

Received: 07.10.2024
Revised: 29.11.2024
Accepted: 12.12.2024
Published: 20.12.2024

Recovery of Literacy Skills in Primary Education in Romania. Potential Systemic Solutions

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Abstract

Despite recent interventions aimed at reducing inequity in the Romanian education system, educational gaps persist and, in some respects, are even widening. International assessment results indicate significant disparities in student performance. These same gaps are also evident in national testing. In this context, targeted interventions from the early years of schooling become not just an educational necessity but a social urgency. The long-term effects of low literacy levels are felt both individually, socially, and economically. This study explores the effectiveness of two intervention methods aimed at recovering literacy skills for primary school students: intervention by a specialist working with students who have skills below their grade level and recovery intervention conducted by the classroom teacher, supported through a training and mentoring program. The main objective of the study is to determine the most effective solution for recovering literacy skills for primary school students from vulnerable backgrounds. The study was conducted on a sample of 146 primary school students. The students were divided into two groups: 18 students who worked with an external specialist in the recovery program and 129 students who worked with classroom teachers after school hours. The classroom teachers were included in a training program as part of the support offered to teachers by Teach for Romania. To evaluate the students' progress, initial and final tests were administered during the 2023-2024 school year. The results suggest that both approaches generate an increase in students' skills, but the effect generated by the specialist's intervention is statistically significantly greater.

Keywords: recovery intervention, literacy skills, vulnerable backgrounds

Introduction

Learning to read and write is a very complex process that involves a series of other cognitive processes: attention, memory, language, and motivation (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998). Beyond their cognitive aspects, reading and writing are inherently social activities. These activities are part of the lives of children and adults to varying degrees, being sensitive to the social and cultural universe in which individuals are situated.

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Learning to read itself involves a series of acquisitions which in the specialized literature are found under the concept of emergent literacy. Emergent literacy involves the existence of reading and writing experiences from very early ages, before children actually learn to write and read (Sulzby, 1991). For some children, these experiences are rich enough, both in terms of variety and quality, while for others they are so limited that they cause major difficulties in acquiring reading and writing skills. These difficulties are especially encountered in children from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds and tend to persist over time, even deepening, as can be seen from the latest analyses of international tests. Thus, for some students, differentiated instruction through recovery programs becomes not just necessary but urgent. Children who have missed the start in acquiring reading and writing skills need recovery programs and well-prepared and competent teachers to provide the support they need.

A recovery program is an early preventive intervention program designed to accelerate the progress of readers who have not managed to learn to read after formal instruction (Clay, 1991). In Romania, these recovery programs have become more “popular” after the crisis generated by Covid-19 pandemic. Recovery programs were carried out by classroom teachers -generally without additional training, support, or specialization in the area of recovering reading and writing skills - and they have never been subjected to an analysis to determine their added value. However, the new legislative provisions in Education Law no. 198/2023 tend to provide a favourable framework for implementing these programs by: specifying the continuation and expansion of remedial learning programs in schools for students struggling to acquire skills and for Romanian students returning from abroad, as outlined in Article 75 of Law no. 198/2023; as well as through the National Teacher Training Program aimed at increasing students’ level of functional literacy, specified in Article 105 par. (10) of the same law. Additionally, the operation and management of the functional literacy platform are detailed in Article 98 par. (9). Currently, by means of Emergency Ordinance No. 115/2023, the implementation of the provisions of Article 105 par. (10) of Law no. 198/2023 has been suspended by the Government and the teacher training program is scheduled for the 2025–2026 school year. That being said, it should be stated however that Law no. 198/2023 does not provide any information regarding the content of the National Teacher Training Program, apart from the institution responsible for developing this program, the National Center for Teacher Training and Career Development, an institution also introduced by Education Law no. 198/2023.

