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Perceived Improvement of Literacy Skills of Students with and Without Special Educational Needs Through Dialogic Literary Gatherings

Esther Roca-Campos [1], Harkaitz Zubiri-Esnaola [2], Susana León-Jiménez [3] and Adriana Aubert [4,*]

1   Department of Comparative Education and History of Education, University of Valencia, 46010 Valencia, Spain; esther.roca@uv.es
2   Department of Language and Literature Didactics, Faculty of Education, Philosophy and Anthropology, University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), 20018 San Sebastian, Spain; harkaitz.zubiri@ehu.eus
3   Department of Education, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Cordoba, 14071 Cordoba, Spain; susana.leon@uco.es
4   Department of Sociology, Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Barcelona, 08034 Barcelona, Spain
*   Correspondence: adriana.aubert@ub.edu; Tel.: +34-934020974

Abstract: This study analyzes the perceived improvement in literacy skills among 2nd-grade Primary Education students, both with and without Special Educational Needs (SEN), following the implementation of Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research included 110 seven-year-old students at a school in Valencia, Spain, 11 of whom had various SEN, such as difficulties in reading, writing, mathematics, oral language, and attention, including 1 student with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Through an inclusive approach, where all students participated in the DLGs, significant improvements were observed in reading comprehension, vocabulary, reasoning, and motivation. Students with SEN, especially those with reading and attention difficulties, showed notable progress, while students without SEN also demonstrated significant advances in communication and reading skills. The results were contextualized with international standards, highlighting the effectiveness of DLGs in improving academic performance and challenging social inequalities in an inclusive environment.

Keywords: Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs); Special Educational Needs (SEN); literacy improvement

1. Introduction

The scientific literature has highlighted the increasing relevance that citizens and institutions place on the social impact of science, companies, and organizations in today's society, which emphasizes dialogue [1]. Most research and debate focus on treatments that achieve the most favorable results when evaluated using quantitative and qualitative measures in domains such as health. However, in areas such as education, most discussions tend to focus on shortcomings in international or institutional evaluations, resource allocation, policies, and socioeconomic status. In contrast, many education analysts attribute a decline in educational outcomes in standardized tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) or Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this decline has not been consistent across all schools. In contrast, some schools demonstrated improved outcomes, suggesting impactful approaches that have yet to be widely discussed.

This study unveils the perceived enhancement in literacy skills following the implementation of Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) as part of Successful Educational Actions for the first time during the pandemic in a Primary Education school involving 110 seven-year-old students. DLGs are an educational action aimed at collectively constructing meaning and knowledge through reading and sharing classic works of universal literature in egalitarian dialogue [2]. Additionally, it assesses the perceived impact of

DLGs on improving educational results. Previous research has extensively demonstrated that DLGs positively impact reading skills, vocabulary, reasoning, and motivation [3,4]. However, studies on DLGs in formal education settings during critical situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, remain limited. This study aims to address this gap by examining the impact of DLGs in a school context where a significant decline in academic achievement was largely attributed to the COVID-19 crisis.

Employing a communicative approach (an approach focusing on dialogic interactions to foster learning and mutual understanding), DLGs were conducted weekly from October to May in the 2020–2021 academic year across five 2nd-grade primary school classrooms. Data were gathered by recording five DLG sessions and a focus group involving five teachers and the school principal. Over eight months, interviews with teachers indicated perceived improvements in students' literacy skills in Spanish and Valencian during the pandemic, particularly among those facing specific learning difficulties. Specifically, notable improvements were observed in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and argumentative skills, increasing motivation for reading the classics of the world literature. Additionally, the role of families is essential in DLGs, as this Successful Educational Action is designed to involve the entire educational community, particularly through family involvement at home. As the interviews conducted in this study indicate, families play a significant role by engaging with children to prepare for the DLGs, thereby enhancing the learning process. Dialogic learning theory supports the importance of these interactions, and evidence demonstrates that family participation positively impacts children's learning outcomes in diverse contexts [5].

Since the late 20th century, the literature has emphasized that the right to education depends not only on children's right to attend school but also on their entitlement to the highest quality education available within the most inclusive educational environment possible, based on scientific evidence of social impact [6]. Many education analysts have linked a decline in educational outcomes to the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptive effects on learning, yet this decline has varied across schools. This study provides new insights by revealing improved literacy results during the pandemic. Data were gathered by recording five DLG sessions and a focus group involving five teachers and the school principal. Results highlight the perceived improvement in students' literacy skills, notably among those facing specific learning difficulties.

