

IMPROVING THE FREQUENCY OF LEARNING DIFFICULTIES - A PREREQUISITE FOR MODERN AND QUALITY EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study aims to present a diagnosis of the frequency of manifestation/occurrence of learning difficulties in the school context. Because the area of manifestation is quite large, being different from one discipline to another, we focused on a single subject (Romanian language and literature) and on a sample of students belonging to a single class (9th grade), as a transition class from secondary school to high school. On the other hand, the study attempts to distinguish between learning difficulties and learning disabilities or learning disruptive behaviour, the latter being rather the characteristic of children with special educational needs.

Our preoccupations in the field are long established, in this respect, studies and research having been undertaken on the basis of representative samples, in the form of constrative or ameliorative type micro-research.

Although in the mainstream literature the learning difficulties have been approached from different perspectives (psychological, psychiatric, neurological, biological, neurophysiological), our attempts to capture the specificities of the learning difficulties from the point of view of the symptomatological and etiological point of view belong to the pedagogical dimension for the purpose of finding ways, means, methods, strategies, approaches, solutions to improve the frequency of manifestation.

With the help of teachers of Romanian language and literature and of the students enrolled in the teacher training programme, the 3rd year Bachelor's degree students (specialisation Romanian - foreign Language), which had the pedagogical practice in various schools in Craiova, we succeeded in drawing up aspects regarding the etiology, symptomatology and solutions to reduce the frequency of learning difficulties.

Key words: *Learning difficulties, Constructivist training, Active and interactive methods, Remedial work programmes, Differentiated tasks.*

1. Introduction

In line with the efforts of education systems around the world, the Romanian education system strives to create and apply a set of projects that include a generous, comprehensive educational offer to meet the growing and diverse educational needs

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of a populations with growing and various educational needs. Thus, inclusive or integrated pedagogy (education), pedagogy of gifted children (elitism pedagogy), educational alternatives (Waldorf, Montessori, Freinet, Step by Step schools) have emerged. Despite all these efforts to meet the educational needs of a mixed and ever-changing population, only one category of individuals has not been researched and explored enough: it is the category of children with learning difficulties. Research on this category of children has taken place especially during the last four decades when so-called "lazy", "heavy-headed", "distracted", "indifferent," "naughty," "slow" children who seemingly did not make trouble their parents and/or teachers, being docile, diligent, workers, obedient, but who despite these qualities did not show any school progress (Ungureanu, 1998, p. 9), were not considered a reality worth being ignored, due to the consequences, materialized mainly in overall failure and school failure, poor socio-professional insertion, school drop-out, psychic, intellectual, affective, social, emotional and immaturity, juvenile delinquency, socially undesirable behaviour.

2. Practical-applied approaches. Ameliorative intervention research results

2.1. Research issues

The study of learning difficulties is exhaustively addressed, yet with no claim of completeness, in the foreign literature. Numerous specialised treatises, including those published on various sites in electronic format, are a useful guide either for parents whose children have learning difficulties at school, in a subject or in more subjects, or for teachers who deal with these children at school or for other specialists (psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, psycho-educators, educators, school counselors, etc.) to provide theoretical information, sometimes supported by demonstrations and practical arguments, to bring light within the investigated field.

We must admit that the number of authors, treaties and studies on learning difficulties has increased considerably; In the same context, we must acknowledge that the views are diverse, sometimes even contradictory, the ways in which the phenomenon in question is addressed is multisided. Being a complex reality, learning difficulties have been and are viewed from multiple perspectives, and this multisided perspective offers a variety of opinions, solutions, interpretations, sometimes vague and contradictory.

More often than not, learning difficulties have been addressed from the perspective of children with special educational needs, triggering confusion between this category of children (CES) and children with learning difficulties. The root of this confusion lies in the mainstream literature from the translation of *learning disabilities* (coined by Kirk, 1962) into two variants: *disabilități de învățare* and *dificultăți de învățare* (*learning disabilities* and *learning difficulties*). However, the two translations cover different realities, disabilities being rather close to the deficiencies in the sphere of children with SEN (children with special educational needs), rather than the actual learning difficulties that occur in a quasinormal

situation (assessed from the perspective an IQ located possibly at the lower limit of the liminal intellect).

