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SEARCHING FOR BEST PRACTICES TO BUILD AN INCLUSIVE INTERVENTION. THE INTERNATIONAL PROJECT ENABLIN+ APPROACH¹

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Abstract

The project ENABLIN+ is an international partnership for the period of 01/01/2014 to 31/12/2016. It is addressed to the needs of children and youth with complex and intense support needs (CISN), their caregivers and supporters. It wants to develop a system of interdisciplinary in-service training, where professionals and parents of various professional backgrounds learn together, with the aim of improving inclusion, promoting de-institutionalization and enhancing quality of life of the children with CISN, at various age levels. ENABLIN+ promotes an inclusive intervention, not only in social life, but also in education. In this context, this work aims to present and discuss the concept of “best practices” in inclusive intervention based in real world cases. To study that subject we prepare a seminar, where 12 cases of “best practices” in inclusive intervention was presented.

The institutions, services and projects working in the field of inclusion of children and young people with permanent SEN were asked to submit, via the project Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Projetos-de-Inclus%C3%A3o/293506687489384?ref=hl>) or via website (www.enablin.jimdo.com) their best practices in a seminar with a duration of 4 hours. We assumed a triadic concept of best practices: IDEAS (Innovative and/or challenging ideas for the inclusion of children and youth); PROCESSES (services, practices, methodologies) and RESULTS (examples, people, and success stories).

Each communication was strictly to a duration of 6 minutes and was supported by a set of 20 slides, made from a template (previously available for download) that ran automatically. The aim was that the communication reports about the innovative character of each best practice, demonstrating their importance and the inclusive impact. In this article, we analyse the 12 submitted communications, about the concept of "best practices", its innovative character, implementation process and results obtained. We also explored the results of the assessment of the presentations and evaluation of the seminar methodology made by the participants.

The results indicated that the participants were very satisfied with the methodology used (Global average of 4.13/5), and with the presentations (global average of 4.05/5). Finally we discuss the effectiveness of define best practices in a triadic approach, in order to promote reflection and implication for more inclusive interventions. The ENABLIN+ Project Seminar was an important milestone for the project's progress as an important point of reflection and sharing of information on best practices in the field of disability.

Keywords: Best practices, Inclusive intervention, ENABLIN+, Research project.

1 THE ENABLIN+ INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

ENABLIN+ project is a European partnership within the Leonardo Life Long Learning Programme (www.enablinplus.eu). The project aims to develop a system of interdisciplinary in-service vocational training, where professionals and parents of various backgrounds learn together, with the aim of enhancing quality of life of the children with very complex and intensive support needs. ENABLIN+ develops a series of on-the-job training modules to improve inclusion, communication, behaviour management, activation and learning, and support for daily life care. The project has eight main objectives:

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1. Promote quality of life of children and young adults with complex and intense support needs
2. Increase social and educational participation, facilitating activities, learning and development of children with CISN
3. Raise awareness, and create a shift of mind in people supporting children with CISN
4. Enhance the quality of support in enabling children with CISN towards a more inclusive and active life.
5. Develop interdisciplinary in-service training modules for professionals and parents working with this target group, in areas such as increasing learning, autonomy, activities in daily life, communication, behaviour regulation and in inclusive education.
6. Professionalize staff of mainstream schools in welcoming children with complex dependency needs.
7. Strengthen parents-professionals cooperation.
8. Empower parents and professionals

To achieve these goals, ENABLIN+ was designed with innovative aspects, like the transdisciplinary character and multi-level learning; the valorisation of expert knowledge by different sources: parents, daily care professionals, researchers, teachers, medical/rehabilitation staff etc.; training parents and professionals together, different hierarchical levels together: carers, teachers, parents, doctors; Complementarity to basic vocational training which is taking place separately, and in-field training which is really interdisciplinary; the needs- based and not impairment-based approach; the definition of the target groups as “complex and intensive needs dependency”; the stress on inclusion, not only in social life but also in education; the construction of training modules based on real needs; a common framework, based on the ICF, modifiability and inclusion paradigms.

In addition to having to meet the objectives outlined, as a research project, funded by European frameworks, ENABLIN+ project wants and need to do present the listed outcomes:

1. A needs study;
2. Search and describe examples of best practices;
3. Develop a set of training modules in EN, NL, FR, IT, RO, HU and BG languages, oriented at support needs assessment, staff attitudes, beliefs and conceptual systems, enhancing children’s communication capacities, daily life activities, behaviour regulation, activation and participation in learning and inclusive schooling;
4. Modules can be on-line as well as in real meetings;
5. A train-the-trainers’ course & conference;
6. Results will be disseminated in newsletters, professional articles, and in a white book.