2. State of the Art

The scientific literature focused on education has extensively tried to address a pivotal question: what factors influence the enhancement of educational outcomes? In response, many scientific articles have pointed out various elements such as socioeconomic status, parents' educational level, immigration status, school economic resources, or disabilities.

One prevalent theme in the scientific literature is the socioeconomic status of the students and their families. The link between socioeconomic status and school achievement has been extensively explored in diverse research contexts [7–9], sometimes presented as a predictor of educational outcomes [10,11]. Another focal point in the scientific literature addresses the educational attainment of families, stating that children from more educated families tend to achieve better educational outcomes [12,13]. Additionally, research indicates that immigrant students in Europe are also said to have poorer educational results [14] than their peers. Finally, a more recent argument attributes a negative effect on students' educational achievement to the pandemic, especially impacting those from low socioeconomic backgrounds [15,16].

When considering more individual and psychological factors, having special educational needs, such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), has been negatively associated with educational achievement [17]. Moreover, students' interest in a subject and their gender have also been associated with better educational results [18]. Other studies have highlighted the influence of children's self-educational aspirations and confidence

on their academic achievement in certain areas, such as mathematics [19,20]. Even genetic factors have been highlighted as drivers of stability in educational achievement [21].

In the realm of literacy, certain studies have associated low socioeconomic status and race with the likelihood of achieving reading proficiency [22]. Additionally, in specific contexts, some studies attribute the decline in literacy outcomes partly to student socioeconomic status and gender [23].

Nevertheless, none of the previously mentioned explanations regarding the influences on improving or worsening educational achievement provide evidence of their social impact [6]. That is, none of those explanations have scientifically presented where they have contributed to improving academic achievements, particularly in the domain of literacy.

The development of literacy skills is one of the main concerns in education. Literacy skills include different specific skills and abilities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) includes reading literacy in assessing students' academic outcomes [24]. PISA defines reading literacy as "understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society" [25]. Other international organizations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), use a broader and more plural concept for literacy [26]: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society".

As these and other definitions suggest, literacy has enormous implications for students' academic performance and participation as active citizens in society. Research has pointed out that many students struggle to read and comprehend academic texts assigned to them in school [27], posing significant barriers to their academic success. Many children, for instance, lack the vocabulary necessary to comprehend such texts [28]. In other cases, even though they can understand the words they read, many students find difficulties connecting ideas throughout the texts, making causal inferences, or correctly parsing syntax, among other challenges [29].

Despite these challenges, research has shown that schools can play a pivotal role in helping students develop those necessary skills for school and future success. In particular, DLGs, in which students read classic works of universal literature and engage in an egalitarian dialogue with them, have shown substantial social impact in this regard [30]. Based on dialogic learning, DLGs generate a space of high-quality dialogic interactions based on students' diverse perspectives, reflections, experiences, and feelings to construct new meanings together using rich literary texts as a departure point. DLGs begin when participants select a book to read from among classic works of universal literature. Adapted versions of these texts are used in early childhood, primary, and special education. Once the book is chosen, the group agrees on the pages to be read, which participants can read independently or with support at home or in school. Participants pick phrases or passages they would like to share with the group as they read. During the DLGs, participants who wish to share read one of their chosen excerpts aloud and explain why they selected it. This opens the floor for others to join in the conversation. The teacher moderates the discussion, encouraging contributions from those who have spoken less and fostering an environment of egalitarian dialogue. Rather than finding the text's interpretation or meaning among all participants, the consensus is that all opinions will be respected equally—so long as they respect human rights—regardless of who says them, using validity claims based on argumentation rather than power claims [30]. In many cases, students' family members also participate in the DLGs in different ways: as one more member in the DLGs, sharing the quote they have chosen, or helping students do the reading to prepare

for the DLGs at home. Family members' participation in DLGs boosts their social impacts in different aspects [31].

Among other social impacts, DLGs have been demonstrated to improve and promote different skills related to language learning, including communication skills, reading skills, active participation, argumentation, and making connections and inferences between texts and participants' lives [2]. The evidence for these social impacts is also diverse, including standardized tests, assessments, and comparisons over time of the dialogues during the DLGs, or students', family members', and teachers' perceptions. These impacts have been found across a wide range of countries, ranges, ages, cultural backgrounds, abilities, and languages. For instance, some studies on DLGs implemented in special education schools show that students improved reasoning, communicative skills, and reading proficiency and were more motivated to read [32]. Other studies have shown that students with Special Education Needs (SEN) participating in DLGs in mainstream schools increase their language- and reading-related skills and make relevant contributions to the DLGs [33]. Some studies have shown their social impacts during the COVID-19 lockdowns, promoting students' reading motivation [34].

