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Good practices for transforming education

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Abstract This text is a guide to the reading and interpretation of the *good practices* that are developing in the countries participating in this project and elsewhere. A systematic approach to the factors making up a *good practice* has enabled us to share our analyses in a more structured manner and to reflect on their potential for learning and change, their peculiarities and regular features, as well as their sustainability outside certain particular contexts and specific forms of support. What can we learn from these *good practices?* Can they influence educational policies on both the administrative and pedagogical levels? Can they become strong points in strategies aimed at improving school life and pupils' results? Under what conditions? These are some of the questions that guide this text on *good practices.* The analysis of the answers to these questions has enabled us to identify a number of minimal conditions that are necessary for a good practice to have some effect on education policies. Moreover, it opened up new lines of questioning which can be pursued.

Keywords Sub-Saharan Africa · Good practice · Education policies · Pedagogic practices · Innovations

The exception that proves the rule or the beacon that lights the way?

Introduction

While working on this project, we noticed that in each country there are schools that succeed in overcoming all sorts of difficulties—professional, social and institutional, for

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instance—developing in an integrated way educational work that links quality with quantity. Whether it is in the way they give concrete expression to official proposals, as in the case of the local curriculum in Mozambique, or construct answers to specific situations, as in Rwanda and Angola, these schools are flashes of light that contradict the pessimism of those who focus more on obstacles and impossibilities than on progress and opportunities.

While it is true that we should take account of the weak points of the education systems, it is also true that we should not be indifferent to the progress and successful practices that can overcome some of the barriers and solve real problems on the road to quality and equity, which are the essential pillars in building Education for All (EFA).

This text is organized around the field study on the *good practices* in action in the countries participating in the project. These concrete examples have nourished the reflection presented here and, at the same time, have had light thrown on them through this same reflection, in a continuous flow between observation and analysis in the field and the development of a tool with which to think about good practices over and above the few examples presented as case studies in this issue of *Prospects*. This text was developed during the international seminars and the work sessions and discussions within the nine national teams taking part in the project (Angola, Burkina Faso, Burundi, the Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Niger and Rwanda). The theoretical outline was discussed by all of the participants in the project, intermediate summaries were worked out during the site visits and analyses shared and discussed based on the good practices observed in those nine countries.

An overly descriptive approach

When consulting one of the most frequently used search engines on the Internet, we realized that although the results obtained were certainly very numerous, they contained very little operational content for innovation and change. Thus, the good practices have their place in the views expressed on change. They appear as positive, even promising, built on real-life situations that we cannot ignore: quite to the contrary, we should take them into account. On the other hand, while the literature devoted to finding, recording and describing good practices is quite rich, the question of the criteria to be used to define them is generally absent. However, such criteria are essential so that the good practices can genuinely clarify the dynamics and strategies for change.

Are good practices just another fad?

This concept is becoming increasingly important in the education field. In the 1970s and especially the 1980s, when we spoke of innovation we were more often referring to projects than to good practices. Such projects were very targeted, concerning only a single group of teachers and pupils, or just one school or group of schools. They would be thematic projects addressing new challenges such as health education or environmental education. Other projects were in the socio-pedagogical field. Their objective was to build pedagogical alternatives to learning for pupils coming from practically illiterate backgrounds (Benavente et al. 2003). Such projects, which aimed at being "action research", in fact built up good practices by linking together various partners and fitting in with the local communities. They were practicing policy dialogue without realizing it.

Since the end of the 1980s and particularly during the 1990s, a new trend became apparent. It concluded that the days of great reforms were past and the promising way to the school of the future (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2001)[1] should come from the innovations made in the field, by working out positive answers to real problems of social inequalities that had also become school inequalities in terms of access and success, with the contribution of various partners ready to take new administrative and pedagogical roads to achieve education for all.

The characteristics of the context are also essential

When we talk of innovation and change in the African education systems, for instance, one obvious factor is often forgotten, underestimated or lost on the way, namely, that the countries in the south have inherited school models that were transferred from the countries in the north. As a result, it is not simply a question of reforming what exists, but rather adopting an approach of rebuilding the school on new bases, because fundamental issues are at stake (Luisoni 2007) and the very model on which these schools have been set up is called into question. It is in this perspective that this article and the whole body of work presented in this issue of *Prospects* have been placed.

What is a good practice?