Nevertheless, a series of questions remain: who will conduct these remedial programs at the school level? Who and how will teachers be trained, and has the alternative of piloting remedial intervention programs with specialists at the school level been considered? The present study does not provide answers to these questions but offers a clear understanding of the direct, tested impact that teachers (supported through training and mentoring programs) can have on recovering literacy skills for students from vulnerable backgrounds, as well as the impact of specialist intervention in

recovering literacy skills in students. The goal is to identify the most viable solution in terms of the results generated for students.

Literature Review

In general, the teaching of reading and writing in the Romanian context is based on the phonetic approach. This means that initially the child learns the sounds, the relationship between sounds and letters, so that later they can decode words.

A less commonly used approach in the national context, but one that recognizes the complexity of the reading process, emphasizing that reading is not just about decoding sounds but also about understanding and context, is the holistic approach to reading. This includes vocabulary development, critical thinking, and interpretation skills. International literature has conceptualized various models that include these approaches. Some of the most well-known are the Simple View of Reading (SVR) (Gough and Tunmer, 1986), later translated and enriched in Scarborough's model (Scarborough, 2001), and the Active View of Reading, AVR (Duke and Cartwright, 2021). The Active View of Reading model has been used in research addressing disparities in student outcomes based on economic or racial criteria, bringing the concept of social justice to the forefront. The study conducted by Burns, Duke, and Cartwright (2023) justifies how knowledge of the components of the latest models of reading and writing learning can contribute to reducing inequities. Meanwhile, in Romania, learning to read and write has been considered a process that happens on its own. Students go to school and learn to write and read. In some cases, this indeed happens, while in others, general instruction seems to fail to yield results. There are a few studies, such as those conducted by Dolean (2019), which highlight the explanatory power of socio-economic factors in the acquisition of reading and writing skills, demonstrating that students from vulnerable backgrounds have a slower pace compared to their peers from economically advantaged families. Thus, from the moment they enter kindergarten, children have certain "chances" of acquiring literacy skills and, consequently, certain chances of success as adults (Smart, et al., 2017). To balance the scales and increase the chances of success, some children need additional attention and differentiated instruction. Other international researches consider that the quality of instruction is often the strongest predictor of student outcomes, surpassing the effect of factors such as life experience given by the economic context or differences between schools (Burchinal, et al., 2011). From this perspective, recovery programs for children from vulnerable backgrounds could be considered affirmative measures that would correct inequity. They can have this status only to the extent that we are dealing with a certain degree of instructional quality. Quality that is difficult to measure because these children are often, even from the preparatory class, in the classes of teachers with whom they do remedial work. Of course, we do not minimize the contributions of economic factors or the problems they generate: absenteeism, grade repetition, we just emphasize that there is a need for teacher training to face these challenges, that they could not address during class hours, through a recovery program tailored to the child's

needs. An interesting recent national study by Balea, Kovacs, and Temple (2023) suggests that teacher training interventions and the use of appropriate materials have significant effects on the literacy levels of students in preparatory grade from vulnerable backgrounds. Using a comparative analysis, the authors demonstrate that there are significant differences in the outcomes of students who received proper training and those who received traditional instruction in learning to read and write.

A recovery program is an early preventive intervention program designed to accelerate the progress of readers who have not managed to learn to read after formal instruction (Clay, 1991). Research has shown that these programs can have positive effects at a general level on children's reading performance, but also specifically on reading fluency and comprehension, especially for beginning readers (Fahle, Kane, Reardon and Staiger, 2024). Recovery programs involve individual or small group sessions with students, tailored to their needs. Needs are identified through an individual assessment that measures both the specific dimensions of emergent literacy: the concept of print, alphabet recognition and reproduction, word recognition, phonemic segmentation, and word spelling, as well as the level of competence in each of the five dimensions of literacy: phonological and phonemic awareness, decoding and grapheme-phoneme correspondence, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency.

