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Practice and Challenges of clustered Primary Schools and Cluster Resource Centres in SNNPRS, Ethiopia

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Abstract: The need for the government to expand education to address the question of access and the demand to enhance quality of education are the double pressures that primary schools in Ethiopia are to tackle. This study was conducted to assess the practices and challenges of clustering primary schools and creating cluster resource centres in some selected zones and special districts of SNNPRS. To accomplish this task a mixed research approach using both quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis was employed. Data source for the study were 462 teachers and 205 school leaders (school principals, CRCs focal persons, and experts of woreda education office). The data were collected through questionnaire, interviews, observation and document review. Accordingly, it was explored that the clustered schools and created resource centres in primary schools of the study area were nominal and not organized enough to provide the expected services for the satellite schools. Moreover, the CRCs were not designed up to the level of developing positive attitude among teachers towards change and innovation. Even though internal efficiency of the schools increased, the quality of teaching learning and overall quality of education deteriorated from time to time. These were some of the identified problems which affect the smooth functioning of CRCs. In general the findings imply that in the study area the program did not work as effectively as expected to ensure quality of education and it did not help to realize that primary schools share resources so as to run the teaching learning process efficiently.

Keywords: Challenges, Cluster Resource Centres, School Clustering, Quality of Education, Primary Schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the crucial instruments in an endeavour toward breaking the ferocious circle of poverty. It is an engine for growth and development (Almendarez, 2011; Alex, 2013) Thus, success in education leads to greater earnings for individuals and improvement of the economic returns of the country. However, in order for education to make significant contributions to the economic growth and development of a country and bring about further social benefits, high quality education at each level is indispensable. Likewise for their socio-economic growth different countries have given priority to primary education by focusing on issues that could ensure equity and equality of education. What is more, as Munjanganja (2006) pointed out, primary education does not only provide the building blocks for sustained economic growth and social stability, but also a treatment to the illiteracy and ignorance that weaken individuals and nations.

To achieve these objectives scholars (Chikoke ,2007 &Dittmar, Mendelsohn.and Ward ,2002) indicated that primary schools should be grouped and/ or clustered within the same geographical location aiming to share educational resources and instructional materials with the purpose of improving the quality and relevance of the education in the schools. Thus, school clustering is used as a tool that schools can use to promote collaboration, reflection, sharing and learning among the teaching community. Even though as different scholars (like Giordano, 2008) explained the practice of school clustering and creating cluster resource centre dates back to the early of 1940's, the program is one of the latest form of educational decentralization that emerged in recent years in Ethiopia. Thus, school clustering has been introduced in Ethiopia very recently with the introduction of school and cluster based teacher professional development at national level as a tool for improving teaching and learning conditions by responding to local needs. In line with this the government of Ethiopia and some donor organizations made a new commitment to improve the provision and quality of primary education in the country.

Nonetheless, most primary schools in Ethiopia are very isolated and have no enough resources. To overcome the aforementioned problems the government of Ethiopia regrouped schools and linked them with one another in order to share at least the available resources including skilled manpower. Thus, clustering schools and forming cluster resource centres is considered as a fundamental element of quality improvement program

and is used as a strategy for bringing together people and resources from several surrounding schools for their mutual benefit.

The Ethiopian Ministry of Education side to clustering schools and creating clustered resource centres designed some indicators to measure the internal efficiency of primary schools including enrolment rate and repetition rates of the clustered primary schools and to check whether or not the schools are achieving their goals and functioning effectively. In the country the school clustering program was introduced since 2002 by BESO (BESOII, 2002) to provide local solution for local problems, to bring services closer to the school level and encourage participation of parents and the local community. Even though the BESO project and the government provided support for clustered schools and created resource centres to use the resource effectively and efficiently, the deep rooted problems of the schools (poor efficiency and low quality of education) were not yet solved due to different factors.

