

Initiatives to Promote the Integration of Migrant Children in Schools and Society: Identifying and Problematising the Notion of 'Good Practices' in the Spanish Context

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Introduction

During the execution of the first phases of the European project: MiCREATE (822664 – H2020-SC6) we have identified some of the good practices carried out by the six European states participating in the project. In the case of Spain, this exercise led us to recognise that there are multiple and different notions of 'good practices', both in the context of top-down and bottom-up initiatives. Given this, in order to guarantee optimal execution of this preliminary phase of MiCREATE, it was essential to try to define and problematise the notion of 'good practices'. For this, we have searched for different key aspects that allow their analysis in educational contexts. The analysis is based on a review of recent academic publications on the field, and the analysis of a set of political and social initiatives carried out with the aim of promoting the school integration of migrant children in Spain during the last 20 years.

In this chapter we have proposed to answer two main questions: (1) What are the most important conceptual contradictions related to the identification of the notion of 'good practices'? (2) What are the most important interests and contextual characteristics that might be behind

the identification of an initiative as successful? The chapter is divided into three sections. The first part is an analysis of the conceptualisation of the notion of ‘good practices’. The second is the presentation of a set of ten initiatives that aimed to promote the integration of migrant children in the school system and have been considered good practices. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the results and conclusions.

Good practices and initiatives for the educational integration of migrant minors

In this section, we first discuss the notion of ‘good practices’ as an ‘apparently simple concept [which] is deceptively slippery, laden with surplus meaning’ (Osburn, Caruso and Wolfensberger 2011: 213). Secondly, we introduce ten initiatives identified by a literature review that were developed in Spain between the years 2000 to 2019 and have been considered good practices for the integration of migrants in school contexts, with the end of exploring their meanings and contributions.

What is good practice in social initiatives and public policies?

The concept of ‘good practice’ is based on the 17th- and 18th-century Enlightenment notion of improvement through scientific knowledge. Based on the modernist trust in an objective science to provide better solutions for progress and improvement, it was thought that a ‘correct’ way to do things could be found. In the 1960 and 1970s, in a sociohistorical context marked by Taylorism, many researchers worked on identifying teachers’ behaviours to improve student achievement. This kind of approach can be found in areas such as medicine, finance, law and architecture, showing that ‘vestiges of Taylorism are reflected in a contemporary tendency to apply science in a myopic way to improve efficiency and achieve ends’ (Kappler 2015: 136).

For this reason, the notion of ‘good practice’ has been problematised in recent years and in different fields. It has remained a concept used to point at a model or activity carried out with satisfactory results. However, how exactly are these ‘satisfactory’ results defined? And why is the notion of ‘good’ usually naturalized and not problematized? This aim of finding good or even best practices is still popular nowadays, to the extent that the concept has many variants and it is used in fields from agriculture and mining to healthcare and education (Osburn *et al.* 2011).

While 'best practice' is the general term, common variants are 'promising practices', 'evidence-based practice', 'science-based practice', 'good practices', 'better practice', and the appealingly modest 'probably effective practices'. Another is 'best outcomes', which is probably what early 20th-century originators of the 'one best way' idea were really trying to get at. In addition, quite a few definitions and descriptions of 'best practice' have been put forward in the literature (Osburn *et al.* 2011: 214).

According to the authors, there are four patterns of discourse when it comes to 'good' or 'best' practices. The first discourse would be based on a definition of good practices as those with a *solid body of evidence* that demonstrates their effectiveness. This is based on the initial goal of identifying 'evidence-based practices' by using different studies, but this notion was quickly substituted by the other three. The second discourse considers those practices that respond to what a *certain ideology* holds desirable. In this case, evidence is not relevant, and it can even be delegitimised if studies point in different directions. The third discourse considers *those practices that have been done all along*. An example of this is found in some conferences or events that make compilations or give to a compilation of papers the title 'good practices', while there is no clear reason for this claim. The fourth discourse has been used by many parties to *embrace the latest trend*. An example would be an organisation that launches a call with a focus on 'good' and 'innovative' practices (Osburn *et al.* 2011: 215).