The phenomenon of learning difficulties has also been tackled in the Romanian literature, but especially from a medical, neurological and especially from the perspective of special psychopedagogy. We mention the studies of authors such as Octavian Ienișteea (1982), Ladislau Fodor (1997), Dorel Ungureanu (1998), R. Jurcău (2000), T. Vrăjmaș, I. Mușu (2000), Mogonea (2010; 2014).

Few studies, however, address the phenomenon of learning difficulties from a pedagogical point of view, from the perspective of the practitioner, a teacher of a particular subject confronting this reality. The prescriptions, informative notes, explanatory and normative notes of the papers and treaties are vague, general, and cannot convey indicative, methodological details for different specialties, curricular areas, subjects where the phenomenon of learning difficulties occurs and manifests among children. For different subjects, there may be different symptomatic manifestations with a multifactorial etiology. That is why we consider it useful in this respect to carry out remedial work programs, following the identification of learning difficulties in a certain curricular area, in a certain subjects and with a certain class.

2.2. Research aims and objectives

According to the theoretical approach in the literature (Bocoș, 2003; Culic 2004; Noveanu, 1995; Rateau 2004), the pedagogical experiment must be based on a set of premises to ensure validation of the hypothesis/hypotheses. Based on these assumptions, we considered that it was useful and necessary to improve the psychopedagogical intervention work, in order to detect the possible learning difficulties in the 9th grade students in Romanian language and literature, with the **main aim** of diminishing their effects on performance and academic achievement, primarily in the subject in question, and as a prolongation of the effect, on all compulsory, optional or optional subjects in the 9th grade curriculum.

To this end, we mention several objectives that we have outlined as strategic priorities to be pursued during and at the end of the research, derived as a generic degree from the final target:

- to draw up a realistic picture of the real situation in the Romanian language and literature subject, following an initial diagnostic test, correlating this situation to the specific objectives of the 8th grade;
- to establish an accurate inventory of the learning difficulties encountered by the targeted students, and of the levels of the affected personality (establishment of the symptomatology);
- based on an inventory, i.e., the effects, visible and visible results, to establish a possible range of causes and, among them, a list of real causes, through discussions with parents, teachers, form teachers and even students (establishing etiology);
- to develop a remedial work intervention program in collaboration with teachers, but also with form teachers and parents, as important educational factors in

reshaping and influencing an appropriate learning style of students, based on formative-educational activities, at the experimental stage;

- to capture the evolution of students during the 9th grade by repeating the set of evaluations (formative assessments or continuous assessment) at approximately equal time intervals, depending on the specific objectives (derived from the framework ones) for the 9th grade, but also on the results obtained in the other previous evaluations;

- to observe and record the difficulties and obstacles encountered, by ongoing adjustment of the tools, methodology, content (content sample), according to the dependent and independent variables, in order to achieve the immediate objectives of the research, but also the final goal;

- to formulate new, specific, particular, working hypotheses, as new aspects, with subsequent opportunities for innovation and research;

- to record how improving the situation in the Romanian language subject is reflected in the efficiency increase and in the other subjects of the 9th grade curriculum;

- to conduct case studies for special situations of students, which require additional intervention (possibly interventions of a team of specialists);

- to establish concrete ways to collaborate with the parents of the students involved in the experimental programme of formative-educational activities;

- to plan, organise and carry out extra-curricular activities, competitive and fun in nature, complementary to school activities;

- to find out how extracurricular life (family, friends, entourage) influences the motivation and interest of students in school in general and in the Romanian language subject, in particular.

We point out to the likelihood that these initial, start-up goals will be duplicated by rewording and readjustments along the way, and by the formulation of others, depending on the set of variables, particular assumptions, observations that may arise in the actual development of the research.

