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# Learning difficulties in the educational context: a critical-reflexive approach to curriculum and pedagogical practice through a decolonial lens

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**Abstract:** This article presents a State-of-the-Knowledge study on learning and teaching difficulties in the school context, highlighting their relationship with the rigidity of a colonial-structured curriculum that historically reproduces exclusionary practices. The study aimed to systematize recent scientific publications on the subject by analyzing theoretical, methodological, and critical perspectives, as well as identifying intervention proposals oriented toward less hierarchical educational practices. The research was grounded in the hypothesis that learning difficulties are closely connected to teaching challenges resulting from a rigid educational system historically aligned with the maintenance of elitist cultural standards. The study was conducted through a bibliographic survey in databases such as the Biblioteca Digital Brasileira de Teses e Dissertações (BDTD) and the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), resulting in the selection of 17 studies, including 11 master's dissertations, 1 doctoral thesis, and 5 scientific articles. The analysis identified central categories such as institutional conceptions, teachers' perspectives, family-school relationships, students' self-perceptions, implications of specific disorders, intervention strategies, and the political construction of the concept within the school context. The results indicate theoretical advances and relevant strategies for addressing learning difficulties; however, they also reveal the persistence of practices that tend to place responsibility for such difficulties on students themselves. It is concluded that confronting these issues requires rethinking teaching in its epistemological, pedagogical, and political dimensions, overcoming colonial and elitist logics, and promoting more flexible and inclusive curricula sensitive to the historical, social, and cultural specificities of diverse learners in contemporary educational contexts.

**Keywords:** learning difficulties; teaching difficulties; colonized curriculum; popular education.

## 1 Introduction

Since the colonial period formal education in Latin American countries has been, historically and socially constructed as an instrument of exclusion and social reproduction, designed to preserve the privileges of dominant groups. This structure is not limited to a past; rather, it continues to be perpetuated in contemporary pedagogical and curricular practices through a persistently process of coloniality of knowledge, a concept formulated by Quijano (2005), which refers as the persistence of Eurocentric epistemologies as a mechanisms of symbolic domination, which marginalize the



plurality of knowledge arising from the diversity constructed through the mestizaje of peoples of the Global South.

The coloniality of knowledge constitutes as the foundation of a colonized curriculum, which, in this context, may be understood as a set of pedagogical, epistemological, and political choices that marginalize knowledge rooted from popular, Indigenous, African, and peripheral matrices, while legitimizing only those forms of knowledge considered “superior” according to a Western, rationalist, meritocratic, and neoliberal logic. Within this framework, this curriculum functions as an exclusionary filter by determining what is valid to teach and learn, thereby directly impacting how learning difficulties are recognized (or not) in everyday school practices. This logic is concretely materialized through standardized assessment systems centered on performance measurement, including objective tests, rankings, and achievement indexes, which privilege content reproduction while disregarding sociocultural diverse trajectories. In this way, a classificatory and selective evaluation model is consolidated, one that confirms and legitimizes historical inequalities by placing responsibility for academic failure on the student to meet previously established standards.

Considering that formal education, since the colonial period, has been structured as an instrument of exclusion and social reproduction serving privileged groups, it becomes necessary to question: to what extent the learning difficulties identified in everyday school life can truly be attributed to individual insufficiencies, given that they may instead occur from a historically rigid educational system? Classical studies such as those of Vygotsky (1978) have long highlighted the social and historical dimensions of learning; however, hierarchical teaching and curricular practices that privilege official and elitist culture continue to shape educational systems today. From this perspective, many so-called “learning difficulties” may, in fact, be reflected by teaching limitations, sustained by a colonizing system that remains embedded in assessment instruments, fragmented curricular organization, and teacher education itself, often grounded by Eurocentric and technicist frameworks.

Scientific production constitutes a proven record of the academic research community, sustained by a continuous process of dialogue, interpretation, and systematization of knowledge. Each study, as it is developed, becomes part of this flow of knowledge, either by expanding upon or critically problematizing previously conducted studies. In this context, Alves (1992, p. 54) argues that, “[...] the proper

formulation of a research problem therefore requires that the researcher situate themselves within this process, critically analyzing the state of knowledge in their area of interest [...]”.

In this scenario, Morosini and Fernandes (2014, p. 155) define the construction of the State of Knowledge (SK) as the “[...] identification, recording, and categorization that lead to reflection and synthesis about the scientific production of a given field within a specific time frame.” Therefore, SK is considered an important strategy for mapping existing discussions, identifying gaps that have not yet been explored, providing theoretical and analytical support for the formulation of new research proposals.