There are some problems embedded in the popularisation of the use of 'good practices' that other authors have addressed. In the first place, they are the product of the characteristics of a specific context where these practices take place (Chickering and Gamson 1987) or, as Meyer (2003) points out, many 'best practices' are likely to be culturally biased toward particular racial, ethnic, political, national or other concepts and constructs. This might have several consequences, such as using it as a way of colonisation or domination when specific conditions are not considered.

Homi Bhabha (2001) points out that colonial power is exercised through the articulations of difference of the colonial subject. This postcolonial author argues that colonisation is about using difference as a means to 'justify conquest and establish systems of administration' where the colonised is discursively produced as the 'other' (391). From this broad definition, we use the term 'colonisation' metaphorically in relation to 'good practices' to signify the danger of using this notion to fix how the 'other' should be, framing as subjects in ways that meet the needs of the reception cultures and powers. This approach leads us to propose that 'good practice' could be a form of structural power, a strate-

gy of governing – regulating – in this case, migrant people. This makes it necessary to consider towards what aim/objective we are being governed. We explore this issue further below, by reporting on the good practice experiences we have gathered for analysis.

Another inherent aspect of the concept is the character of transferability and exportability (Benavente 2007) – that is, that a public policy or initiative could be considered good practice to the extent that there is an escalation or replication of the initiative in other contexts and institutions. Focusing on another aspect, Biesta (2015) considers that a good practice should be considered as such when it overcomes the difficulties it faces in its applicability and which ends up favouring its sustainability and implementation capacity in different realities and situations. Therefore, from this point of view, a good practice would imply a transformation of traditional forms and processes of action, which could be the beginning of a positive change in traditional methods of action.

However, the notion ‘good practices’ has also been widely debated when it is understood directly based on the logic of means and ends. In other words, an action could be considered a good practice to the extent that it favours the sustainability and profitability of the initiative or institution where it is carried out, which would not necessarily imply a change or improvement in the social conditions of less favoured groups. In this sense, for Biesta (2015), if the aims and ends of education are embedded in an initiative identified as good practice, what kind of citizens are individuals supposed to become?

Another problem would be the ‘hyperbolisation’ that is produced when a practice is labelled ‘good’ or ‘best’. We agree with Osburn *et al.* (2011) that all practices have their limits and actually analysing and mentioning these limits is fundamental. The fact that pointing at good practices might inhibit the exercise of identifying how one activity might improve or change in time is a great danger.

Another important issue is what Biesta (2015) calls the ‘normative validity’ of measurements. Especially in Social Sciences, many phenomena cannot be measured, but if some activity has to be labelled as good, better or best, it will be necessary to measure the results or impact of this activity. Therefore, many times the exercise of identifying good practices is limited by what can easily be measured.

The definition of these terms is elastic, and they could be considered also as slippery concepts that can be associated with almost any idea, activity or technology. Their excessive use strongly suggests their misuse as well. This is not to say that what some people proclaim as good practice may not, in fact, merit that designation, or a similar one, but rather that

the claim itself does not ensure its merit, and yet it is all too easily made (Osburn *et al.* 2011).

Therefore, the literature shows us that the prevalence of one notion of 'good practices' over another would be conditioned from the following three dimensions: (1) the cultural and historical framework in which the initiative has been implemented, (2) the specific ideology and aims that guided the proposal, and (3) the limitations or tensions of the initiative that point at how it could be improved.

The next section presents a descriptive analysis of diverse initiatives that have been considered 'good practices' for the integration of migrant children in the Spanish educational context. Later, in the section 'Discussion', we will analyse these initiatives based on the three dimensions mentioned above.

Initiatives for educational integration of migrants in Spain considered 'good practices'

For the development of this section, a review of initiatives and public policies implemented in Spain between 2000 and 2019 has been carried out. After the identification of more than 50 projects and programmes, nine were selected and grouped into three dimensions, according to the actors implementing the initiative or policy: (2.1) formal education, (2.2) civil society and (2.3) administration. The description of these initiatives has been built from the information that we have been able to obtain from the executing institutions themselves, or from the documentation available on the internet (official documents, technical evaluations, doctoral theses, reports, management, press and research reports). The development of this process has made us face the same doubts and tensions that have been identified and described in the previous section. This happens when in each of the initiatives the consideration of 'good practice' does not obey a common and representative pattern, but rather a self-assignment of a singular nature.