While a significant body of scientific evidence supports the social impact of DLGs in promoting literacy skills among students with and without SEN, there is a need for an in-depth exploration of such social impact in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which many education analysts have blamed for the last PISA results. To fill this gap, this article explores a group of teachers' perceptions of their students'—some of them with SEN—improvements in literacy skills following their participation in DLGs during the pandemic.

To contribute to addressing it, the present study analyzes a case in which the following research questions are posited:

(1) Did DLGs promote the enhancement of reading and writing competence in the studied second-year primary students' case?
(2) Did DLGs contribute to reversing low literacy levels in the studied second-year primary students' case?

3. Methods

3.1. Study Design

The study presented here employs a case study design based on the Communicative Methodology approach, validated by numerous studies for its effectiveness [35,36]. The European Commission recommends this methodology due to its proven efficacy in fostering impactful research [37]. Particularly in the context of vulnerable groups, Communicative Methodology has demonstrated its capacity to enhance the social impact of research [38]. By facilitating egalitarian dialogue between researchers and the community, this approach aims to identify actions that directly address the issues raised by citizens [39]. To achieve these goals, Communicative Methodology focuses on recognizing the exclusionary elements hindering transformation and the transformative elements facilitating meaningful improvement [40].

3.1.1. Context

This study analyzes the case of a voluntary-aided school (Jesuit-religious-Order) located in the city of Valencia (Spain) with 752 students enrolled in Primary Education. The school offers Primary, Secondary, High School, Vocational Training, and Special Education. This study in particular focuses on the 2nd grade of Primary Education.

In the 2019/2020 academic year, the school introduced DLGs. Due to COVID-19, the school temporarily stopped its implementation but continued developing it after the lockdown period. This study was conducted between October and May of the 2020–2021 school year after schools had re-opened. The DLGs took place in one-hour sessions once a week. Between 25 and 30 students participated in the DLGs. In all, students read and engaged in dialogues around six books in varying forms. The first book was *El Lazarillo de*

Tormes, a classic of Spanish literature, in a 176-page adaptation recommended for 4th-grade students by the publisher. Students read it in Spanish and engaged in dialogues in one chapter every other week throughout the whole school year. The DLGs on *El Lazarillo* alternated with other DLGs sessions in which students read and engaged in dialogues on mini-classic adaptations of *Frankenstein*, *Tirant lo Blanch*, *Treasure Island*, and Chapters 1–4 of *The Arabian Nights*. The periodicity for the mini-classics was 2–3 weeks (from October–November to March–April). The mini-classics were read in Valencian.

3.1.2. Participants

The research sample included the voices of the school principal, five teachers, and 110 seven-year-old students enrolled in the 2nd grade of Primary Education. The criterion for selection required a complete year of schooling with students who had never previously participated in DLGs. Additionally, the school committed to providing rigorous training on DLGs and consistently applying them throughout at least one academic year inclusively, i.e., ensuring the participation of all students in DLGs, irrespective of their specific needs. Among this diverse group of students,11 pupils had SEN: 3 students had difficulties regarding reading, writing, and mathematics; 1 student faced difficulties in learning mathematics; 1 student had challenges in oral language and writing; 1 student grappled with oral language and reading; 1 student had difficulties in language; 1 student had specific needs related to reading; 2 students had attention difficulties; and one student was diagnosed with ADHD.

In Table 1, a more detailed description of the participant profiles in the focus group is provided, encompassing the voices of the school's assistant headteacher and five tutor teachers from 2nd-grade Primary Education (one from each classroom involved in the study).

Table 1. Focus group participants' data.