To respond to the Item 2 of this outputs list, we organized a seminar, which will be described in this paper, but we begin with a brief disc start by exploring the definition of best practices.

2 BEST PRACTICES – HOW TO DEFINE IT?

The term “best practices” it is a current expression and very popular in English literature, generally used in a large number of contexts and disciplines [1].

According to Flores, Escola & Peres [2], this expression identifies best practices, but because it is difficult to find a practice, which has all the features to be identified as an excellent practice, it was decided to use the term "best practices" in order to identify a successful practice. In general, the concept of "good practice" arouses something positive and desirable to identify, document, disseminate and capitalize on the practices that have been successful [3]

In the same line of thinking, Solla Salvador [4] and Ballesteros & Mata [5] say that the same concept identifies the best way to carry out a project, considering the objectives, and this may serve as a model for other organizations. This concept, in what’s concerning to the quality, besides covering interventions also includes management and procedures that contribute to the project objectives. Flores, Escola & Peres [2] corroborate the previous authors, affirming that the concept of "best

practices" have emerged in different contexts according to the project in which it operates and its objectives. Because of this multiplicity of contexts, the term conceptualization have an unknown origin [6].

In special education context level, according to Osburn, Caruso & Wolfensberger [1], there is little or no literature about the appearance of the concept of best practice in disability and other service areas. The same authors argue that it should have been derived from the commercial and industrial sector in which it was connected with the search for financial gain.

In the area of intellectual disabilities, their use has become more frequent in the XX century 80's, starting in special education. The general use of the term is connected with TASH (Association for the Severely Handicapped) in their policy and publications over the years [1]. In this sense, according to Flores, Escola & Peres [2], best practice facilitates learning, understanding, knowledge, know-how, the debate, but not the repetition.

One best practice requires well-defined objectives well outlined strategies, a participatory approach with innovative actions within a network of partnerships, which promotes networking, transferability, sustainability and good expectations. As we can below see in Fig.1.



Fig. 1 – Best practices. Adapted from Flores, Escola & Peres [2]

Based in the conceptual framework of ENABLIN+ project we proposed that are often seen as best practices those that meet a set of procedures that have been predetermined by others. Even when supported by evidence (i.e., evaluated results in situations) such procedures tend to be a standard that tends to be replicated but have difficulty to include or arouse new or innovative practices or experiences.

Knowing that not all the practices are equally good, not all of them serve as examples and are not necessarily innovative, interested to the project collect a wide range of practices, which its promoters considered good quality and a range of new ideas that can help to progress both the models and the practices in the future.

We felt the need to go in search of what is being done, on the assumption that only a comprehensive reflection on what is done allows to improve gradually, practices and to introduce on them innovative and higher quality features. This led us to seek a methodology for collecting and sharing of best practices and innovative ideas.

The aim of the present study was to investigate the representation of the expression “best practices in inclusive education”, based in real world cases. In this sense, it could play a central role to understand, first, how best practices are organized in ideas, processes and results, second, the level of satisfaction of participants in the seminar that present best practices in terms of planning, length and organization.

3 METHOD

3.1 Design and procedures

We wanted to collect the actual experiences that are on the ground, from those who performs and values them without any prior judgment or external criterion about their value. We did not sought to collect closed practices, or finished examples but:

- a) Best ideas - Innovative and challenging ideas that seem to have potential to solve problems, find solutions, innovate practices, or achieve better inclusive results. Even if they have not been tested or fully developed in its applicability in the inclusion of children and young people with SEN.
- b) Best processes - Responses already implemented in the form of services, practices and methodologies to solve problems related to inclusion.
- c) Best results- Concrete examples of success stories in the inclusion of people with SEN.

Consequently, each presentation or report cannot be elected as exemplary or example to be copied, but it can be used as reflection generator or new ideas to clarify and improve inclusive practices. In accordance with this purpose, we ensued the following methodology:

- a) Were invited to participate, by presenting their contributions, all agents and not only those that are commonly recognized, more institutional, or more responsible. There was no specific calls but only motivation, open and inclusive, of all stakeholders to share their work.
- b) They were asked to present concrete and specific practices, not the presentation of services or institutions working in the field.
- c) The presentations had to be concise, having only 6 minutes each participant for his presentation sustained in a maximum number of 20 slides, accordance with the previously provided template.

