

Essential information for understanding current education issues



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## HOW SHOULD WE SUPPORT STUDENTS' LEARNING?

**P** Providing students with support in their learning is a social and policy challenge in French education system, which are characterised by high inequality. Since September 2017, lower secondary students can benefit from a new measure introduced in their schools, namely the Homework Done programme, which offers supervised time for completing homework after school, in addition to other existing support initiatives. How can such support be organised coherently? What are the links with what is taught in class? And what results can be expected?

### HELPING OR SUPPORTING: WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES?

There are currently several ways of organising initiatives to help and support students and students' learning in a more personalised manner, depending on:

- students' needs: occasional, continuous or special
- the number of students: in small groups or the whole class
- students' willingness
- the place where the assistance is provided: in the classroom or outside the classroom but still in the school
- the person providing the assistance: the classroom teacher or another teacher, or another kind of educator from inside or outside the school.

The measures that existed until the beginning of the 2000s (which can be called "help initiatives") were above all intended to provide occasional help, remedial work on lessons that had not been understood, and support for what had been done in class. They were usually organised for a group of students, outside the classroom, and were what researchers describe as "externalised initiatives". Their main aim was to overcome students' difficulties by organising a specific time and place.

Since the end of the 2000s, to avoid the risk of stigmatising students through externalised initiatives, and driven by the international trend of inclusive education (accommodating with all children needs in the same classroom), a paradigm shift has taken place. To encourage academic success, the idea now is to support each student over a longer period, and not just alleviate difficulties when they have already taken root.

This support should come on top of the help structures that continue to exist in schools and is intended to be incorporated into teaching practices, thereby creating "multiple layers of initiatives to tackle learning difficulties" (Félix et al., 2012).

### Different types of initiatives available in 2018 to help and support students:

- **In primary school:** complementary educational activities outside the classroom
- **In lower secondary school:** personalised support for all students in the class; the Homework Done programme outside the classroom
- **In upper secondary school:** personalised support for all students in the class.

#### SUPPORT OR HELP DURING CLASS



Remediation and support measures:  
HELP OUTSIDE CLASS

## Is a struggling student a student who:

HAS A LEARNING DISABILITY?

HAS PERSONAL PROBLEMS?

HAS TROUBLE ADAPTING TO THE SCHOOL SYSTEM?

HAS BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS?



The answer will depend on who is asked: a teacher, the head teacher, an administrator, or a non-teaching staff member in charge of discipline and supervision. This is why available initiatives are not always used by the students who need them the most. Some students combine different schemes to the point of overloading their timetable, while other students who may need help have no access to it.

## IS IT THE STUDENT'S PROBLEM OR THE SCHOOL'S PROBLEM?

Let us concentrate on those who are affected in the first place by such initiatives: students. Research findings indicate that the beneficiaries of help initiatives are, in the end, not only students with learning difficulties but also students with other types of problems (behavioural, personal, etc.). There is a tendency to think that the personal characteristics of students are the cause of their learning difficulties, rather than their relationship with the curricular content or the structure of the education system. This raises the question of how students' needs are assessed and how students are perceived: this assessment should be shared by the different staff members of the school in order to grasp all the educational, learning and personal aspects of students, and it should be possible to review such an assessment depending on the students' progress and academic path.

In addition, the perimeter of such support measures and personalised programmes is blurry. According to research, they often focus on temporary difficulties more than on serious learning difficulties (which are taken into account through initiatives such as remedial classes or the Networks of Specialised Assistance for Students with Learning Difficulties – RASSED) or learning problems that are directly or indirectly related to disabilities.

### Some research findings:



#### Positive effects of "EXTERNALISED" initiatives:

- teachers work closely with the students; it is a special, almost personalised time (necessary reassurance for some students).



#### Risk of:

- stigmatising the students if the assistance continues over the long term
- segmenting knowledge, reducing access to complex tasks
- separating supporting time from instructional time
- maintaining the "teacher's authoritative posture" (Félix et al., 2012) instead of a more supportive attitude.



#### Positive effects of in-class SUPPORT:

- students' needs are taken into consideration at the moment of learning
- no break in instructional time.

#### Risk of:

- active differentiation: adapting learning tasks to the expected level of students, which can end up hindering knowledge acquisition.



## A STORY OF LEARNING SITUATIONS

Large-scale assessment of the different measures that might enable us, in theory, to pick out the most effective ones, encounters methodological problems: the number of evaluated students is very low; further more does the evaluated efficacy refer to each student's performance, or to the number of students who are improving, or both? Research findings, mostly qualitative, reveal the contrasting effects of externalised initiatives, which can even be negative if they continue for a long time. In-class support also carries risks. For example, the tasks offered to struggling students must be sufficiently guided so that students are not set up to fail, but should not be too easy because students have to practise solving complex problems eventually.