'Good practices' from formal education

The *Plan for reception of foreign students* was promoted in a primary school in Andalusia in 2003. It was selected as a 'good practice' and awarded a prize by the Observatory of Childhood in Andalusia (General Directorate of Childhood and Families, Andalusia Government), who launched a call for good practices with regard to immigrant minors. The main goal was to promote intercultural education by involving different members

of the educational community to achieve social and educational integration of foreign students, to guarantee equal opportunities for all. The school developed a project of intercultural education with the educational community, including local institutions and associations, that involved changing teaching practices, creating teachers' working groups and engaging families in school activities. The goals of the project were: sensitising members of the educational community about multiculturalism, promoting the value of respect and coexistence, making a linguistic adaptation for students who did not speak Spanish, helping them to build their identity, establishing the principle of difference as enriching, promoting the participation of students and families in the school, addressing the socioeconomic situation of immigrant students, fostering competence to understand cultural differences with a positive attitude and collaborating with local entities.

The *INTO project*¹ – *Intercultural mentoring tool to support migrant integration* – was financed by the European Comenius Multilateral call in 2014–2015 and awarded by the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Union as a 'good practice'. It was promoted by universities and secondary schools from Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Cyprus and Poland, and its main aim was to introduce tools for the social integration and improvement of academic performance of immigrant students at risk in secondary schools. They introduced peer tutoring in schools to decrease absenteeism and early school leaving, improve social integration and academic and job opportunities. Students (13–19 years old) with a migrant background accompanied younger migrant students, while teachers supervised and supported the mentors. It consisted of providing teachers and students with tools and training to support mentees during their learning process, advise them academically and professionally, offer linguistic support, and organise activities for newly arrived students and students at risk of exclusion.

The *Nightingale project*² – *Social mentoring to promote social inclusion and interculturality* – is a mentoring programme that has been implemented in 20 different European universities, including the University of Girona. The project was inspired by the mentoring project Perach, founded in 1972 in Israel. It was carried out in Malmo University (Sweden) as a pilot in 1995, and in 2002, the city of Malmo awarded the project its integration prize. Its main aim is to promote the inclusion of immigrant children and young people from a social, cultural and linguistic

1 www.interculturalmentoring.eu/images/Toolkits/sp/SPAIN_HANDBOOK.pdf

2 <http://nightingalementoring.mau.se/the-members>

perspective. It consisted of connecting college students with primary and secondary school students with migrant backgrounds, so they could create a social bond and the mentor could become a model for the children and do leisure activities with them. The activities involved practising the language of the region and visiting cultural spaces, and usually secondary school students ended up establishing a relationship with the mentors' families and friends.

Civil society 'good practices'

The project *Cambalache*³ was selected by the General Directorate of Integration of Immigrants (Ministry of Work and Immigration of Spain) to receive funding from the European Integration Fund (EIF) of the EU Annual Call for proposals. Launched by the *Federation Andalusia Hosts* in 2012, it aimed to improve the socio-educative process of inclusion of children from diverse sociocultural origins, by engaging the whole educational community, starting from schools of Andalusia and connecting with other ambits of socialisation such as the neighborhood, family and group of peers. It involved accompanying minors and their families in the process of integration in the school system, promoting extracurricular activities for intercultural cohabitation, providing school reinforcement in curricular subjects and organising workshops for educators to learn to manage diversity in school, with a gender perspective.

The project *Own Voice: Interculturality and Gender in Primary Schools*⁴ was also selected by the General Directorate of Integration of Immigrants (Ministry of Work and Immigration of Spain). It was promoted by the NGO Women in Conflict Zones and implemented in 11 primary schools in Andalusia and seven schools in Extremadura. The objectives were to improve the intercultural and co-educational approach of teachers, improve the coexistence of immigrant and local students and increase the level of awareness about interculturality and gender equity. By using action research, they identified needs in the educational community with students, teachers and families and prepared interventions with students in classrooms and playgrounds, by using songs and games from all continents based on cooperation, respect and mutual enrichment.