In the United States, these recovery programs are part of the university training of teachers, in addition to continuous training. For example, Reading Recovery was developed in the 1980s by Dr. Marie Clay, a researcher from New Zealand, and is implemented in many schools in the United States and other countries, being a model of intervention used by various school districts. The program itself involves a year of dedicated training for instructors, both theoretical and practical training. In Romania, such programs have not been explicitly addressed in university programs. They are tangentially included in specializations such as special psychopedagogy. The effects of the recovery program have been demonstrated since 1988, through research initiated by Pinnell, DeFord, and Lyons (1988), which showed a statistically significant effect on comprehension, followed by research by Pinnell et al. (1994) and Schwartz (2005), which clearly demonstrated the improvement of fluency for beginning readers. Improving fluency, as shown by the studies conducted, leads to improved reading performance and subsequently text comprehension. There is research that has shown that students who read below grade level at the end of third grade are four times less likely than their peers with grade-level skills to graduate from high school (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce and Fox, 2013). Thus, literacy skills can be treated as effective tools for acquiring, organizing, and applying information in various fields. As such, the ability to read and understand written materials is a transdisciplinary competence and an essential condition for success in school and later in life.

In the international specialized literature, there is a generous body of research that follows the predictors that lead to or jeopardize the formation of literacy skills in students. In addition to socio-economic factors and the quality of teaching, metacognitive

strategies, reading speed, and the number of books students have at home seem to predict their level of comprehension (Artelt, Schiefele, & Schneider, 2001), along with psychological aspects such as motivation for reading or technical aspects: vocabulary size and word reading. In the national context, research has focused on economic predictors (Dolean, Melby-Lervåg, Tincas, Damsae, & Lervåg, 2019). The purpose of this study is not to identify those predictors that can influence children's literacy skills but to present an analysis that primarily aims to find the most effective intervention method for recovering literacy skills for primary school students. Thus, we test two intervention models: specialist intervention and classroom teacher intervention, who undergo training and mentoring programs to implement the recovery program for their students.

Research Methodology

Starting from the premise that there is a need for literacy recovery programs for those students who, for various reasons, are unable to write or read by the end of the fundamental acquisition cycle (end of second grade), the main objective of this study is to determine the most effective solution for recovering literacy skills for primary school students. In this context, two types of interventions were tested: the intervention conducted by the classroom teacher, supported through training and mentoring, and the intervention by an external specialist. Thus, we had two secondary objectives: the first focused on analysing the impact of teacher training and mentoring on the outcomes of students with difficulties in acquiring reading and writing skills, while the second aimed to evaluate the contribution of an external specialist to the recovery of reading and writing skills for primary school students with difficulties. Thus, the main research question around which the entire research endeavour was conducted is whether there are significant differences between students who work with an external specialist and students who work with the classroom teacher in recovering literacy skills. In this regard, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Students with gaps in reading and writing skills who work with an external specialist will show significant and possibly greater improvements than students who work with the classroom teacher.

H2: The training and mentoring program offered to teachers will have a positive impact on the results of students selected for literacy recovery programs.

H3: There are significant differences between the two groups of students.

The research design employed is quantitative, featuring a quasi-experimental, comparative approach between two groups. At the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, an initial assessment was conducted for 1,143 primary school students in the classes of teachers supported by the Teach for Romania organization, using tools developed by the Noi Orizonturi Foundation: the Informal Reading Inventory and the Emergent Literacy Assessment Workbook. The evaluation aimed to identify the literacy level of each assessed student (the grade level they were at compared to their current grade). The Emergent Literacy Assessment Workbook was designed based on

internationally recognized tools, such as the one developed by Marie Clay (2019), and assesses students' literacy levels across five dimensions: concepts about print, alphabet and letter-to-sound knowledge, the concept of word, phonemic awareness, and word recognition. The Informal Reading Inventory is grounded in the work of Darrell Morris (2014) and measures several key aspects of children's reading skills from the beginning of Grade 1 to the end of Grade 4, as follows: word recognition (both highly familiar words recognized instantly and decoding of words, *i.e.*, using letter-sound correspondence skills), reading fluency, comprehension of read text, comprehension of heard text, reading levels, and word spelling. The inventory consists of word lists, reading passages, and questions, all carefully graded by difficulty level.