In the same perspective, Kohls-Santos and Morosini (2021) emphasize that understanding and planning the research pathway as a process of reinvention implies in a critical examination of previously consolidated knowledge. To this end, conducting the SK study, consists in an important methodological strategy, which allow the identification of the most recurring themes within a field of study, but also identify perspectives and approaches that remain insufficiently underexplored in the academic literature.

Considering the importance of the theme “learning difficulties”, as well the significant number of academic publications addressing this theme, the need to systematize existing contributions becomes evident. Such systematization not only highlights the central and recurring nature relevance of the theme within the educational field, but also makes it possible to identify gaps and innovative perspectives that may contribute to the advancement and strengthening of new research studies.

In this context, this article<sup>1</sup> aims to map the existing academic literature on “learning difficulties” in order to understand how this theme has been addressed in the educational field and also, identify which research pathways emerge from this critical analysis. To this end, dissertations, theses, and scientific articles were selected based on previously established refinement criteria. The selection process initially involved the analysis of titles, followed by the examination of pre-textual elements, such as

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<sup>1</sup> This article is derived from the master’s thesis entitled *Learning Difficulties of 6th-Grade Elementary School Students: A Study in Light of Problem-Posing Education*, submitted to the Graduate Program in Education: Teacher Education for Basic Education – Professional Master’s Program at the University of Uberaba. The study was funded by the *Trilhas do Futuro para Educadores* project and was conducted between 2022 and 2024.

keywords and abstracts, and subsequently the full reading of studies that considered to have greater potential for analytical contribution. Based on this process, a critical and systematized perspective was developed, enabling the identification of trends, advances, and challenges that characterize the literature on the investigated theme.

Therefore, this study seeks to systematize the State of Knowledge on “learning difficulties” in order to identify the theoretical and empirical narratives that associate such difficulties with colonizing educational practices and rigid curricula structures. The research is structured around three articulated analytical dimensions: (1) the critique of the medicalization and pathologization of “learning difficulties”, which redirects the focus from presumed individual dysfunction toward institutional conditions; (2) the socio-emotional dimension, understood as being shaped by contexts of inequality, school expectations, and labeling processes; and (3) the decolonial perspective, which problematizes the epistemological and curricular foundations that determine who learns, what should be learned, and how learning is validated within educational systems. Specifically, the objective is to analyze recent academic literature in order to understand current academic discussions on “learning difficulties”, while mapping contributions that may support future educational actions and challenge discriminatory logics. By articulating these three dimensions explicit, this research seeks to demonstrate that “learning difficulties” cannot be reduced to a merely clinical or individual problematization; rather, they must be understood as a relational, political, and historically situated phenomenon, whose overcoming requires not only the revision of classificatory assessment models and curricular flexibility, but also the valorization of plural forms of knowledge, and the reconfiguration of teacher education based on critical and intercultural perspectives.

The relevance of this study is justified both from a scientific and educational-social perspective. Scientifically the research contributes to the systematization and critical analysis of existing production on “learning difficulties”, From an educational and social perspective, the theme directly impacts teaching, learning, and school inclusion processes. By gathering and critically interpreting the selected academic literature, this study seeks to provide theoretical support capable of guiding future investigations and contributing to the development of more conscious and effective pedagogical practices in the face of challenges identified in everyday school life.

## 2 Learning difficulties, teaching difficulties, and problematizing education

In light of the issues raised and within this analytical framework, the theoretical foundation begins with the concept of learning difficulties. According to Lev Vygotsky (1978), learning is understood as a social and dynamic process, opposing to the static view that considers the student a passive recipient of knowledge. Alves, Casella, and Ferraro (2016) emphasize that, in traditional curricula, tend to focus on pre-structured content, disregarding learners' prior and contextual knowledge, which, from this perspective, is interpreted as a teaching difficulty.

Paulo Freire (1996) makes a significant contribution to the understanding of "learning difficulties" by critically problematizing banking education and advocating pedagogical practices that promote critical consciousness, student autonomy, and the collective construction of knowledge. The author emphasizes that the act of teaching must necessarily engage with learners' social realities, integrating their popular knowledge and life experiences, thereby challenging the imposition of decontextualized academic content. Freire's critique of banking education extends beyond methodological concerns, reaching broader epistemological and political dimensions. By denouncing the imposition of hegemonic knowledge that silences ways of learning produced in socially marginalized contexts, Freire (1996) directly engages with decolonial perspectives by demonstrating that educational exclusion does not result solely from inadequate teaching practices, but from a power structure that hierarchizes both knowledge and people.