The project *Culture and inclusion: Building from the youth and the European institutions*⁵ was financed by the European Comenius Multilater-

3 <https://acoge.org/cambalache/>

4 http://educacion.mzc.es/Ciudadania/R_Ciudadania.html

5 <https://jovesdaccio.cat/culture-and-inclusion>

al call (2018–2019) and considered an example of ‘good practice’. It is an initiative from the Youth of Cultural Action (Joves d’Acció Cultural), based on the need to propose tangible and youth-led solutions to change the design of immigration and refugee reception policies. The project aims to generate a process of active debate, through a participatory methodology based on non-formal education, backed by important policy-makers, activities and learning materials. In order to fulfil this goal, they used the network of ‘Ciudades Refugio’ (refugee cities). This network is composed of the municipalities that have offered to host refugees, since the central government was not responding to this need.

‘Good practices’ from the administration

The programme *ATAL: Temporary classrooms for language adoption*⁶ was launched by the Department of Education of the Government of Andalusia (Order of January 15, 2007) to promote the educational and cultural integration of immigrant children. Since its origin, it has been defined as a mechanism that seeks to regulate actions of intercultural education and the teaching of Spanish as a vehicular language in the teaching-learning process in public primary and secondary schools in Andalusia. The programme is implemented in eight Andalusian provinces and it is aimed at foreign students enrolled between the third grade of primary and fourth grade of Compulsory Secondary Education. It is considered a good practice of social integration for two central reasons: (1) it has allowed the provision of Spanish language skills, reaching more than 50,000 young immigrant students throughout its history, and (2) it has had a progressive growth both territorially and in terms of coverage. ATAL emerged as a pilot programme in the province of Almeria in 1997. Once the pilot was finished, it was implemented in the rest of the Andalusian provinces. It is not until 2017 that the project began to be promoted and financed by the Department of Education of the Government of Andalusia.

*Escolinos de Babel*⁷ is a programme offered by the City Council of Oviedo since 2006. Since 2014, it has been carried out by the NGO ACCEM, a non-profit statewide organisation whose mission is to defend the fundamental rights, care and support of people who are at risk of social exclusion. The objective of the programme is to reinforce the in-

6 www.juntadeandalucia.es/organismos/educacionydeporte/consejeria/sobre-consejeria/planes/detalle/59497.html

7 www.accem.es/escolinos-de-babel

strumental learning of students who present difficulties and, as a priority, to assist those who join the educational system late, and those who do not know the language. The programme is considered good practice of social integration mainly because it is an initiative that has been able to remain in force from 2006 until now, gradually increasing its coverage. In addition, it is an initiative that supports immigrant children's inclusion in the education system. The City Council of Oviedo considers that the outsourcing of the service to the NGO ACCEM has been fundamental for the sustainability and success of the initiative.

The *II Plan of Attention to the Immigrant Student in the framework of an inclusive and intercultural school (2016–2020)*⁸ was produced by the Basque Country Government with the objective of supporting the inclusion of students from families of foreign origin in the educational system of the Basque country. This objective was sought to be achieved through the promotion of normative, organisational and methodological initiatives that support actions carried out in schools. The specific actions were the creation of points of information and orientation, making adjustments in school supply, offering teacher training to foster positive coexistence, and creating an instrument for the characterisation of educational needs. This public policy is considered a good practice because it represents a significant effort of many years bringing together different local initiatives with the same objective. The creation of this plan therefore represents the culmination of a process of generating initiatives for more than 30 years and has broad support from all the political sectors of the Basque parliament.

From the presentation of these cases, we can point out three considerations. As noted above, the designation of an experience as 'good practice' is usually given from outside the activity itself. Namely, they are agents external to local experience, who define what is a 'good practice'. These agents have their own agendas and, in many cases, use the qualification of 'good practices' to legitimise their performance. This is something that happens, as we have seen, with the entities – public and private – that finance the projects that are later called 'good practices'.