The choice of this methodology forced presenters to:

- a) Be concise, highlighting the best ideas, examples of best practice and best results, avoiding theoretical frameworks or vague and repetitive theories;
- b) Avoid excessive institutional description, doing that only when that connects to example or idea to be transmitted
- c) Operational focus on the examples, maintaining the public's interest in reflection.

At the end of the presentations the participating public was asked to evaluate each presentation. Not assigning an overall value but a value for each dimension: to what extent the presentation showed best ideas, best processes, or best results. This means innovative and challenging ideas, processes, and methodologies consistent and inspiring, or good examples of success stories in inclusion.

3.2 Participants

The seminar took place on March 14, at the University of Évora (Portugal), with the designation «Best Practices and New Ideas on Children and Youth Inclusion». It was an important milestone for the project's progress as an important point of reflection and sharing of information on best practices in the field of disability. It was attended by parents, psychologists, special education teachers, experts and researchers, institutions and students, which resulted in a total of 130 participants, of which 12 presented communications representing best practice. The inscriptions were made online, on a website created for this purpose (www.enablin.jimdo.com), where they could also consult the program and objectives of the meeting. Due to the constraints felt mainly by professionals, the seminar was held only on a Saturday morning. So it was intended to enable the participation of stakeholders, not carrying with workload. This influenced the choice of the methodology followed.

3.3 Best Practice & New Ideas: contents characterization

A closer look at the best practice activities and projects and new ideas in the inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) of a permanent nature, presented by the various participants, we identified six areas associated with the development and inclusion of children and young people, including: society, family, kindergarten/school, work, recreation and artistic expression.

Society - The actions relating to the society, in order to strengthen the full social inclusion, are geared towards raising awareness of citizens and local agents on the need for better access to information, accessibility to physical and social spaces as well and the need to overcome the stereotypes associated with different disabilities. The communications presented in this area were: *1 - Project trim minds; 2 - Nothing about us without us!; 12 - Including by information.*

Family - The family, as caregiver of children and young people with SEN, of permanent nature, need to be looked after and included in social life. In this sense, the proposed actions were intended to relieve physical and emotional overload from the family, due to the constant caregiving. The communications presented in this area were: *3 - Caring for caregivers; 6 - For an inclusion without labels.*

Kindergarten and school - The kindergarten and school are, as family background, spaces for learning and socialization. In this context the proposed actions pointed to the development of socio-cognitive, affective and artistic skills. The communications presented in this area were: *4 - "Garden" of affections; 5 - It is not enough to talk about inclusion; 7 - Inclusion is carried out including.*

Leisure - Leisure appeared proposed on actions carried out in inclusive spaces, with a recreational and educational nature, during school breaks. These actions, responding to the needs of children and youth, also relieve family burden imposed by the permanent care. The communication presented in this area was: *10 - Inclusive summer camps.*

Labour market - when it comes to work is reasonably known that the inclusion of disabled people, in formal employment context, usually raised difficulties, involving in most cases exclusion. Thus, in the area of labour market, inclusive practices presented had in consideration physical, sensory or mental limitations, and were adapted to the activities to develop, in association with protected or formal workplace settings. In protected employment context, it is possible, among other skills, develop artistic expression. The communication presented in this area was: *9 - Helena Rainha: successful in the labour market.*

Artistic expression - Artistic expression appeared in the proposals of stakeholders both via the music associated with the school-based therapy, such as via of visual arts associated with a protected working environment / occupational activities. The communications presented in this area were: *8 - Communication and expression workshop: music therapy; 11 - Artistic exploration project: Explor'arte.*

4 RESULTS

In this section we present the questionnaire results of the evaluations of the presentations and the seminar.

4.1.1 Presentations evaluation

It was delivered to all 130 participants, an evaluation sheet called «Presentation of Best Practices & New Ideas». Each presentation represented a best practice in the area of inclusion of children and young with permanent special needs. It was required, for each presentation, to be given a rating on a scale from 1 to 5, for each of these categories: ideas, processes and results, and was given a clear indication that the participants should identify what seemed to them the value of each best practice, in each particular aspect, instead of a global value. In the end of the seminar, 77 sheets have been returned properly filled. The results are listed in Tab. 1:

Table 1 - Best Practices & New Ideas scores (n=77)