A quick compilation of the good practices has shown that they often focus on a major problem of considerable importance to the country, as witnessed in the examples identified within the framework of this project, including:

- the linkage between the local or "mastered" languages and the official languages;
- the integration of a local curriculum into the national curriculum;
- the positioning of the school in the local community as an individual and collective asset;
- solutions that take account of territorial characteristics, such as scattered settlements and climatic conditions;
- solutions to specific issues linked to each country's history, such as war, epidemics and orphaned children;
- an urgent need for teacher training;
- the harmonization of school calendars and timetables with the lifestyles and production methods of the local populations;
- the fight to reduce school dropouts and failure, by setting up priority education zones (PEZs) for example.

In the course of the project we tried to define a certain number of criteria to describe and analyse the minimum common conditions that we found in the examples identified in order

[1] The work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) presented in its report *What schools for the future?* has resulted in the construction of three families of scenarios (see the Annex at the end of this text). The rebuilding of schools is identified as being one of the most desirable and most likely scenarios to ensure that the institution can fully play its role in democratizing knowledge and life skills, by becoming relevant to all communities, whatever their level of education and means of living.

to consider them *good practices* in the alleviation of poverty, over and above the descriptive criteria already identified, but soon seen to be of little use with respect to innovation and change. First, we asked ourselves what the term *good practices* means. We concluded that they are organizational, pedagogical and educational realizations that help to solve a specific problem, such as an initiative to reduce social exclusion and school dropouts, especially with respect to girls and pupils with learning difficulties, or an initiative that fosters sustainable, operational links between the school and the local community, making the school an asset for the entire community. Another example could be the link between the quality of learning achievements and equity in environments of social inequality.

We then tried to phrase the questions to be asked in order to identify a good practice, compiling the following list:

- Is there a *pedagogical project*, such as a shared vision or intention with aims that are clear for all of the partners involved, which gives meaning to fragmented actions?
- Are a minimum number of material conditions present? What is the minimum for each context?
- Is the time allocated to building up the pedagogy sufficient for the process?
- Is there a high degree of autonomy in interpreting and developing the curriculum?
- Is there a serious, formal and valued link with the local community as a partner in education? (See the role and importance of policy dialogue in building education policies.)
- Have the political and administrative powers at both national and regional levels provided a monitoring system, with pedagogical support and linking of schools to share experiences, problems and solutions, and not just a prescriptive inspection?
- Has the setting up of reasonably stable pedagogical teams to work out a common project been provided for?
- Has a regulative assessment aimed at improving school and educational work been provided for? What are the assessment methods already found in the field?
- Does any shared learning between schools in the same territory take place? If not, who is responsible for supervising and inspecting schools? And how?
- What barriers remain and what form do they take?
- What are the possibilities for anchoring and continuing these good practices, from the time they are consolidated to when they disappear, beyond the support of specific temporary projects, as is often the case?
- Do pre-service and, even more so, in-service training take account of these realities?

The answers given to these questions can uncover conditions that are important in understanding how good practices are built up. These questions make up a basic tool with which to approach the analysis, but which need to be completed, enriched and adapted as our reflection progresses. In short, it is a question of gradually drawing up a framework for analysis of the common points identified in the good practices. This means going beyond their individual diversity and looking at the administrative and pedagogical aspects of organizing the work at the central, regional and local levels and the results obtained. It also demands that we go beyond the level of broad generalities.

Nevertheless, it is certain that we must know more about the conditions that enable building *good practices* and those that ensure their sustainability and consolidation.

The good practices: from description to analysis

The large bibliography consulted very clearly shows that the approach to good practices is limited to recording and describing. It does not include any more profound analysis of the consequences for school life at the policy, administrative and pedagogical levels. Our approach ran this risk, too, but when we speak of good practices we are not talking about something obvious. In education, as in other sectors, there is a big difference between what is said, the intentions, and what is done, the practices and surrounding conditions. Thus, if a country's educational policies contain proposals for reducing poverty through schooling, then we should observe what is really happening out in the field.

The IBE's methodological reflections on good practices (Braslavsky et al. 2003), as well as most of the case studies produced so far, generally remain at the level of thematic description, aims and objectives, and results achieved—often in the context of setting up a database of these good practices, which is no doubt extremely useful—or producing a set of documents that reveal a school unlike any other. However, only very rarely do these studies enter into a more profound analysis of the common points, the necessary conditions or the barriers that lie at the heart of these good practices. Identifying those answers that have been rated positively with respect to poverty alleviation, at the level of one school or a group of schools, is a first step. It is still necessary to analyse how these answers have been constructed, what the essential conditions are, who the partners are, what effect they have had and what lessons should be learned, if they become a useful conceptual and operational tool for innovation and change. Why is a good practice good, and for whom? According to which criteria? Is it sustainable beyond the people who have worked it out here and now? What consequences can it have on educational policies, as a feedback or return effect, for instance? At what levels and in what field?

What roles do good practices play?