Participant	Gender	Years in the School	Time Implementing DLGs	Area of Specialization	Role in the School
Assistant Headteacher	Male	15	7	Primary Education	Assistant Headteacher
Teacher 1	Female	27	6 years	Primary Education	Tutor
Teacher 2	Male	6	6 years	Primary Education	Tutor
Teacher 3	Female	12	10 years	Primary Education	Tutor
Teacher 4	Female	14	7 years	Primary Education	Tutor
Teacher 5	Female	20	8 years	Primary Education	Tutor

The study was explained in advance to all students and their families by the researchers in a dedicated session, where all questions were addressed. It was clarified that student participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Signed informed consent was obtained from both the students and their families. The DLGs planned as part of the study were offered to all students in the class as a curricular learning activity. If any student had not provided consent, they would still participate in the DLGs, but their data would not be included in the study. In this case, all students at the school agreed to participate in the study.

3.2. Data Collection

The data collection comprised two stages: (a) one communicative focus group discussion and (b) observations of the DLGs. The communicative focus group was conducted with five teachers and the school's assistant headteacher in May 2022, considering the participants' availability and their substantial perspective on the school year's development. The participants were asked about the course of the academic year after 8 months of implementing DLGs. The two-hour discussion took place via the Zoom video conferencing application, with teachers physically present at the school during the focus group. At

the same time, the researcher conducted the session remotely from the University. All participants provided informed consent for the focus group to be audio and video recorded. In addition, between October and May, five DLG sessions were observed and recorded, each lasting one hour and being recorded with two video cameras. These recordings were supplemented with field notes from the researchers present during the process.

3.3. Data Analysis

All data were transcribed to facilitate the data analysis. A twofold analysis was conducted. On the one hand, in line with Communicative Methodology principles [40], the analysis focused on two essential dimensions: the transformative and the exclusionary. The transformative dimension was used to identify teachers' perceptions of students' improvement in literacy skills and the factors they perceived led to such improvements. The exclusionary dimension referred to teachers' perceptions of a lack of development of literacy skills among students and the factors they considered hindered such development. It is worth noting that, throughout all the data analyzed, only one instance of an exclusionary dimension was found from one teacher referring to one specific case; the rest of the data fit the transformative dimension.

On the other hand, in terms of the development of literacy skills, researchers first identified the main themes that arose from the teachers' focus group. In order to compare such skills with the ones used by the international educational community, researchers used the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which focused specifically on reading. PIRLS is used every five years with 4th-grade Primary Education students worldwide to measure students' reading achievement [41]. The latest results were published in 2023, which have identified a decrease in Spain's students' achievements compared to previous years, and similar to other international achievement tests, much of the blame has been put on non-scientifically supported factors such as the pandemic or students' migration status. Although this study's students are from the 2nd grade, PIRLS's categories to measure reading literacy are similar to some teachers' perceptions in this regard, and the texts these students have read are recommended for 4th-grade students. In particular, PIRLS uses two evaluation fields with different dimensions:

1. Reading goals, with the following dimensions: having literary experience and acquiring and using information.
2. Comprehension processes, with four dimensions: localizing and obtaining explicit information, extracting direct conclusions; interpreting and integrating ideas and information; and analyzing and evaluating content and text elements.

It is essential to clarify that using this framework does not imply a subjective assessment of its efficacy or appropriateness for evaluation purposes. Instead, PIRLS's selection responds to its widespread international usage. Adopting this established framework is intended to serve as a reference point, facilitating an understanding of whether and how teachers perceive their students' literacy skills improve in relation to the broader educational landscape.

After analyzing the data and reviewing international measures of literacy skills, five main categories were found: reading fluency and comprehension, acquisition and use of vocabulary, reading behaviors and attitudes, the impact of home and school environment on reading, and literacy achievement amidst adverse conditions (lockdown). These results highlight educators' perceptions regarding these categories, which somehow align with PIRLS.

All data were analyzed and categorized by two researchers in constant dialogue. Most of the analysis was focused on the teachers' focus group, where teachers' perceptions regarding students' development of literary skills were analyzed. In addition, data from observations were retrieved as evidence to support teachers' perceptions.

4. Results

4.1. Enhancing Reading and Writing Competence Through DLGs

Throughout the academic year following the lockdown, DLGs were conducted weekly. By the end of the school year, notable enhancements in linguistic competence were observed, including improvements in lexical and phonological skills and the comprehension and use of specific syntactic structures. These findings challenge the misconception, often spread by the media, that low literacy results on PISA assessments can be attributed to the lockdown and COVID-19.

In the following excerpt, Teacher 1 describes the perceived improvements in students' reading speed and comprehension. She underlines that three students with SEN and learning difficulties have significantly improved these skills by participating in DLGs, which helped them overcome the low achievement they experienced immediately after the lockdown. It is also noted that other teachers, families, and students perceived a marked improvement among SEN students throughout the school year during which the DLGs were implemented. Teacher 1 highlights that this was the only year she observed such a substantial improvement.