Of the 1143 initially evaluated students, a sample of 129 second to fourth-grade students who needed urgent literacy recovery intervention was selected based on the evaluations, having skills at least two grades below their current grade level. Eliminating evaluation errors, we selected a subsample of 56 students who were evaluated at both T1 (end of the school year), constituting Experimental Group 1, the group of students who worked in the recovery program with classroom teachers.

Experimental Group 2 consists of students who worked with an external specialist in a pilot literacy recovery program conducted at the school level. The program involved evaluating all students in the school using the aforementioned instruments, which allowed the identification of a group of 18 primary school students who needed support in recovering skills, being at least two grades behind their current grade level. From these, we selected a subsample of 9 students who were evaluated both initially and finally.

The actual intervention consisted of conducting remedial programs. Students in Group 2 worked with the specialist, while students in Group 1 worked with the classroom teachers. The teachers underwent a training program that included both synchronous online training sessions on the Zoom platform, eight in total, and mentoring, which consisted of at least six 1:1 work sessions aimed at interpreting initial evaluation results, creating a personalized intervention plan, implementing the individual plan, adjusting it based on student results, and final evaluation of results. The intervention took place over seven months: October 2023 - May 2024.

For data analysis, specific statistical procedures were used to measure results, compare initial and final outcomes, as well as to compare the two samples, performed using the Excel application.

Research Results

At the level of the entire sample of 129 students who were significantly behind by at least 2 grades compared to their current grade level, an average difference of -2.75 was recorded in the initial evaluation (T0). At the end, after the implementation of the recovery program, the average grade difference remained at -2.49. This means that, at the level of the entire sample of students and teachers who had remedial interventions,

the students' recoveries were quite small. For Intervention Group 1, which contains 56 students who were significantly behind by at least 2 grades compared to their current grade level, an average difference of -2.57 was recorded in the initial evaluation (T0). At the end, after the implementation of the recovery program, the average grade difference remained at -2.07. The Cohen's test indicates a small statistical difference in intensity. This means that during the 2023-2024 school year, the students who were included in the recovery programs and were evaluated initially and finally recovered on average about half a grade. From the subsample of 56 evaluated students, at the final evaluation: 23 progressed on average by 1.34 grades; 30 remained at the same level; 3 showed regression. The analysis of the evaluation results graphs indicates a dynamic trend on the right side at T1. Students who were 4 grades behind either recovered one grade or regressed. The most substantial recoveries are for students who were a maximum of 3 grades behind, especially those who were 1 or 2 grades behind. Thus, we can consider that in the case of very large gaps, the probability of recovery is small. Recoveries are easier when students are closer to the grade level they are enrolled in. Therefore, we can consider that Hypothesis 2 is partially validated. Students who followed literacy recovery programs with their teachers who were trained and mentored showed predominant growth where the gaps were a maximum of 3 grades. Of course, it should be mentioned that we did not consider in the analysis factors related to teacher characteristics: teaching experience, completed university, qualification, previous training programs. The results raised a new question that we will address in future research: "To what extent do teacher characteristics affect the results of students included in recovery programs?"