2.3. Research hypothesis

Given the magnitude, frequency and negative effects of the learning difficulties in the Romanian language subject on academic performance, on the entire activity and on school life, as well as on the students' entire life, we consider, as a **basic hypothesis of the research**, the following: **if learning, in the framework of compulsory activities (the lessons) of Romanian language and literature, is based on the students' own activity, on the cognitive-constructive and socio-constructive, active and interactive knowledge and the development of general and specific skills alongside transversal skills, then the frequency of manifestation of the learning difficulties in this subject will decrease to a significant extent and, implicitly, the negative effects on the school performance.**

2.4. Results and discussions

We shall present some concrete aspects regarding the problems of learning difficulties, as resulting from the pedagogical research carried out.

Thus, in order to make a diagnosis and implicitly a prognosis (finding remedial work solutions) regarding the nature, frequency and etiology of the learning difficulties, 63 teachers were questioned who, in the school/academic year 2018-2019, performed teaching activities with 9th grade students. The experiment also involved students - pre-service teachers, enrolled in the Teacher Training programme, Level 1, who attended the teaching practice, supervised by tutors. Based on the experience gained, but also on systematic observations, the data recorded in the evaluation grids, the results in the content knowledge tests, but also the interpretation of a reading assessment questionnaire administered at the beginning of the school year, they filled in the teacher questionnaire (see Annex).

Regarding the experience of these teachers, we mention that all are tenured teachers and have a length of service as follows:

Table no. 1. Distribution of teachers according to length of service

Length of service	0-5 years	5-15 years	15-25 years	More than 25 years
No. of subjects	9	20	22	12

The answers to the first question of the questionnaire ("Do you think that in the acquisition of Romanian language and literature, 9th grade students - for different reasons - experience difficulties in learning?") highlighted the following: the majority of teachers (59 affirmative answers, i.e. 93.65% of the target population) agrees with the presence of learning difficulties in Romanian language and literature. 4.76%, i.e. 3 teachers refuse to answer, and 1 teacher (1.58%) believes that in the acquisition of Romanian language and literature, 9th grade students do not show learning difficulties.

These data can be graphically represented as:

Table no. 2. Frequency of teachers' answers to Item 1

Teachers (Total no.: 63)		
I refuse to answer the question	I answer the question	
1=>1.58%	Yes=>59=>93.65%	No=>3=>4.76%

For the second part of the item ("If No, please justify.") in the teachers' questionnaire, we have only one teacher's justification:

"9th grade students do not have any major learning difficulties because, with the exception of some - very few, at the end of the school year (the end of the 9th grade) all the students have successfully passed (becoming 10th grade students)".

After answering the second item of the teacher questionnaire ("*Based on your teaching experience, but especially by virtue of the observations, the evaluation and*

the tests administered at the beginning of the school year to the 9th grade students in the Romanian language and literature, draw up a symptomatic inventory of the learning difficulties in the subject, with reference to three important areas: "Speaking", "Writing", "Reading"), we were able to draw up an inventory of the symptoms recorded by teachers.

To complete the symptomatological inventory, according to the frequency of manifestation of the identified learning difficulties, only 10 teachers from the target population were involved. They determined the frequency of manifestation of the identified symptoms, for each student in the 9th grade, on a five-rating scale ("not at all", "very little", "a little", "much" and "very much"), the symptoms identified in the activities, tasks, tests, continuous assessment that these students undertook in the initial assessment stage or the observational indices in the evaluation. The 10 teachers (from the 10 classes) thus investigated a sample of 268 students. The criteria/aspects of the learning difficulties in the Romanian language and literature subject are presented below, with respect to the three areas: Speaking, Writing and Reading.

- **Oral production (Speaking):** Poor vocabulary; lexical errors; telegraphic language (short sentences); poor wording; difficulties in: comprehension and formulating complex sentences, understanding and formulating elliptical sentences, with implicit meaning, the formulation of requests and questions; obtaining useful information, understanding figurative meaning, taking over and continuing or combating the ideas of others; phonological difficulties: distortions, non-reception, inversion, omission, phoneme substitution; morphological difficulties: distortions, replacements, inversions, word matches; syntactical difficulties: distorted word order, disagreement; semantic difficulties: meaning distortion, wrong lexical choices.