> Teacher 1: *"In my case, at the beginning of the academic year, we identified three students with significant difficulties in reading and writing, as well as in reading speed and comprehension. By the end of the year, all of us—teachers, families and students— could see that these students had made considerable progressed. We observed very positive development within the class, and I believe this is the year that has seen the most improvement among the 2nd-grade students. We noticed a clear difference between the start of the first term (right after the lockdown) and how we finished the year."*

In the following comment, Teacher 2 concurs with Teacher 1 regarding the difficulties students faced in reading and writing during the year following the pandemic. She notes that the students had not consolidated the content covered in the previous year, which led them to revisit content during the first term. However, she highlights the importance of the measures taken by the management team after the lockdown, such as implementing DLGs to adapt to the new reality. By the end of the year, they observed meaningful progress in students' skills. Although three students were initially identified as having severe difficulties in reading and writing, the overall perception was positive and satisfactory by the end of the year. Teacher 2 emphasizes the need to continue these interventions in the future.

> Teacher 2: *"I agree with my colleague that, this year, students faced difficulties in reading and writing due to not having consolidated the contents taught during the previous years' third term. This led us to revisit content, forms, and tasks in the first term. Once we had adapted to the post-lockdown context through all the actions that we have been doing like the DLGs, we observed a strong progression in the students' skills by the end of the year. In my case, initially we identified three students with serious difficulties in reading writing, reading speed and comprehension. But by the end of the year, the feeling was positive and satisfactory, underscoring the importance of continuing this approach."*

Regarding vocabulary acquisition, another critical component of linguistic competence, Teacher 1 underlines the potential of DLGs to empower students to express their opinions while simultaneously enriching their vocabulary. The teacher explained that through this activity, students not only had the opportunity to work at home but also improved their ability to learn new words. This provides students with a valuable opportunity; by acquiring new vocabulary, they can explain texts more effectively and deal with previously unfamiliar words.

> Teacher 1: *"The DLGs have not only empowered students to express their opinions but have also helped them discover new vocabulary. This provided an opportunity for them, as they were already working at home (...) on this activity and the vocabulary. They are now better able to explain the text and the words that they didn't know before."*

In the same vein, the following quote highlights the remarkable improvement of two students with SEN, whose comprehension levels were very low at the beginning of the school year. Teacher 1 notes that DLGs allowed these students to gain confidence to participate. In addition, listening to their peers and engaging with classic works of universal literature improved their vocabulary, which in turn contributed to increased comprehension. Teacher 1 emphasized vocabulary acquisition as a critical factor in improving comprehension and noted a marked enhancement in their literacy skills.

> Teacher 1: *"The improvement in comprehension for two of the students with SEN was significant, as their comprehension levels were very low at the beginning of the school year. The readings and discussions in the DLGs gave them a chance to build confidence, and by listening to their classmates and engaging with classic works of universal literature, their vocabulary and, consequently, their comprehension have improved."*

Additionally, Teacher 2 points out that the learnings in DLG sessions transfer to other contexts. For example, families report that children participating in DLGs now use linguistic resources learned in these sessions at home.

> Teacher 2: *"Families have told us things like, «This student repeats at home», «I agree with», «but I disagree with. . .» and other phrases like that. (. . .) There has been a transfer of syntactic structures we used in the DLGs for discussion, and that has been very positive."*

4.2. Overcoming Low Literacy Skills Through DLGs

Although the experience of the pandemic and the lockdown period posed significant challenges, particularly in literacy, as no work was completed from home during that time, the school decided to address this issue. At this school, literacy skills are introduced in greater depth starting in the first year of Primary Education, when students begin formal literacy instruction.

In the following quote, Teacher 1 points out that some children experienced specific difficulties because they missed the second and third trimesters of the primary 1st-grade academic year. She mentions that three students had particular struggles with reading, writing, and comprehension. Comprehension, in particular, was difficult for them, especially when the texts were longer or the vocabulary more complex. However, despite these initial difficulties, Teacher 1 highlights the importance of continued effort and educational interventions, such as DLGs, as they have led to remarkable improvements over time. This underscores the need to adapt and address learning gaps caused by exceptional circumstances to ensure students' educational success.