To identify the factors that affect the overall activities of the clustered schools and cluster resource centres and to reverse the problem it requires courageous strategic interventions. Thus, this study intends to find answers to the following research questions:

1. How are cluster schools and resource centres organized and managed in primary schools of the study area?
2. What are the specific factors affecting the effectiveness of clustered primary schools and cluster resource centres in SNNPRS?
3. How do teachers and others stakeholders perceive cluster resource program in the primary schools?
4. What major changes have been achieved in primary schools of the study area since the introduction of clustering schools around cluster resource centres?

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Depending on the purpose of the study the researcher employed mixed research design. This is because mixed methods provides different sight lines, that is, it enables the researcher to look at something from avidity of perspectives, for a more comprehensive understanding (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, as Creswell and Clark (2011) indicated, the combination of the two approaches provides a more complete understanding of the given research problem than either approach by itself. A questionnaire prepared by the researcher, semi- structured interviews, observation and review of related documents were used to gather relevant data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data sources were 462 randomly selected primary school teachers and 205 purposefully selected school leaders (school principals, Custer resource centre coordinators and woreda education office heads) and from secondary sources(like reports of the Clustered schools and cluster resource centres). Finally the data obtained from different sources were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Objectives of Clustering Schools

Clustering schools and setting resource centres is used to accomplish a variety of activities and tasks. The major objective of clustering schools and resource centres as indicated by some scholars like Giordano (2008) is to find out strategies and solutions to identified local problems. Thus, the main goals of school clustering and establishing resource centres are: improving education quality, education management, participation of community in different education affairs and effectiveness in utilizing scarce resources.

Table 1: The t-test for mean differences of teachers and school leaders on objectives of clustering schools

.Items	their responsibility in the school	Mean	T	Sig.(2.-tailed)
To promote efficient utilization of resources	Teachers	1.87	-15.350	.000
	school leaders	2.80		
To promote quality of education	Teachers	1.89	-21.002	.000
	school leaders	2.94		
To create team spirit among school communities	Teachers	1.86	-18.340	.000
	school leaders	2.87		
To improve local creativity and flexibility	Teachers	1.77	-15.253	.000
	school leaders	2.73		
To develop positive attitude among teachers towards change and innovation	Teachers	1.80	2.461	.014
	school leaders	1.61		
To decrease Burden from WEO and make schools better institutions	Teachers	2.38	-6.109	.000
	school leaders	2.75		

To offer in- service training for teachers in cost effective way	Teachers	2.44	-12.229	.000
	school leaders	2.96		

As we observe from **Table 1** above, for all items the p- value in the Sig.(2-tailed) is less than.05,which shows there is a significant difference in the mean scores on the dependent variable for each of the two groups (teachers and school leaders). Thus, unlike teacher respondents, most school leaders believe that clustering schools promotes efficient utilization of resources and quality of education, creates team spirit and improves local creativity(mean value ranges between2.73 &2.94). However, both groups agreed that clustering schools decreases the burden of higher officials at woreda level. Regarding the effectiveness of the in-service training offered for teachers, while school leaders agreed teachers denied it. On the other hand both groups (teachers and school leaders) did not believe that the clustered schools and created resource centres met the objective of developing positive attitude among teachers towards change and innovations (mean 1.8 for teachers and 1.6 for school leaders). This shows that teachers did not develop a sense of belonging and were not motivated to produce teaching learning materials from local materials to equip their clustered resource centre. However, this observation was against the idea stated by Mulford and Silins (2011) motivated teachers make greater effort through developing various types of media and other supplementary materials together with the text used for teaching the subject.

3.2 Planning Activities of School Clustering Program

School clustering program gives an opportunity for teachers to share resources and experiences in order to improve quality of education. However, to achieve these objectives it requires a deliberate intervention in setting activities, and bringing cooperation and coordination of all stakeholders of the program.

Table 2: respondents level of rating on planning activities of school Clustering program.