- **Writing:** omissions, inversions, confusions, letter or syllable substitutions; cut or bold words; letter or syllable additions; too large or too small letters; poor orientation/inclination of the letters; disproportionate letters (large and small letters in the same word); page fit; misspelling; non-observance of punctuation marks; illegible or hard to read hand writing; handwriting replacement.

- **Reading:** slow, cumbersome, syncopated reading; omissions, word substitutions; word distortions (poor pronunciation); stumbling blocks, reading blockages; misunderstanding content (even in normal reading); jumping from one line to another, different from the next one; reading by using the finger; fast pace with a negative effect on reading comprehension; monotone, monotonous, intonationless reading.

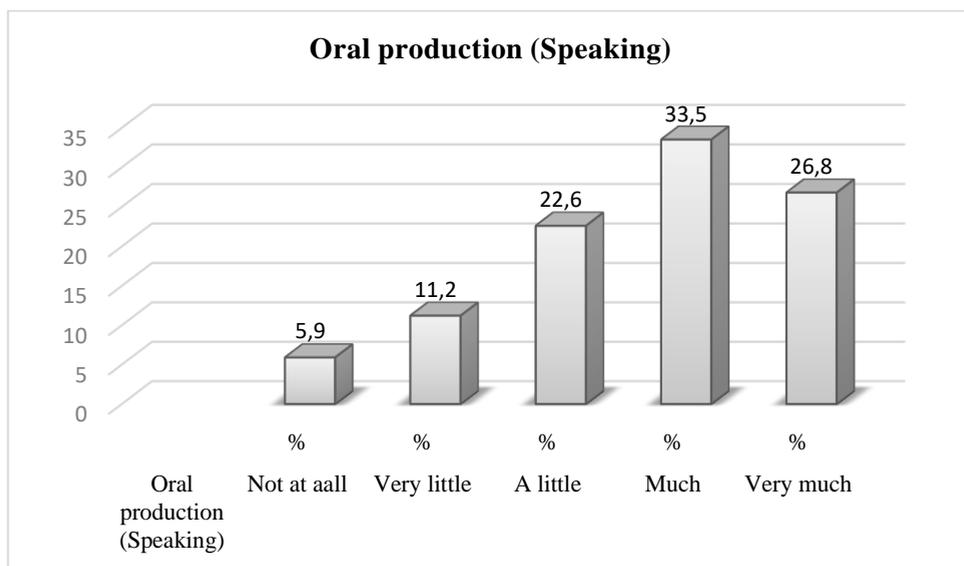
We continue to present the frequency of these symptoms, following the three areas outlined above.

Thus, for the first level, calculating the average of the recorded values, for each of the five levels of the rating scale, we have:

Table no. 3. Frequency of the symptoms of learning difficulties in Speaking''

Oral production (Speaking)	Not at aall %	Very little %	A little %	Much %	Very much %
	5.9	11.2	22.6	33.5	26.8

Graphically, the data may be represented as follows:

**Chart no. 1. Graphic representation of learning difficulties in "Speaking"**

It is noted that for "Much" and "Very much", the percentages are the highest, indicating the presence of learning difficulties that characterize the "Speaking" aspect.

