

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

Effects of a French remedial program on pupils' educational outcomes



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Remedial program
Educational outcomes
Primary school
Labelling effect
Crowding-out effect
Teacher effect
Propensity score matching

ABSTRACT

Few studies have examined the French “Networks for Specialized Assistance to Pupils in Difficulty” (Rased). In this article, we evaluate the impact of receiving Rased services in the first year of primary schooling on academic success. Using data from a national panel study, we find inconsistency in student selection within Rased. Using matching methods, our results reveal that pupils who benefited from the program school have a higher probability of grade repetition and obtain significantly lower scores on the third grade national assessment, particularly in mathematics, compared to pupils with similar characteristics who did not take part in the program. This impact seems particularly negative for pupils with less prior academic and behavioural difficulties.

1. Introduction

Since its creation in 1990, the French remedial program “Réseaux d'Aide aux Elèves en Difficultés”¹ (Rased) has aimed to provide specific and differentiated services to pupils in difficulty who are enrolled in pre-primary and primary schools. These services are complementary and do not substitute classroom learning. Specialist teachers and psychologists help teaching teams inside or outside of the classroom take charge of the learning and behavioural challenges of pupils who have been identified by their teacher as in difficulty. Three types of services are offered: pedagogical, re-educative or psychological follow-up services. One of the characteristics of this remedial program is that admission decisions are decentralized to the level of each class, and there are therefore no norms at the national level. In fact, the teacher of each class must judge the difficulties of his or her pupils and determine who should benefit from this aid. This selection method risks creating two problems: student selection depends, on the one hand, on the judgement of the teacher, and on the other hand, on the availability of places in the program in each school (Gossot, 1997). While the Rased program covers the entire country, there are local tensions and trade-offs that happen within departments, which result in very different levels of availability within each region (Delaubier & Saurat, 2013). Furthermore, Rased's existing supply structure does not seem to be correlated with the socio-economic characteristics of departments.

To date, few evaluations of Rased's effectiveness have been carried out. Previous studies focused on local initiatives with limited samples of beneficiaries. Guillarmé and Luciani (2011), and more recently Liraud and Roditi (2016), found that the Rased intervention had a positive effect. However, this most recent study concerns one specific pedagogical experiment and shows a stronger positive impact for pupils with greater academic difficulties. Furthermore, this study included a limited number of pupils: only 25 pupils in difficulty in third grade, without a comparison group.

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¹ “Networks for Specialized Assistance to Pupils in Difficulty”.

The only study where beneficiaries are compared with a control group is Mingat's 1991 study, which used a regional survey. However, this study looked at the GAPP program ("*Groupe d'Aide Psychopédagogique*"²), a remedial program preceding the Rased program, and highlighted strong variations in its functioning and negative effects in terms of student progress. The author proposed two possible explanations for this result: First, these pupils were deprived of classroom learning time, and second, they may have been subject to a "labelling" effect insofar as this program identifies them as "pupils in difficulty." Since this study, no other research has been conducted using national data with a comparison group.

In this article, we evaluate the effect of Rased services on academic success. More precisely, we focus on the effect of having benefited from Rased services in primary school on grade repetition and success on third-grade national evaluations. We use data from the "*Primary Panel 1997*", produced by the French Ministry of National Education. This panel followed a cohort of pupils who entered the first year of primary school in 1997 until their second year of secondary school. Interviews were conducted with a representative sample of 10,000 pupils in 1570 public or private schools. This survey includes information not only on the socio-demographic characteristics and academic progress of the pupils, but also on their skills and attitudes when entering the first year of primary school.

In the first section, we review the literature on the evaluation of remedial programs. Then, after discussing the data and methodology used, we determine which criteria were used to select pupils for the Rased program. Using the methodology pioneered by Mingat (1991) for GAPPs, we identify several groups of pupils based on their success on first-grade assessments, language level, social skills, and classroom behaviours. Finally, we establish the impact of the Rased program on academic achievement by analysing first-grade repetition and the results of the third-grade national assessments.

2. Evaluations of remedial programs

Remedial programs for pupils in difficulty can take multiple forms. Notably, they differ by whether aid is given during or outside of class time. Below, we present quantitative evaluations of remedial programs in France and in other countries.

2.1. Programs conducted during class time

The first type of program offers pupils in difficulty a different division of instruction time in certain subjects during regular class hours. In this type of program, the pupils identified as in difficulty may be removed from the class in order to work in a smaller group or the class teacher or a teaching assistant may offer them pedagogical assistance within the classroom.

2.1.1. Evaluations of remedial programs in France

Mingat (1991) conducted one of the first studies on this topic. His study aimed to evaluate the GAPP program, which preceded the Rased program and where pupils identified by the teacher as having difficulties benefited from extra help outside of the classroom with a specialized teacher during school time. This study showed that, first of all, there was inconsistency and heterogeneity in the availability of this program to pupils. It was not necessarily the pupils with the most difficulties who benefited from the program. This was explained by the fact that, on the one hand, the selection made within the GAPP program depended on the academic history and socio-economic characteristics of the other pupils in the class. On the other hand, the administrative resources and personnel available differed from one GAPP to another, which caused there to be differing modes of selection of beneficiaries across regions. Furthermore, it appeared that pupils having benefited from the GAPP program in first grade had significantly lower results in terms of improvement and academic success as compared to other pupils with comparable characteristics. The author explained these results as due to two main effects. Firstly, this type of program has a strong likelihood of creating labelling effects. By definition, the children selected for the GAPP program are explicitly identified by teachers as having difficulties. Teachers may then lower their expectations for these children, who in their turn become less motivated to learn and less invested in their work. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) have popularized this effect with the term "Pygmalion effect." The second explanation relates to the existence of a "substitution effect". The pupils, during the time that they receive assistance from the GAPP program, are not benefiting from regular instruction in class. Their learning time is therefore reduced in certain subjects, despite the fact that it is the pupils with the most difficulties who need the greatest amount of learning time.

In a more recent study, Piquée and Suchaut (2004) examined the program of "a supplementary teacher in the class," which was an experiment in one French department. This program consisted of putting a supplementary teacher in the third cycle classes of priority education schools, and also allowing class division for the pupils with the most difficulties. They showed that this program only had a weakly significant impact on student progress in mathematics and French in the third cycle. The effect was even negative for the pupils who were initially the weakest. One possible explanation given by the authors was the grouping of pupils by academic level. The formation of a group of the weakest pupils risks creating peer effects that are detrimental to student learning, in particular for those who present the greatest difficulties initially.

Based on a survey of teacher practices in France, Piquée (2007) analyses the effects of different pedagogical practices on pupils in difficulty, including peer tutoring, differentiated instruction and external assistance, on the academic success of pupils in first grade. The author shows that peer tutoring and differentiated instruction can have significant positive effects on student success, notably in mathematics. However, pupils in classes where the teacher systematically resorts to using Rased services have significantly weaker

² "Psycho-pedagogical Support Group".

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