No.	**Items**	**Respondents**	**Agreement level**					
			Low		**Moderate**		**High**	
			N	%	N	%	N	%
1.	The individuals awareness in planning school clustering program is	Teachers	360	77.9	26	5.63	76	16.5
		Leaders	150	73.2	7	3.4	48	23.4
2	Teachers, CRC committee, PTAs and KETB involvement in planning the program is	Teachers	372	80.5	18	3.9	72	15.6
		Leaders	160	78.0	2	1.0	43	21.0
3	The level of identifying and prioritizing problems during planning is	Teachers	286	62.0	23	5.0	153	33.12
		Leaders	34	16.6	4	2.0	167	81.5
4.	The relation between CRC plan with long range education plan is	Teachers	288	62.3	47	10.2	117	25.3
		Leaders	38	18,5	6	3.0	161	78.54
5	The outside consultant Involvement in planning CRC program is	Teachers	385	83.33	40	8.6	37	8.0
		Leaders	178	86.83	5	2,4	22	10.73

As can be seen in **Table** 2 above, for items 1,2 and 5 majority of the teachers and school leaders (more than 75%) indicated that the school teachers, PTSA and KETB committee members awareness and involvement in planning of clustering schools program has been low. Moreover, both respondents also designated that external consultants were involved less in planning the program. This indicated that interaction between the schools and their stakeholders was low which may impede the efforts made to boost the contribution of school community in improving educational access, mobilizing scarce school resources and adapting school policy to local needs.

On the other hand the two groups of research participants (teachers and school leaders) responded differently for item 3 and4. Thus most teachers (greater than 62%) unlike the school leaders replied that the states of identifying and prioritizing problems for planning, and the attention given for aligning the plan of school clustering with long range of education plan at school level were low. However, more than 78.5% of the school leaders believed that not only the school clustering program was derived from a strategic plan of the schools but also an effort was made to forward solutions for identified problems according to their priority order at their schools.

3.3 Implementation strategies of School Clustering Program

Table 3: Respondents Level of Rating on School Clustering Program Implementation Strategies

No.	Items	Respondents	Agreement level					
			Low		Moderate		High	
			N	%	N	%	N	%
1.	Establishing clear policy statement and creating awareness at all level to avoid misunderstanding	Teachers	298	64.5	17	3.7	147	31.8
		Leaders	41	20.0	9	4.4	155	75.61
2.	Involving the community in all affairs of the school and fostering greater support to clustered schools	Teachers	315	68.2	49	10.6	98	21.2
		Leaders	129	62.9	11	115.4	65	31.7
3.	Developing a culture of openness, flexibility and creativity among school communities	Teachers	361	78.14	37	8.0	64	13.9
		Leaders	51	24.9	12	5.9	142	69.3
4.	Improving teachers capacity through using continuous professional development programs	Teachers	130	28.14	58	12.55	274	59.31
		Leaders	18	8.8	4	2.0	183	89.3
5.	Promote teachers motivation and getting their commitment	Teachers	324	70.13	43	9.3	95	20.6
		Leaders	27	13.2	2	1.0	176	85.9
6.	Establishing clear vision, mission objectives and implementable strategies	Teachers	295	63.9	102	22.1	65	14.1
		Leaders	12	5.9	8	3.9	185	90.2

As pointed out in **Table 3** above both teachers and school leaders forwarded their response about the extent of implementation strategies of the school clustering program. However for most stated items the two respondents have different views. Accordingly, for item 1 of the table above about 64.5% of the respondent teachers indicated that the effort made to set clear policy and create awareness to avoid misunderstanding was low. While about 75.6 % of the school leaders unlike teachers' respondents replied that a great effort was made to solve the problems ahead through creating awareness and setting clear policy statements. Similarly, majority of teacher respondents (more than 63.9) indicated that practice of implementation strategies like, developing a culture of openness and flexibility, motivating teachers to have their commitment, and establishing clear organizational vision, mission and making the designed strategies implementable in the study area was low. However, most school leaders (on average more than 80.0%) showed that the status of the implementation of stated strategies in the study area was high.

On the other hand, nearly equal number of teachers and school leaders (62.2% and 62.9% respectively) specified that the practice of involving community as a strategy to provide support for clustered schools was low. Similarly, both groups of respondents accepted that there was high endeavor to execute continuous professional development program as a strategy to augment the capacity of teachers in sampled primary schools.