For the second level (Writing), calculating the average of the recorded values, for each of the five levels of the rating scale, we have:

Table no. 4. Frequency of the symptoms of learning difficulties in "Writing"

Writing	Not at aall %	Very little %	A little %	Much %	Very much %
	6.33	11.42	21.14	36	25.11

Graphically, the data may be represented as follows:

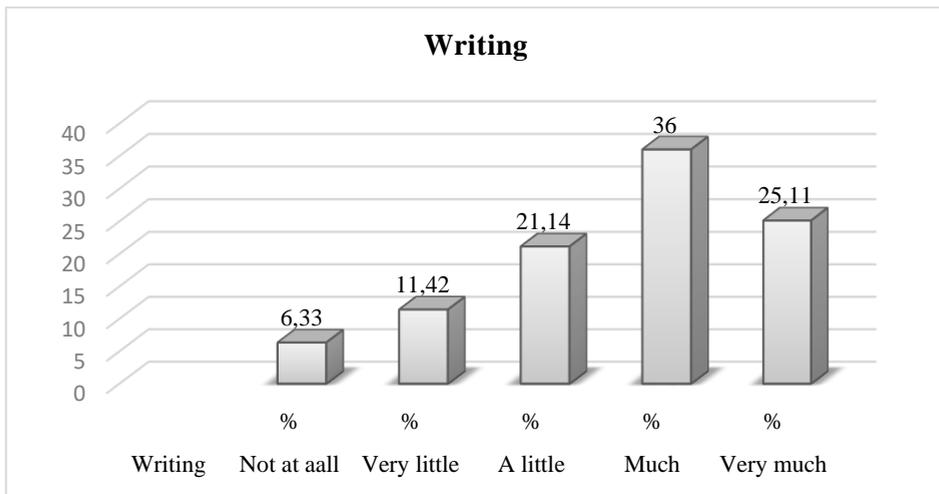


Chart no. 2. Graphic representation of learning difficulties in " Writing"

Also in the case of "Writing", the frequency of learning difficulties indicates a significant increase for "Much" and "Very much".

For the third level (Reading), calculating the average of the recorded values, for each of the five levels of the rating scale, we have:

Table no. 5. Frequency of the symptoms of learning difficulties in "Reading"

Reading	Not at aall %	Very little %	A little %	Much %	Very much %
	11.18	19	26	25.56	17.56

Graphically, the data may be represented as follows:

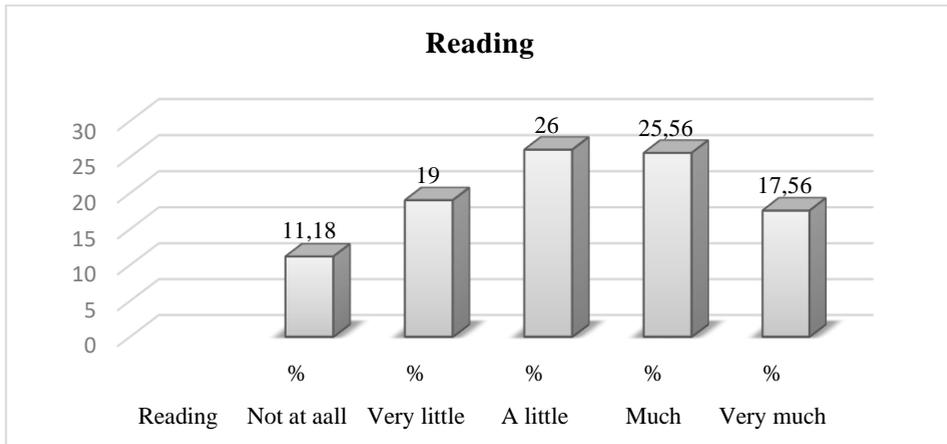


Chart no. 3. Graphic representation of learning difficulties in "Reading"

In this case, too, it is noted that, by aggregating the values, the percentage frequency for "Much" and "Very much" is quite high, even if "A little" indicates a lower frequency than "Much".