On the teachers' side, the answer to learning difficulties has traditionally been found in lesson planning, for example when the teacher finds the best methods for leveraging the knowledge and skills presented in class in order to attain the set learning goals. It is complicated, however, during the same instructional time of a class, to take care of students with different profiles, learning paces and needs, and especially to identify those needs. In this way, both anticipating learning obstacles and closely analysing the student's situation in front of a learning obstacle can enable teachers to differentiate students' needs closely. Moreover, it is known that the efficacy of such expertise increases with a collective approach.

## HOW SHOULD INITIATIVES BE ORGANISED?

The transition from primary school to lower secondary school remains difficult for many students. Some externalised initiatives were introduced and extended across lower secondary schools in the 1990s and 2000s. Is this abundance simply an indication of the complexity of including assistance in daily teaching practices, or is it the sign of a political will to invest in support for learning difficulties, in order to limit, for example, the use of entities outside schools?

Personalised support, an initiative rolled out in French secondary schools in 2016 for all students, is an example of a compromise between an externalised initiative (outside the class) and a support initiative (intended for all students and included during classroom learning time). Lessons have been learnt from the failures of previous initiatives, such as the stigmatisation of students, but this plan does not appear to be making real headway by improving support in daily classroom life.

*The initiatives lie at an intermediary level between an overall reform that would affect all schools in an undifferentiated way [...] and local projects at the initiative of stakeholders, too dependent on their individual energy and at times too independent of policy and ministerial aims. In some respects, such initiatives represent an offering of one-size-fits-all reforms, whose potential constraints and contestation are softened and euphemised by their very fragmentation*

(Barrère, 2013).

## SUPPORT: A LOCAL CHOICE

Research findings suggest that every school is capable of adapting its structures to deal with students' difficulties depending on:

- its existing practices;
- whether needs assessments are done by the school's educators, who are in the best position to know if measures are required, and which ones;
- whether special help sessions can be arranged for a specific problem over a short period for more effectiveness;
- whether support for students necessitates additional hours for some teachers, etc.

The "More teachers than classes" scheme has been moving in this direction since 2014. It allows for the pooling of resources and practices a gradual change in teaching practices, made by teachers themselves.

## Lower secondary education in France: The history of support initiatives

1970

**BEGINNING IN THE 1970S:** differentiated instruction directly in the classroom after decision-makers realised the need to diversify teaching methods

1980

**FROM THE END OF THE 1970S TO THE BEGINNING OF THE 1980S:** support for students in *sixième* and *cinquième* (the first and second years of lower secondary education in France)

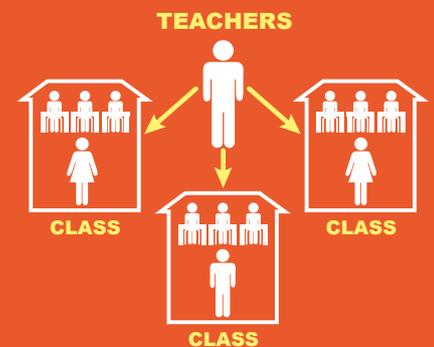
1995

**BETWEEN 1995 AND 2011:** after-school help with homework, learning consolidation hours, the personalised help and progress programme, individualised help, refresher classes, tutoring, help with individual work in *sixième* in 2002

2006

**CURRENTLY:** the personalised educational success programme since 2006, personalised support for all levels since 2016 and the Homework Done programme since 2017.

These initiatives were introduced in response to an increase in the number of struggling students after the massification beginning in 1975 (the Haby Law) and often in order to help students transition to lower secondary school.



## The example of the "More teachers than classes" scheme

- ➔ **Objective:** to encourage new teaching configurations in class
- ➔ **Means:** assigning extra teachers to provide support as needed in primary schools
- ➔ **Implementation:** first in priority education networks (REP), then expanded to other schools
- ➔ **Benefit:** the teaching staff handles students' difficulties in a flexible and collective way
- ➔ **Double evaluation:** the educational teams measure the impact of their teaching on students, and the "More teachers than classes" national monitoring committee, created in 2014, carries out both quantitative and qualitative evaluation (see, in particular, Toullec-Théry, 2017)

# HERE ARE SOME REFERENCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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## INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES:

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- Homework Done programme: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/cid131710/homework-done-work-towards-success-of-all-pupils.html>
- "More teachers than classes" scheme: <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid72849-plus-de-maitres-que-de-classes.html>
- Support for lower secondary students: <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid48653/les-dispositifs-d-accompagnement-des-collegiens.html>
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