3.4 System of Monitoring and Evaluation in school clustering program.

Table 4: The t-test for mean differences of teachers and school leaders on level of monitoring and evaluation school clustered program.

	Items	Respondents	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig.(2-tailed)
1	The monitoring and evaluation of the program is systematic	Teachers	1.65	.905	-10.502	.000
		school leaders	2.44	.887		
2	All school communities are actively involved in the process of monitoring and evaluation of the program	Teachers	1.33	.702	-23.927	.000
		school leaders	2.73	.674		
3	The monitoring and evaluation process focused up on effective utilization of human and material resources	Teachers	1.45	.788	-18.499	.000
		school leaders	2.64	.758		
4	The in-service training given at clustered school is assessed by top officials on regular bases	Teachers	2.08	.681	-11.804	.000
		school leaders	2.75	.660		

5	Clustered school committee arranges their program to monitor and evaluate the overall activities of the program.	Teachers	1.23	.423	-89.814	.000
		school leaders	3.00	.000		
6	Clustered school activities are considered in the regular evaluation format	Teachers	1.27	.580	-2.043	.052
		school leaders	1.39	.757		
7	Supervisors provide supervision service for cluster schools and CRC on regular bases	Teachers	2.58	.726	-5.384	.000
		school leaders	2.88	.464		

The statistical data illustrated in **Table** 4 above for all items since the p- value in the Sig.(2-tailed) column is less than.05, this shows there is a significant difference in the mean scores of the two respondent groups (teachers and school leaders). As a result, respondents were asked to show the monitoring and evaluation system in work in clustered schools and unlike school leaders most teachers indicated that the existing monitoring and evaluation system observed in clustered schools not only was unsystematic and non-participatory but also failed to focus on effective utilization of human and material resources. Supporting this, one of the interviewed clustered resource centre focal persons (CRC focal person 3) reported that:

The satellite schools did not actively communicate and utilize physical resources from the established resource centres. This implies that, the implementation of the overall activities of CRCs and satellite schools were not properly monitored and evaluated by the concerned educational leaders.

Moreover, teachers lack information whether or not the in service training given at clustered schools were assessed by top officials on regular bases. They also signified that clustered school committee members did not arrange time to monitor and evaluate the overall activities of the program and even supervisors did not provide the necessary support for clustered schools on regular bases. This was also confirmed by most interviewed clustered resource centres' focal persons, woreda education officials and supervisors themselves. For example one of the supervisors (CSS2) disclosed that supervisors did not provide the necessary supervision service for clustered schools and he justified that:

Most supervisors were assigned without possessing the necessary knowledge and skill in the area of supervision. They are ordered by top officials to accomplish different duties which are not within their job description. These non- professional supervisors accomplish their task traditionally without planning and prioritizing activities.

However, as reported in different sources (MOE, 2012; and Rai &Singh, 2013) cluster supervisors are assigned to perform three distinct but interrelated activities which are summarized as: providing support, controlling the teaching learning process in the clustered schools and acting as liaison. Moreover, both group of respondents similarly forwarded that clustered school activities were not considered in the regular performance evaluation format of the teachers and this shows there is no controlling mechanism about the engagement and contribution of teachers in the established cluster resource center.

3.5 Observable Changes Due to the Implementation of School Clustering Program

Table 5: Respondent agreement level on change observed after CRC implementation

No.	**Items**	**Respon-dents**	**Agreement level**					
			Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
			N	%	N	%	N	%
	Internal efficiency (improved enrolment , and decreased repetition and dropout rate) improved	Teachers	19	4.1	3	0.7	440	95.2
		Leaders	28	6.1	2	0.4	175	85.4
2.	Facilities of library and pedagogical centres increased	Teachers	343	74.2	43	9.3	76	16.4
		Leaders	165	80.5	2	1.0	38	18.5
3	Overall quality of education improved	Teachers	417	90.3	13	2.8	32	6.9
		Leaders	154	75.1	3	1.5	48	23.4
4	Teachers problem solving capacity improved	Teachers	380	82.3	11	5.4	71	34.6
		Leaders	28	13.7	15	7.3	162	79.0
5	Experience sharing increased	Teachers	353	76.4	27	5.8	82	17.8
		Leaders	38	18.5	14	6.8	153	74.6
6	Team spirit created in the schools	Teachers	355	76.8	51	11.0	56	12.1
		Leaders	22	10.7	7	3.4	176	85.6