Another aspect to consider is that defining an experience as 'good practice' implies an act of standardisation that establishes the guidelines for what has to be done in a specific field. This process of normalisation may favour, as can be seen in some of the cases described, a form of colonisation. This is something that could happen because the qualifica-

8 www.irekia.euskadi.eus/uploads/attachments/11487/II_Plan_atencion_alumnado_inmigrante.pdf?1523359696

tion of 'good' is related to the kind of subject that this notion wants to normalise through recognition of reception language and the hegemony of certain cultural practices. In this operation, 'good practice' acts as dispositive to define a legitimated 'other'.

Finally, we must not lose sight of the fact that the process of naming an experience as 'good practice' does not usually take into account the vision of the 'insiders', of these subjects who participate in the experience. 'Good practice' comes from the adaptation to predetermined objectives or from the accommodation of immigrants to host societies' expectation of them. In this sense, the notion of 'good practice' does not usually take into account the agency of those who should be considered as actors and not as receivers.

Discussion and conclusions

There are multiple contradictions and conceptual definitions regarding the notion of good practices. As we have been able to observe, the typification of 'good practice' (of a public policy or a bottom-up initiative) is conditioned both by the historical-cultural dimension and by the ideological framework in which it is promoted and implemented. In order to address this problem, we proposed two questions in the introduction to this chapter, in order to guide the theoretical and analytical development of this work.

The first question was: What are the most important conceptual contradictions related to the identification of the notion of 'good practices'? The first aspect identified across these initiatives is that the majority of these assumed their 'good practice' status because they were funded by the European Commission, the Spanish Government or different city councils. Behind each initiative was a school, a university, an organisation or a government that presented its initiatives and these have been awarded or selected because they showed continuity, they were implemented in different countries of the European Union, they found sources of funding, and their support increased its coverage gradually. Also, the development involved collaboration with other entities and was based on local initiatives.

In terms of patterns of discourse (Osburn *et al.* 2011), we identified initiatives of all kinds that were assessed, researched or monitored, showing a body of evidence based on the implementation of questionnaires, interviews or focus groups. Some other practices were considered 'good' because an institution selected them to promote similar projects,

falling into a discourse based on what a certain ideology considers desirable. We did not find any discourse that supported that they were good practices only because they have been done all along or that it was a trend that had to be embraced.

The second question was: What are the most important interests and contextual characteristics that might be behind the identification of an initiative as successful? When it comes to the sociocultural and historical context of the initiatives, the analysis shows that the only context that is described in the presentation of the practices was very general and institutional. For example, they pointed at universities, associations or public schools that participated in the project. However, a deep description of each context would be needed.

This is related to the lack of consideration towards the difficulties or tensions that were faced by the participants of each initiative. In line with Biesta (2015) and Osburn *et al.* (2011), we suggest that when 'good practices' are sought, only achievements and successful practices are highlighted, producing a hyperbolisation that can be counterproductive for the educational community. For example, one project fostered collaboration between institutions such as families, schools and civil society, but the tensions or problems across them were not mentioned. Highlighting and discussing why they encountered certain problems and how they faced them could be extremely useful for educators, but the discourse associated with 'good practices' usually avoids showing any kind of fissure or contradiction. Thus, as we have said in other spaces (Erstad, *et al.*, 2021; Ocampo-Torrejón, *et al.*, 2020) we believe that it is essential to be able to reveal the mechanisms with which these tensions were faced and addressed.

Along the same lines, what we suggest is that the exercise of studying and sharing practices that are oriented towards solving educational and social problems is relevant, but the logic behind the use of the notion of 'good' practice might be counterproductive and limiting. Our proposal would be to move towards the use of 'initiatives', to address some of the issues that have been pointed out. From this perspective, apart from identifying why one practice might be relevant, in this case to promote social and educational inclusion, as we proposed in the first section, we suggest that the following aspects might be taken into account: (1) a cultural and historical framework in which this initiative has been implemented; (2) a definition of the specific ideology and aims of the initiative; (3) the limitations or tensions of the initiative, pointing at how it could be improved.

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