> Teacher 1: *"When the school year started, we had just came out of a lockdown. The children had been in isolation, and this created a setback, particularly in literacy, as we weren't working from home during the lockdown. Some children experienced difficulties because they missed the second and third trimester of 1st-grade, a critical period, especially for literacy development. (. . .) There were three students with issues in reading, writing, and comprehension. (. . .) Comprehension was particularly hard for them, especially with longer texts or when vocabulary was more complex. However, through our continued work, we have noticed a significant difference."*

The following quote highlights the case of another student of Teacher 4 who had faced problems with reading and writing since the teacher met him. Despite his difficulties, this student has shown considerable effort and has worked hard to improve. Teacher 4 specifically mentions that during DLG sessions, this student actively participated on multiple occasions and that despite his challenges in areas such as reading, writing, or syllable separation, the student did not show difficulty and would voluntarily raise his hand to participate without showing complexes.

> Teacher 4: *"Another student who mentioned having problems with reading and writing since I met him has made significant efforts despite his difficulties. He even worked*

hard and actively participated in the DLGs sessions, raising his hand and reading aloud whenever needed, despite struggling with reading, writing or syllabification. He showed no hesitation."

In the following excerpt, Teacher 4 explains that conducting DLG sessions significantly helped a student who was previously very unmotivated regarding reading and writing. Now, she participates just like any other student in class and feels included. In the following excerpt, Teacher 4 also emphasizes that involving families in preparing the DLG sessions has notably contributed to their success.

Teacher 4: *"[. . .] her lack of motivation affected everything related to reading and writing, specially when done individually, so the DLGs have helped me, and her too, to see that she is one more in the class, that she had no problem participating in the work. At home, she reads each chapter with her mom or dad and without any problem. [. . .] It has given her confidence."*

Teacher 1 also emphasizes the importance of involving families in the DLGs sessions. Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 note that families work with their children to prepare for DLGs, providing invaluable student support.

Teacher 1: *"The fact that these DLGs are prepared at home is very favorable for inclusion. It doesn't just mean that the involvement of families is important—families feel like they're part of a team with the child, school and families, isn't it? I think it was very different from before, when children had to be very autonomous or very alone, hadn't they? I think that involving families in these gatherings has greatly helped the children."*

Teacher 4: *"There have been families who are very involved, especially among those who are immigrants—two or three families are very engaged. They're aware—or perhaps because they're aware—that their child's vocabulary and language skills may not be fully developed yet. As a result, they've had more contact with me, provided additional support, made extra efforts, and we've had more dialogue. The family has done a lot of work at home to ensure these differences aren't noticeable and don't hinder their child's learning."*

Given the positive impact observed with the most involved families, one of the teachers reflects on the importance of continuing to improve this aspect in the coming school years.

Teacher 2: *"One of our goals for next year is to better explain how the literary gatherings are organized. At first, the children's contributions [in the gatherings] were very linear and superficial, but by the end of the year, there's been a transformation with a rich interconnection between the different classics we've read. For example, while reading The Odyssey, they would bring up Lazarillo de Tormes, which was wonderful. Then later, with One Thousand and One Nights, they made similar connections."*

In addition to the essential role families play in supporting the inclusion of all students in DLGs, teachers highlight other inclusive strategies they employ to engage students with SEN in DLGs. In this school, these strategies are facilitating the improvement of literacy skills for all students within an inclusive environment—where previously, such skills were taught in segregated settings with limited academic progress.

Teachers 1 and 2, along with the Assistant Headteacher, emphasize the importance of fostering an atmosphere of solidarity and mutual support among students with and without SEN through DLGs. This environment reflects one of the core principles of dialogic learning theory, which DLGs enable students to experience.

Teacher 1: *"I think the 'reading buddy' idea is fantastic. Students understand each other better with their peers; they feel more confident. We've really learned a lot from these gatherings, learning as we go. For instance, students would choose to listen to someone who spoke less often; in that way, the quieter student felt supported and valued because a classmate wanted to hear their opinion and thoughts on the topic."*

Teacher 2: *"They wanted to help each other, and that was wonderful. As Teacher 1 mentioned, it creates a great atmosphere of trust. I had one student who usually worked*

with the Speech and Language teacher, but he preferred staying in the classroom because he was making noticeable progress. The improvement in confidence, and the sense of belonging, is evident—it's a space where everyone has a voice."