Statistical data (averages) for the three domains or dimensions ("Speaking", "Writing", "Reading"), according to the recorded values, can be included in the following table:

Table no. 6. Comparative frequency of the symptoms of learning difficulties in "Speaking", "Writing", "Reading"

Value	Not at aall %	Very little %	A little %	Much %	Very much %
Domain					
Speaking	5.9	11.2	22.6	33.5	26.8
Writing	6.33	11.42	21.14	36	25.11
Reading	11.88	19	26	25.56	17.56

which, graphically, may be represented as follows:

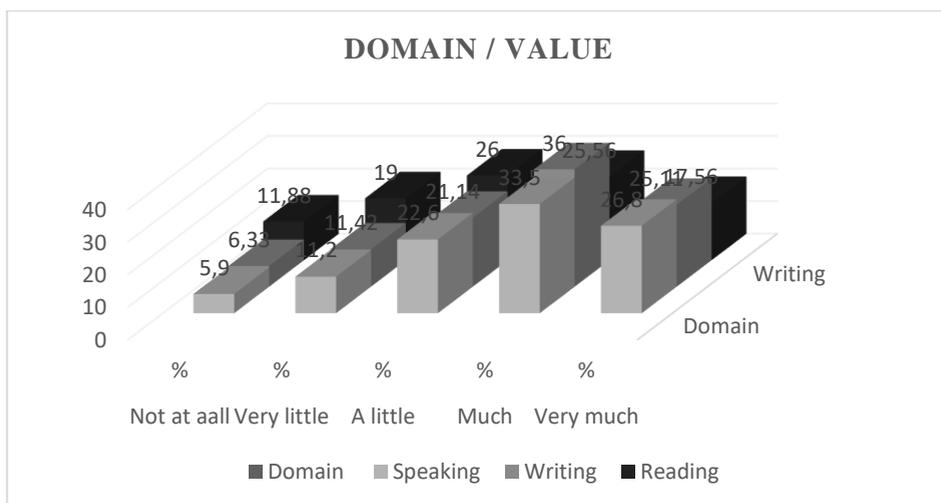


Chart no. 4. Comparative graphic representation of frequency of the symptoms of learning difficulties in "Speaking", "Writing", "Reading"

From the previous chart, it follows that the most common learning difficulties lie in Writing, followed by Speaking and next by Reading.

On the basis of the teachers' answers to the third item of the teacher questionnaire (*"Taking into account the identified symptomatological aspects, draw up an etiological inventory, the possible causes of learning difficulties in Romanian language and literature"*), we could make an etiological inventory, the main causes of learning difficulties in 9th grade students, these causes being grouped by the investigated teachers into several groups as follows:

- **Attention:** distraction, shifts of concentration, poor stability, reduced mobility;
- **Memory:** short and long term - poor;
- **Language:** difficulties in receiving, processing and sending messages;
- **Motivation:** overmotivation, undermotivation;
- **Volition:** unwillingness, lack of tenacity and perseverance in learning;
- **Affectivity:** affective balance disorders, shyness, sensitivity, excessive emotionality, low tolerance to frustration, low emotional intelligence;
- **Reasoning:** difficulties in processing information, poor, poor, poor metacognition;
- **Activity:** hyperactivity, hyperkinesia, hypoactivity, hypokinesia, self-control, poor self-assessment;
- **Character - Behaviour:** attitudinal - behavioural - character problems;
- **Other causes:** inadequate learning style, lack of effective learning techniques, disinterest, negativity, gaps in prior learning, quality of teaching, school overload, poor family climate, lack of family-school communication, chronic fatigue.

In the following table, the frequency of these causes of learning difficulties, grouped by personality dimensions, is presented below:

Table no. 7. Frequency of these causes of learning difficulties, grouped by personality dimensions

Dimension	Not at all %	Very little %	A little %	Much %	Very much %
Attention	6	11	23.5	34	25.5
Memory	8	16	26	27	23
Language	2	8	21	43	26
Motivation	16.5	22	26.5	23	12
Volition	12.5	19.5	21	25	22
Affectivity	21	20.33	23.5	18.16	17
Reasoning	2	9	15	45	29
Activity	17	14.66	19.66	28.66	20
Character Behaviour	– 4	6	12	42	36
Other causes	7.2	12.4	20.4	28	32

To item number four ("*Do you think that learning difficulties in Romanian language and literature - 9th grade - could be diminished or even eliminated if there were a way, strategy, technique, remedial work programme, etc.*"), 56 teachers (87.30%) of the target population answered, 2 (3.17%) subjects did not answer and 5 answered negatively (7.93%). Of the 5 negative respondents, 3 have more than 25 years length of service, 1 (one) is a beginner (0-5 years) and 1 (one) is has between 5 and 15 years length of service.