We have noticed that the good practices can play a wide variety of roles in different socio-political and educational contexts. To begin with, the good practices can quite simply be ignored by the educational authorities. As they are rather invisible, they benefit those who experience them but do not generally enjoy the conditions that would allow them to continue. It only needs the teachers concerned to leave and others take their place for these good practices to become just a memory.

Good practices can also be just a sort of guarantee with respect to the external funding agencies or international institutions to justify funds and support, without any concern for consolidation or continuity being present.

Good practices can, in certain cases, be a way of using any leeway available in the system for a locally-based initiative, or more or less isolated initiatives by external partners, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In this case, they become a single island or even an archipelago that benefits the people living there. Their scope is limited and only rarely do they become a source of change for other schools or communities.

We therefore believe that it is more important to go beyond the roles that these practices play in the specific countries in a more or less circumstantial manner and analyse their status, both real and potential.

What types of status do the good practices have in the field?

The answers given to this question are extremely important in that they oriented the action taken, both at the level of the countries involved in the project and at the level of the work carried out in real-life situations. Moreover, we had at our disposal a heuristic tool on which we could base the analysis of each good practice in its context.

We have counted six types of status of good practices in education. These statuses are in no way exclusive. In fact, some cut across each other in the real-life situations recorded. We describe them here as a heuristic analytical tool.

The status of showcase

These are good practices that often stem from local initiatives. They are shown to visitors, presented to the outside world and sometimes win prizes, but they remain isolated and, paradoxically, are often controversial for the partners involved. In general, there is no concern for a detailed analysis or even consolidation to go beyond the experiment stage. They are like the well-stocked, beautifully decorated shop window that is very often practically empty.

The status of example

These are the good practices that make us realize that the impossible can become possible, provided a certain number of conditions are present that play a decisive role, including willpower and a strategy to use any leeway available by the partners directly involved. These situations reveal that informed and structured action by the various partners could overcome the blinkered attitudes held by the policy-makers, communities, teachers, parents and pupils.

Let us take the example of the lack of textbooks: "Without any textbooks ... there's nothing we can do! Without any teaching materials, how can we teach?" By finding simple answers that are not centred on habits and routines, we can go beyond questions and barriers and turn them into opportunities. The Palo Alto theory of change tells us that it is very often the way in which we formulate problems that stops us from finding solutions. Good practices can be a source of inspiration for new, extremely rich solutions in that they are not just simple words or ideal theories, but also truly concrete responses constructed in concrete situations.

The analyses of the good practices presented in this issue of *Prospects* show that it is possible to find simple answers when we change our mindset with respect to both pedagogical strategies and teacher training. They also show we can build a a world of possibilities as soon as we free ourselves from a traditional, rigid, univocal conception of school and teaching.

The status of work-in-progress

These are practices that are still being developed. Surprises can occur at any time in the process, to which we must adapt our response. Not everything is defined yet. We must dare to try out new ideas, and correct and reinforce them as we progress. We have to analyse those practices while they are still taking shape, finding their place. We should take up challenges, identify obstacles and work out strategies to overcome them, and assess the results with all of the persons involved.

In these situations of practices "under construction", it is extremely important to adopt a reflective perspective and ask the right questions concerning what we call good practices.

This is not to evade fundamental discussions, but rather to keep constantly in mind the issues of quality and equity in education, and examine all of the possible ways to regulate, improve and consolidate the good practice in question. A critical mindset, which is alert, clear and shared by all, is crucial in constructing these alternatives to the well-worn paths of the traditional school.

The status of "the exception that proves the rule"

These are good practices that have developed by chance or out of a cluster of special circumstances, but would remain isolated scenarios for want of interest or detailed analysis. The day the team of teachers involved in a specific project disbands, the local authorities change or the community has other concerns and priorities, this good practice becomes a happy memory for those who had experienced it. Meanwhile, the school system would continue to turn out failures and dropouts, and EFA will suffer more and more delays.

The status of singularity

These good practices include answers that are appropriate to situations related to a specific set of circumstances, such as the ending of a conflict or a minority lifestyle. These types of practices must not be devalued. Quite the contrary: they show flexibility towards different contexts and a concern for relevant answers to the diversity of the very legitimate needs of both the learners and their communities, which we should not ignore. However, their value as a lever for change is limited.

The status of lever for change

This status applies to those practices that are certainly isolated or relatively limited—in number or geography, for instance—but enable us to question the context and reality in which they are situated. The analysis of the conditions for their success enables us to work out strategies and tools to build these practices elsewhere, while taking account of the specificity of each situation. They uncover barriers that are often hidden, cast doubt on any certainties we may have, reveal new opportunities and mark out new roads at all levels, including management, pedagogy, school materials, the organization of time and space within the school, the curriculum itself, teacher training and the relationships between the various partners in education.