Assistant Headteacher: "This inclusive approach to preparing for the gathering, whether through support for reading, oral expression, idea development, or even language assistance, including Valencian, has been transformative for the school through DLGs. DLGs provide essential support for students who need it most, empowering them to grow independently. It's opened my eyes—not only for the gatherings themselves but also for introducing other successful programs, like Interactive Groups, in the future".

Finally, Teacher 2 expresses her satisfaction with implementing DLGs in her school this year. She acknowledges that while substantial scientific literature demonstrates the effectiveness of DLGs in various contexts, witnessing these improvements firsthand has been incredibly rewarding.

Teacher 2: *"A lot of research has been done on all the improvements and all the benefits of the DLGs but experiencing these firsthand this year has been incredible. We made a strong commitment to a reading plan based on classic books and DLGs. Thanks to this research, we knew that it would benefit our students."*

5. Discussion

On 5 December 2023, the latest results of the OECD's 2022 PISA survey were published [42]. Many countries and communities saw a decline in their results, with some attributing this worsening to the pandemic [43]. However, other countries have improved over the same period [42]. In some cases, it has been overlooked that declining results were already a trend before the pandemic. Furthermore, even in countries where overall outcomes have worsened, there are examples of schools that improved their performance under similar conditions [44,45], as highlighted by this study.

Another excuse used to explain the decline is the presence of immigrant-origin students [46]. However, PISA data show that in some countries where declining results have been attributed to this factor, outcomes have also worsened for students without immigrant heritage. This argument echoes the widespread hoax that schools cannot ensure equal outcomes for all types of students. Non-scientific references, such as the Coleman Report and Bourdieu's reproduction theory, have suggested that schools cannot overcome social inequalities. Although the fundamental errors in these claims have long been demonstrated [47,48], these myths are still repeated despite numerous studies showing that academic success can be achieved across all social backgrounds.

The key is for scientific research to identify educational practices that guarantee academic success for all students without exception. It is not only about ensuring that all children, teenagers, and young people attend educational institutions but also about implementing educational actions based on scientific evidence of social impact, as these actions ensure quality education and good outcomes for all students.

DLGs are among the internationally recognized Successful Educational Actions with extensive research demonstrating their ability to improve participants' lives across diverse contexts [2]. Among the many documented benefits, it is noteworthy that DLGs efficiently foster language learning, a crucial component of academic success [49]. Research has shown that DLGs promote participation in collaborative interactions in the target language that lead to learning, enhance reading skills, improve attitudes toward learning the language [50,51], boost oracy skills [32,52], and effectively build interactive learning environments [53,54]. Studies also show that conducting DLGs with family members to improve their language skills positively impacts their children's reading skills and attitude toward learning [31]. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that literary gatherings positively impacted the quality of life, companionship, and interest in reading among families with children during confinement [34,55].

However, until now, the impact of DLGs on students' literacy skills during the COVID-19 pandemic remained underexplored. This study addresses this gap by providing evidence of teachers' perceptions regarding their diverse students' literacy improvements in the 2020–2021 school year through participation in DLGs. According to this study's results, DLGs facilitated significant progress in reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and reading fluency, even among students with special educational needs and those initially facing significant learning challenges due to pandemic-related disruptions.

Previous studies have already demonstrated the impact of family participation in DLGs for students with and without SEN; this study highlights teachers' perceptions of family involvement and its effect on academic progress for SEN students in inclusive settings. Family support is crucial in strengthening reading comprehension and preparation for oral participation in DLGs. Teachers see this involvement as essential for developing SEN students' language skills and a key motivator for those with learning difficulties. While such students may feel unmotivated in other school activities, family support in DLGs fosters a desire to learn and reach levels on par with their peers without SEN.

6. Conclusions

In the context of the debate prompted by the publication of the PISA survey results, this study contributes evidence supporting research that shows schools rigorously implementing educational actions based on scientific evidence of social impact can make a significant difference, regardless of the socioeconomic and cultural context. DLGs are one of the actions shown to generate notable improvements. The scientific literature demonstrates their replicability across various contexts, showing social impact in multiple areas of learning and development, including academic performance, values, emotions, and sentiments. This study provides evidence of a previous underexplored social impact: improved literacy skills among students with different abilities during the pandemic, as reported by interviewed teachers. Future studies should explore participants' perceptions of these improvements in more depth and examine changes in standardized and other international and national test scores to track progress from when students began participating in DLGs.

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