Those who responded negatively to item number five gave as arguments:

"They cannot be removed, irrespective of the method, because teachers cannot work alone if they are not helped by the family and if the students are not interested."

"They cannot be removed because a suitable method should be found for each one, which means that the classes of 25-30 pupils should no longer exist."

"Some students, although "normal", are irrecoverable regardless of the applied method."

"Their gaps are so great that they should be reintegrated to the primary school to be able to recover what they lost in the process."

"The difficulties cannot be removed because teachers do not give up their style in favour of active methods, recovery strategies, etc. "

"There are children who cannot be helped in any way. There are students who should not have pursued high school education."

To item 5 a) ("*If you answered Yes, evaluate the effectiveness of the following proposals to reduce learning difficulties ("Very little ", "A little ", "Much ", "Very much")*") the answers of the teachers (the proposals are actually the 5 independent variables of the baseline hypothesis and the four specific hypotheses of the research project) were as follows (we mention that the percentages were approximated by 0.50%):

Table no. 8. Teachers' evaluation of the remedial work on learning difficulties

No.	Proposals	Frequency of efficiency				
		Not at all %	Very little %	A little %	Much %	Very much %
1	Emphasizing active and interactive learning based on constructivist and socio-constructivist cognitive support	1	9	16	36	38
2	Differentiated activity and tasks	2	11	17	33	37
3	Task completion through collaboration and cooperation	2	10	18	34	36
4	Alternating organisation modes, focusing on independent ones (individual and group work)	5	12	23	27	33
5	Activating teaching	8	18	22	24	26

Graphically, the data may be represented as follows:

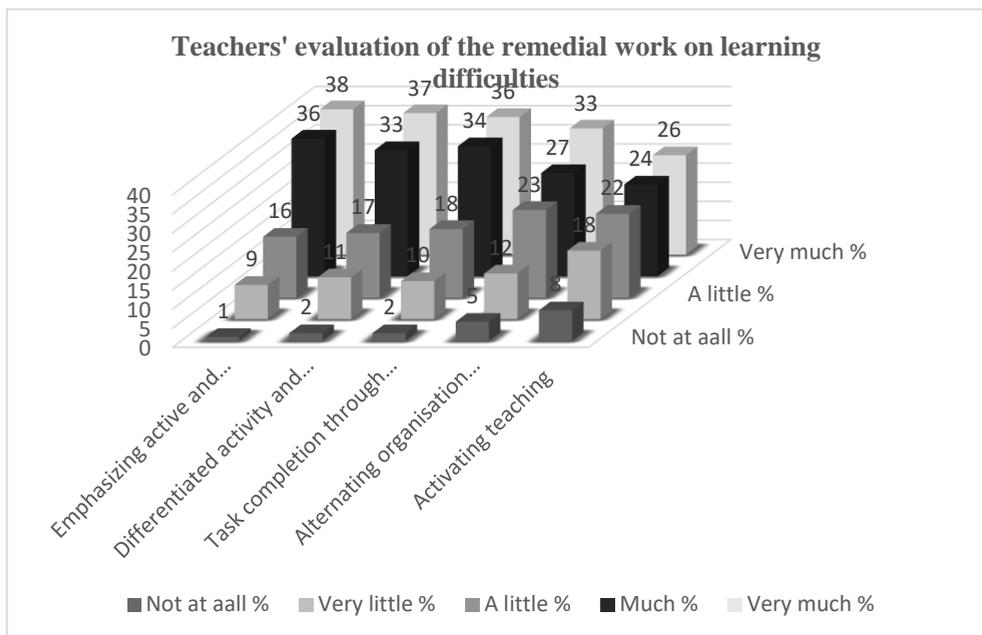


Chart no. 5. Teachers' evaluation of the remedial work on learning difficulties

Graphic representation of the rating scale of proposals of remedial work on learning difficulties

Taking into consideration the above table and chart, it follows that, at least theoretically, the teachers recognise the importance, usefulness and necessity of introducing such strategies and remedial work programmes to reduce learning difficulties.