Each of these statuses, at one level or another, underlines once again the fact that in education there are no recipes that can be transposed as they stand. A standardized copy or transfer is just not possible. On the other hand, what we can find is a shared vision of the school, an uninterrupted policy dialogue, public policies that encourage flexibility and enable intentions to become reality, all within the diversity of contexts that make up a region or a country.

Creating the conditions within which good practices can be built, analysing them and thinking about their retrospective effect on the different levels of reality, from policy to pedagogy, is a strategy for change that seems to be at work to different degrees in the examples of good practices analysed in the case studies chosen for this project on the role of the curriculum and the school in the reduction of poverty.

The analysis of the points common to all of the good practices seen in different contexts shows very clearly that the conditions exist for a school to become an individual and collective asset in each context. These conditions are linked to the degree of autonomy in the practice of teaching, training in practicing reflection, flexibility of the curriculum, socially recognized relevance of the learning achievements, decentralized management of schools, government commitment to EFA and an intersectoral approach to poverty alleviation, concern for the citizenship of one and all, involvement of the local communities and mobilization of several partners.

Conclusions

In an approach such as the one described here, which serves as a working document, reflection starts with questions and ends up with new questioning. Each time we analyse any barriers we must ask ourselves new questions in order to examine the conditions needed to overcome these barriers. This has led us to ask, for example:

- What are the minimal material and pedagogical conditions that must be put together for a government to be able to talk of a *school?*
- What roles can the *good practices* play in the pre-service and in-service training of teachers?
- To what extent could the extremely difficult material conditions under which certain teachers live, and the social status of the profession, affect their commitment to their work and their ways of teaching?

In the course of the work carried out in this project we have certainly progressed in the analysis of the conditions needed for building *good practices.* We have come to realize that this analysis depends on our vision of school, of the teaching and learning processes, the internalization of practices and routines that we have ourselves experienced, as well as the internal and external academic offerings that influence and shape training.

We have also become certain, though, that achieving EFA is possible, provided the will to do so, the competencies and the means to free ourselves from old-fashioned, bureaucratic, conventional and sometimes unsuitable school models are mobilized, and that the contributions of the good practices constructed in the field are taken seriously. With all their diversity, good practices are a very rich source. They can become the basis for strategies for change, rebuilding schools and involving all the social partners so that education, training and citizenship become assets within everyone's reach, thus contributing to the assertion of the identity and rights of every individual, together with the building of a world of peace in which we can live together, in all our diversity and differences.

This work should continue by asking the central question: knowing how to change scale and move from good practices that remain limited in scope to proposals that maintain the flexibility and diversity of the answers, which in turn presupposes the autonomy of the teaching teams conducting their work, so that they can have an impact on educational policy and influence at all levels, from administration to teacher training. Continuing the work on this project carries much hope.

Acknowledgements This text is the product of a shared reflection to which all of the participants in the project have actively contributed. The preparation of the final text was coordinated by the two main authors.

Annex

Six education scenarios (OECD 2006)

These scenarios have been worked out based on a set of common variables that represent a trend already found in existing school systems. They are divided into three groups.

The status quo: maintaining or strengthening the traditional school

1. Highly bureaucratized systems that resist radical change.
2. Education as a good that is increasingly subject to market conditions.

In this first group of scenarios one just tries to improve what one already has, without making any fundamental changes.

Re-schooling

1. Repositioning the school as the essential social centre at the heart of the community (in situations of poverty, the school becomes a centre for care, support, education and learning about citizenship).
2. Schools as centres of intelligence, functioning as independent organizations that are capable of learning.

In this second group the focus is deliberately on qualitative changes that will go beyond the taboos of the traditional school by building change on forward-looking innovations.

De-schooling

1. Faced with the difficulties of the school in its present form, the formal model is abandoned and replaced by learning networks that form part of a networking society; for example, information and communication technology (ICT).
2. Crisis in the teaching profession, breakdown of the system, lack of discipline and unmanageable schools.

In this third group the formal school model is considered to be out of date. Other structures, both formal and informal, must take over. The state also tends to become less involved.

Thinking about change

If one considers education as a right, these scenarios have very different meanings with respect to: access to education in terms of equity and quality; the status of teachers; the involvement of the state; the place of the school within the community; and many other aspects of school and educational life.

What is desirable, what is probable?

None of these scenarios are either probable or desirable to the same degree. Our evaluation depends on our vision of the school, the social functions that we expect it to assume and its role in fostering sustainable development, poverty alleviation, social cohesion and peace.

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