Figure 1

Situation of Students in Experimental Group 1 at T0

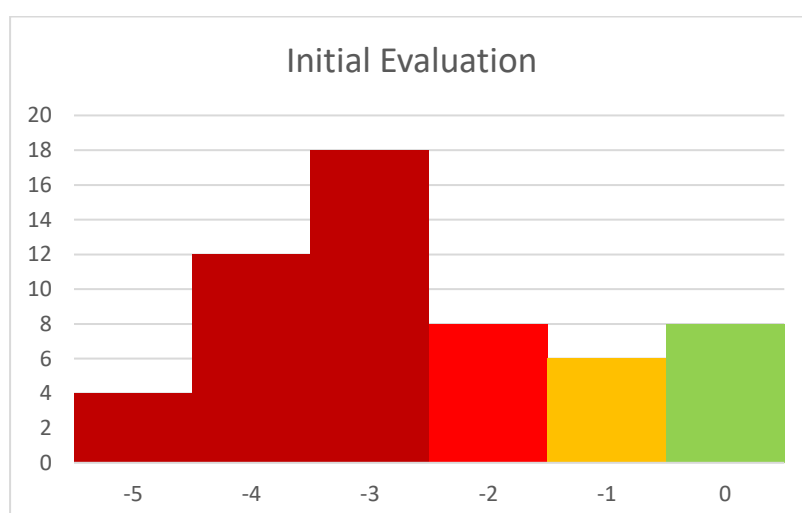
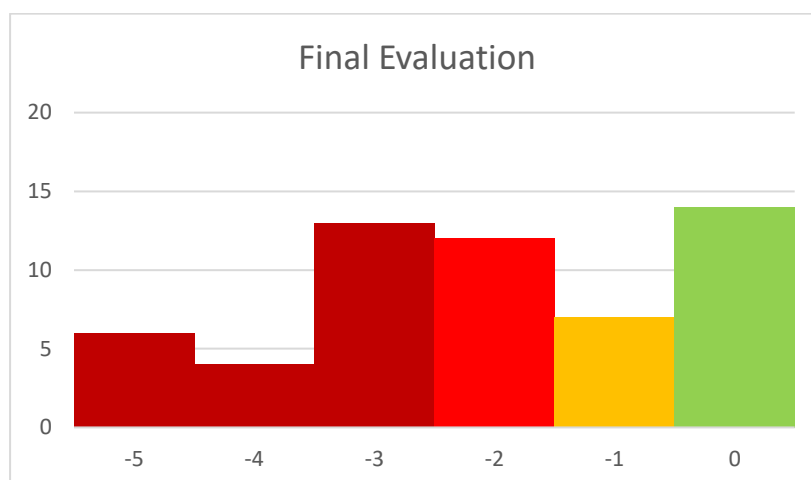


Figure 2
Situation of Students in Experimental Group 1 at T1



The group of students who worked with the literacy specialist was evaluated using the same instruments. The difference lies in the fact that we have an intervention led by a specialist, as well as a dedicated space for this intervention at the school level. For Experimental Group 2, the differences are on average less than -3 grades. This allowed for extensive testing with Instrument 2 (Informal Reading Inventory), which enabled measurements in two areas: reading accuracy and comprehension. For students in Experimental Group 2, the average difference (between the student's grade and the evaluated literacy level) in terms of reading accuracy was -3.4 at T0, and at T1 the difference was 1.1. The statistically significant difference is 2.3. This means that in terms of reading accuracy, students recovered on average more than 2 grades.

The average difference (between the student's grade and the evaluated literacy level) in terms of comprehension at the initial evaluation (T0) was 3.7, and at T1 the difference was 1.5. The statistically significant difference is 2.2. This means that in terms of comprehension, students recovered on average more than 2 grades.

Of the 17 students who participated in the recovery program and were initially evaluated, 6 moved past the emergent literacy stage, while 2 still need support in acquiring specific emergent literacy skills in certain areas, although they scored above 60%: 101 and 106 out of 150, respectively. From the group of 9 students evaluated initially and finally with the same instrument, the Informal Reading Inventory, the average score difference in terms of reading accuracy is 0.8 at T1, 2.8 points lower than at T0, where the average difference was 3.6. In terms of comprehension, for the same group of students, the average score difference decreased by 2.8 points. At T0, the average recorded difference was 4.4, and at T1, the indicator reached 1.6. This means that on average, students improved by approximately 3 grades in both comprehension and reading accuracy. The Cohen's test indicates a statistically significant difference of high intensity. Given these results, we can consider that Hypothesis 1 is validated. Students

who worked with a specialist in the pilot intervention program achieved better results at the end of the year, with significant improvements, some of them reaching grade-level competencies.