For the second part of the item (5b) ("*Please come up with suggestions*"), the teachers also put forward the following:

- Additional support from the teacher in the classroom;
- Additional support from colleagues in the classroom and/or at home;
- Teaching of basic elements (common core and in-depth curriculum);
- Varying teaching styles;
- Help from parents at home;
- Establishing a permanent parent-school relationship;
- Counseling, tutoring, additional counseling at school;
- Combining school activities with extracurricular, fun, thematic, competitive, collaborative ones;
- Counseling students about techniques, strategies, learning methods;
- Changing the students' learning style;
- Motivating students by judiciously alternating reward and punishment.

We consider these proposals relevant and, in the experiment, some of them can be used as independent variables in formulating specific hypotheses during the course of research.

3. Conclusions

In the light of the major changes brought about by postmodernism, education systems around the world tend to bring about changes in structure and functionality, priority being given to increasing quality. The Romanian education system, thanks to the reform, especially the curricular one, seeks to align to the standards of the countries that have already undergone this experience, taking over and implementing successful models, experiments, practices. These practices include, for example, the inclusion of children with SEN in mass schools, the creation of elitist schools, the creation of alternative educational centres or forms (Step-by-Step, Montessori, Waldorf), laying the foundations for creating schools for gifted people, decentralisation of the education system, enrichment of the information offer, design of alternative textbooks, etc.

In this respect, we consider that paying increased attention to children with learning difficulties is a rewarding effort, not necessarily in relation to the considerably higher effort made by other countries in this respect, but by virtue of the priority of raising the qualitative level of education as mentioned above. Children with generalised learning difficulties due to a chronic cumulative etiology, but also specialised in a specific subject or a set of subjects, are a reality of our education system. Efforts to reduce them were minimal and most of the time empirical, short lived, based on the experience of the teachers.

Taking into consideration that Romanian language and literature is a core subject in the curriculum (being allocated a high number of hours for study,

compared to the number of hours for other subjects), the need to carry out remedial work on this subject is fully justified. All the more so since the acquisition of Romanian language and literature and the development of skills and abilities in the compulsory activities dedicated to this subject contribute substantially to acquiring knowledge in other subjects, especially in the humanities, and the development of the related skills.

We consider that the carrying out of psycho-pedagogical research, even if only for diagnostic purposes, is absolutely necessary for all compulsory disciplines in the curriculum; we also believe that it is necessary to make a diagnosis (and even a prognosis) of different levels of schooling, regarding the same subject, in order to observe the evolution, age- and stage-related characteristics of different learning difficulties. This is, in fact, our concern for future psycho-pedagogical interventions.

We can therefore state that diminishing the learning difficulties in different compulsory subjects in the curriculum is a pre-requisite for increasing the academic performance of students who have problems in reading, learning, processing and capitalising on content with a view to the development of the related skills. This statement can be considered a hypothetical premise for increasing the quality of education by reducing learning difficulties in order to enable academic success.

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4. Do you think that learning difficulties in Romanian language and literature - 9th grade - could be diminished or even eliminated if there were a way, strategy, technique, remedial work programme, etc.?

a) Yes.....b). No.....

If No, please justify:

.....

5. a) If you answered Yes, evaluate the effectiveness of the following proposals to reduce learning difficulties ("Very little ", "A little ", "Much ", "Very much"):

No.	Proposals	Frequency scale of efficiency				
		Not at all %	Very little %	A little %	Much %	Very much %
1	Emphasizing active and interactive learning based on constructivist and socio-constructivist cognitive support					
2	Differentiated activity and tasks					
3	Task completion through collaboration and cooperation					
4	Alternating organisation modes, focusing on independent ones (individual and group work)					
5	Activating teaching					

5. b) Please come up with suggestions.

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