7	Human resource utilization improved	Teachers	359	77.7	63	16.6	40	8.7
		Leaders	37	18.1	17	8.7	151	73.7
8	Material resource utilization improved	Teachers	369	79.9	13	2.8	80	17.3
		Leaders	121	59.0	23	11.2	61	29.8

As scholars (Aziah and Abdul, 2011) indicted school clustering mainly contribute to better quality education and promote efficient utilization of the existing resources. In line with this in **Table5** above, both respondents (teachers and school leaders) indicated that internal efficiency like, improved enrollment rate, and declined repetition and dropout rate were observed due to school clustering program. However, facility of library and pedagogical centers, overall quality of education and utilization of material resources did not show improvement in the clustered schools. Unlike the school leaders, most teachers (greater than 76%) indicated that improvements were not observed in teachers' problem solving capacity, experience sharing, creating team spirit and human resource utilization in the clustered schools.

On the whole although school clustering is very important to bring change in all activities pointed out in **Table 5** above, the majority of the teacher respondents and significant number of school leaders responded negatively about changes observed after implementing school clustering program. This is due to low level of awareness and lack of commitment among educational stakeholders including representatives at different echelons.Moreover, the researcher also made an effort to gather data (using additional open ended item in the questionnaire and through semi- structured interview) about what other changes were observed as a result of the implementation of school clustering program in primary schools of the study area. Accordingly, some changes observed due to the practice of school clustering program reported by participants of the study are:

- tremendous improvement was observed on continuous professional development of teachers program
- Due to the practice of decentralization, school clustering program minimized the burden of top officials including zonal and woreda education officials and,
- The efficiency of the school leaders showed improvement on some aspects like increasing enrollment rate and minimized repetition rate.

However, the respondent also indicated that many target objectives like, generating financial resource from local community and utilizing it fairly, enhancing supervisory service, establishing well furnished clustered resource center for satellite schools, and preparing exams centrally (at clustered level) were not addressed in clustered schools of the study area.

3.6 Factors affecting the practice of school clustering

Table 4: T- test for mean difference of teachers and school leaders on major factors affecting the practices of school clustering

N.O	Item	their responsibility in the school	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
1	Inadequacy of financial support	Teachers	2.51	.796	.241	.809
		school leaders	2.50	.861		
2	Lack of technical support	Teachers	2.93	.336	.759	.448
		school leaders	2.91	.399		
3	Lack of experienced and skilled manpower	Teachers	2.48	.866	25.432	.000
		school leaders	1.14	.486		
4	Lack of organizational structure to manage the program	Teachers	1.53	.827	8.975	.000
		school leaders	1.10	.420		
5	Absence of motivating strategies for those teachers who actively involved in the CRC program	Teachers	2.82	.534	-2.652	.008
		school leaders	2.91	.291		
6	Lack of regular discussion program	Teachers	2.38	.910	10.740	.000
		school leaders	1.57	.887		
7	Lack of knowledge to conduct action research to solve local/ school / related problems	Teachers	2.49	.801	24.430	.000
		school leaders	1.18	.559		
8	High distance between CRC and satellite schools	Teachers	2.59	.766	2.581	.010
		school leaders	2.40	.894		
9	Less cooperation between organized and poorly organized schools	Teachers	2.62	.733	1.105	.270
		school leaders	2.55	.813		
10	CRC activities are not included in the	Teachers	2.74	.626	4.814	.000

	criteria used to evaluate teachers performance	school leaders	2.40	.911		
11	Lack of awareness by CRC committee about the CRC program	Teachers	2.42	.826	7.437	.000
		school leaders	1.83	.981		