To test Hypothesis 3 in comparing the two groups, we used the Welch test, which indicates a statistically relevant difference between the two groups: Experimental Group 1 and Experimental Group 2, comparing the final evaluation results. It can be stated that students in Group 2, who worked with the specialist, achieved much better results than those who worked with classroom teachers. However, we remain cautious because the groups are different in terms of numbers, and the grade differences for Experimental Group 1 were much more pronounced.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results indicate that the interventions had a positive impact on students' literacy skills, but with significant variations between groups. For Experimental Group 1 (students who worked with their teachers), the recovery averaged about half a grade, suggesting a moderate impact of the training and mentoring programs for teachers. For Experimental Group 2 (students who worked with an external specialist), the improvements were significant, with an average recovery of more than 2 grades in terms of reading accuracy and comprehension. These results validate Hypothesis H1, which states that "Students with gaps in reading and writing skills who work with an external specialist will show significant and possibly greater improvements than students who work with the classroom teacher," as well as H3, which states that there are significant differences between the two groups. However, we would like to emphasize that these results should be treated with caution because, as it can be seen from the analysis, students who worked in recovery programs with classroom teachers had larger gaps than those who worked with the specialist. These gaps reach up to 5 grades, meaning that a fourth-grade child has emergent literacy skills. The results show that for these students, recovery is even more difficult; 2 of the students who were 4 grades behind at the initial evaluations regressed. Moreover, a significant portion of the sample, more than 50%, only maintained their level, without significant improvements. Improvements were predominantly for students who were 2 grades behind. This demonstrates the need for rapid intervention programs, starting from first grade, to prevent large gaps that are difficult to address, especially when they span an entire school cycle. Thus, we have a partial confirmation of Hypothesis 2: "The training and mentoring program offered to teachers will have a positive impact on the results of students selected for literacy recovery programs," with these improvements being sensitive to the size of the gap. Therefore, although the training and mentoring programs for teachers had a positive impact, the results suggest that interventions could be improved to increase their efficiency, especially for students with large gaps. There are aspects we did not consider, and we believe they could be the subject of more nuanced research regarding the characteristics of teachers that could positively or negatively influence the recovery

process of the students they work with. After establishing specialized university programs, which we recommend given the confirmation of Hypothesis 3, we could also include training providers as predictors in determining models that could improve students' literacy skills.

The presence of an external specialist demonstrated a significant impact on literacy recovery, suggesting that integrating such specialists in schools could be beneficial, with students recovering more than 2 grades. However, clear questions remain about who trains these specialists and what the costs of such programs extended at the national level are. We believe they could be treated as affirmative measures specifically aimed at students from vulnerable backgrounds. At the same time, we do not believe in a rigid approach that supports only one model, but we consider it necessary to integrate these recovery programs and approaches from the initial training of teachers, as well as part of continuous training, as part of horizontal career development in teaching. Moreover, beyond treatment itself, we are talking about prevention, and from this perspective, we consider that addressing this topic from the initial training of teachers would make them more attentive to the components of the reading and writing processes.

Of course, there are certain limitations to the study, primarily due to the sample size: the small number of students in Group 2 may limit the generalization of the results. On the other hand, there are a series of uncontrolled factors, such as the individual characteristics of teachers and students, school characteristics, the teaching experience of teachers, as well as other characteristics related to their training and continuous preparation; student motivation and the school climate in educational institutions were also not controlled in this study.

Beyond the results it offers on interventions aimed at children who need recovery programs for acquiring reading and writing skills, this study opens up broader research perspectives that could consider topics such as: teacher characteristics by investigating how teacher characteristics influence student outcomes; long-term interventions by studying the impact of interventions over a longer period to see if improvements are maintained; the organizational culture of the school by investigating how it can influence student outcomes, and a more detailed analysis of interventions by specifically evaluating the components of training and mentoring programs for teachers to identify the most effective practices.

In conclusion, the study demonstrated that interventions for recovering literacy skills are essential and can have a significant impact, especially when led by external specialists. However, to maximize the efficiency of these programs, an integrated approach is necessary, including both continuous teacher training and specialist support.

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