BEST PRACTICE TITLE	IDEA	PROCESS	RESULTS	GLOBAL AVERAGE
9 - Helena Rainha: successful in the labour market	4,14	4,57	4,74	4,48
3 - Caring for caregivers	4,63	4,52	4,20	4,45
11 - Artistic exploration project: Explor'arte	4,35	4,32	4,43	4,37
10 - Inclusive summer camps	4,36	4,16	4,21	4,24
8 - Communication and expression workshop: music therapy	4,24	4,04	4,13	4,14
7 - Inclusion is carried out including	3,80	4,24	4,20	4,08
12 - Including by information	3,73	4,04	4,20	3,99
5 - It's not enough to talk about inclusion	3,61	4,05	4,12	3,93
1 - Project trim minds	3,97	3,95	3,47	3,80
2 - Nothing about us without us!	3,68	3,79	3,83	3,77
6 - For an inclusion without labels	3,68	3,76	3,81	3,75
4 - "Garden" of affections	3,62	3,79	3,61	3,67

4.1.2 Seminar evaluation

At the end of the seminar, a sheet for evaluation of the seminar was distributed. This evaluation focused on three topics on which we intended to have feedback: planning (previous to the seminar), length and organization. The 12 items were scored in a scale from 1 to 5. A total of 75 sheets have been returned properly filled. The results are listed in Tab. 2:

Table 2 - Seminar evaluation form (n=75)

Areas / Item	Mean score
I – Planning	4,19
1 - You has been notified, in advance, of the seminar location and correct date	4,05
2 - There was a previous agenda	3,95
3 - The website had relevant information	4,18
4 - You received emails from registration confirmation or questions clarification	4,60
II – Length	3,89
1 - The length of the seminar was appropriate	3,89
2 - There was time to clarify several issues	3,89
III – Organization	4,16
1 - The seminar started at the expected time	3,24
2 - You was welcomed	4,45
3 - You received the necessary documents / information	4,37
4 - The meeting's objective was achieved	4,40
5 - The debate was productive	4,08
6 - Communications were relevant	4,41
Average global score	4,13

The seminar evaluation sheet also contained an open response question where participants could leave comments and suggestions. A total of 22 from the 75 participants left comments (Tab.3), producing 31 registration units, distributed over 10 units of meaning:

Table 3 – Analysis of Frequencies for «Comments and Suggestions»

Units of meaning	Frequency											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
It was important	12											
Longer duration	3											
More debate and reflection	3											
More time for presentation	1											
More events	4											
Do it in working time	1											
More space	5											
More entities and districts	1											
Previous meetings	1											
Start at the expected time	1											

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results shown that one of the innovations of the presented work is to define and operationalize the construct of what is a best practice. Starting from a discussion between different professionals, we felt that best practice can refer to three main aspects: ideas, processes and outcomes.

This implies that best practices may relate only to one of these aspects, two of them or all three simultaneously, allowing to identify best practices both in conceptual terms (ideas) and procedural (processes) and outcomes or products. The conceptualization of best practices presented here can be assumed also as a guide for planning and evaluate intervention actions.

The actions and projects proposed in the seminar, in the area of inclusion of children and youth with special and permanent needs, by the various communicators, were evaluated for all the participants using these same three aspects: i) ideas (Innovative and / or challenging for the inclusion of children and young people); processes (services, practices, methodologies) and outcomes (eg, people, success stories).

The four actions most considered as best practices was about inclusive holiday camps (10); Rehabilitation and Social Integration (3); Artistic exploration (11) and socio-professional integration (9). These four actions show that the three aspects of the best practices concept for us assumed can be present in a conjugated form, or at different intensity levels.

It is noted that only the action 11 (Artistic exploration project) presents the three aspects assessment values equally high. We can therefore conclude that best practices do not always have the same strength in all three dimensions. From these data emerges several questions: should or should not best practices be equally robust in these three aspects? How the fact that only one of these aspects be considered excellent does affect a best practice real value?

If, on one hand, we believe that ideally a best practice should correspond to best ideas, best processes and best results, on the other hand, we assume that each action is more than the sum of its different facets, having a global and qualitative character that goes beyond the sum. In fact, standing in a systemic perspective, we believe that any best practice aimed at producing and promoting development, which occurs through global interventions within the framework of interactions between different actors (children / young people, couples, professionals, families, school, service, community), with the aim of an inclusive intervention. Assuming, therefore, that not all practices are equally good and inclusive, not all of them are necessarily innovative, and not all of them serve as good examples, even if their promoters may consider it good quality and a range of new ideas that could improve the models and the practices in the future. Simultaneously, we believe that trough the dissemination of best practices a participatory approach within innovative actions that improves partnerships, networking, transferability, sustainability and good expectations could be improved and empowered. In this sense, dissemination of best practices in a participatory design could improve inclusive community of practices, based in partnerships and networking.

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