The statistical data in **Table** 4 above depicts that for most items (except item 1, 2 & 9) the p- value in the Sig.(2-tailed) column is less than.05, which shows there is a significant difference in the mean scores of the two respondent groups (teachers and school leaders) on factors affecting the practice of school clustering. Thus unlike school leaders, teachers indicated that lack of experienced and skilled manpower, absence of strategies to motivate teachers, poor organizational structure, absence of regular discussion programs, weak efforts to solve local and school related problems through using action research, long distance between the satellite schools, absence of mechanisms to evaluate teachers performance in line with clustered schools activities, and lack of awareness about the school clustering program were the major factors which impede the smooth functioning of school clustering program. However, there was no statistical significance difference on the response of the two groups on item 1, 2, and 3 (p- value greater than.05) of **Table**4 above. Hence, both groups believe that inadequacy of financial and technical support, and less cooperation observed between well and poorly organized schools affect the overall practice of school clustering program.

In addition to the above factors which affect the overall performance of clustered schools in the study areas, supervisors, school principals WEO officials and CRC focal persons who took part in the studyalso indicated in their response to the open ended items of the questionnaire that:

- ✓ There were shortage of teaching- learning resources
- ✓ exams prepared at the centre lacked credibility and students result were exaggerated
- ✓ School clustering program were not considered when allocating budget for schools.
- ✓ satellite schools were asked to contribute all the necessary resources when training was designed
- ✓ there was lack of awareness on the side of school teachers about the objectives of school clustering and CRCs program
- ✓ there was lack of experience and motivation for solving school related problems based on scientific evidence (research findings)
- ✓ Most satellite schools did not identify their own training needs to improve teaching- learning and quality of education.

These are among the factors that affect smooth functioning of clustered schools and cluster resource centres. However, as different sources indicated all these problems should be avoided or minimized for effective execution of the program. For this, as Hallinger and Heck (2011) stated especially school leaders should ensure that their schools are adequately equipped with the desired resources so that the learners acquire maximum knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.

Beside data collected through questionnaire and interview actual observations were made by the researcher which revealed that almost all clustered schools and the school selected as resource centre for the satellite schools there had shortage of teaching learning resources.

Questions were also raised for respondents regarding the school clustering program organization and management structure. The result obtained from the analysis of the data gathered through questionnaire and interview revealed that most primary schools (4-5 schools) were clustered together; most schools were levelled as complete primary schools (grade1-8) and in all sampled clustered schools, clustered school committee were organized. However, the established committee members' awareness on their role and responsibilities, and their participation in school CRCs activities and management were low. Therefore, in view of the fact that the stated challenges impeded the smooth functions of school CRC, there is a need to take healing actions. Even though the problems seem to be deep rooted in the system, prioritizing them for action based on the degree of significance might be necessary.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONSC

In Ethiopia three to five primary schools are connected to form the cluster resource centre. The major school around which the other schools are networked is known as the cluster while the networked primary schools are called satellite schools. Even though schools were clustered and cluster resource centres were established in primary schools of SNNPRS the study found out that the clustered school leaders capacities of planning, implementing, managing and efficient utilization of human and material resources were observed as a mix of fair and poor. This implies that the enabling environment to create the momentum for clustering schools and implementing the program was found to be weak and the changes observed in improving quality of primary education were not up to the expectation. Moreover, absence of common vision among different stakeholders (teachers, school leaders and other community members) and their low participation in planning and implementation of the program indicate the program was ineffective in improving the teaching- learning process

in general and quality of education in particular. Therefore, to make the program effective the WEO, ZED and the leaders of clustered schools should give due consideration to support, motivate and sustain the development of the cluster program by means of providing resources, and by initiating responsible bodies to participate in creating awareness, evaluating the school clustering program and letting them take account of the needs of the learners in a systematic way.

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