In this regard, Freirean pedagogy converges with the decolonial perspective proposed by Walter Mignolo (2007), as the coloniality of knowledge is expressed in the persistence of teaching practices grounded in Eurocentric epistemologies that delegitimize peripheral and marginalized knowledge. By advocating the valorization of popular knowledge and the collective construction of learning, Paulo Freire anticipates central elements of the critique of the coloniality of knowledge. In dialogue with this perspective, Castro and Pinto (2023) argue that rigid curricula reflect a form of "selective invisibility," excluding culturally relevant themes and reinforcing social hierarchies. Their findings empirically demonstrate that public schools frequently maintain assessment standards that penalize students from socially vulnerable contexts.

This articulation between critical pedagogy and decolonial perspectives is further supported by Mota Neto (2015), who argues that Freire and Orlando Fals Borda (1991) share a counter-hegemonic epistemological framework in which knowledge and political action are inseparable dimensions. The author highlights that knowledge production is understood as a situated political practice committed to the emancipation of historically marginalized subjects. The authors also demonstrate that Popular Education recognize knowledge produced within territories and collective experiences, contrary with the Eurocentric logic of epistemological validation and anticipates key debates within contemporary decolonial thoughts. Thus, Freire's critique of banking education is intrinsically linked to the denunciation of the coloniality of knowledge by questioning not only how the knowledge is taught, but also the relations that determine which forms of knowledge is authorized within the school environment and who has the authority to produce them.

When addressing the critique of curriculum, it is essential to engage with the concept of coloniality of knowledge proposed by Aníbal Quijano (2005) and further developed by Mignolo (2007). According to Quijano (2005), the coloniality of knowledge constitutes one of the structural dimensions of the coloniality of power, historically perpetuated in Latin American societies through the imposition of Eurocentric epistemologies as universal. Mignolo (2007) expands this perspective, arguing that this process establishes a hierarchical division between knowledge considered "legitimate" from those considered "inferior" or "primitive," producing an epistemic hierarchy marked by segregation and exclusion.

Patto (2015) and Esteban (2002) contribute to this discussion by analyzing the relationship between diagnosis and intervention, demonstrating how educational practices can be adjusted to address learners' actual needs without resorting on clinical or neurological approaches that tend to naturalize exclusion and individualize the student academic failure. Moacir Gadotti (1997) reinforces the centrality of education as a practice of freedom, advocating for flexible curricula that value cultural, social, and cognitive diversity in alignment with an emancipatory perspective.

Pereira (2011) emphasizes the need for curricular flexibility as a fundamental condition for promoting student autonomy and protagonism, mitigating discriminatory effects. From this perspectives, critical psychopedagogy, articulated with the contributions of Freire (1996), Patto (2015), and Esteban (2002), emerges as a

strategic field of knowledge, showing diagnoses and intervention options aligned with learners' affective and cognitive needs (Garcia, 1999). However, it is necessary to critically examine the risk of internalizing discourses that attribute learning difficulties primarily to neurological disorders, since such perspectives frequently transfer responsibility for school failure onto the individual learner, thereby naturalizing exclusion.

The discussion on curricular flexibility and the pathologizing approaches regarding the "difficult of learning" requires an in-depth analysis of the power relations embedded in curricula. For example, Green and Bigum (1995) argue that the curriculum (1) the conception of learning difficulties within the school context; (2) teachers' perceptions; (3) family–school relationships; (4) students' self-perception; (5) implications associated with specific disorders; and (6) proposals for pedagogical intervention and curricular resignification. be understood as a neutral instrument, but a cultural artifact that produces identities, differences, and hierarchies, functioning as a mechanism of power that determines who belongs, who fails, and who become a subject of corrective intervention. At the same time, the authors emphasize that the curriculum also function as a field of dispute, making it a potential space of resistance, where counter-hegemonic pedagogical practices can challenge dominant discourses, valorizing subaltern knowledge, and reconfiguration of teaching and learning processes.

In light of these reflections, the theoretical framework presented here highlights the intentional interdependence between "learning difficulties" and the persistence of a colonized model of teaching, grounded in the exclusion of knowledge and the hierarchization of learning processes. It becomes urgent to rethink school practices, curriculum and teacher education, in ways that recognize and value the cultural, epistemological, and subjective diversity of educational subjects. Freire (1996) emphasizes the importance of a horizontal conception of education in which individuals are simultaneously learners and educators. Such possibilities require not only the inclusion of historically marginalized knowledge, but also the reconfiguration of pedagogical relationships toward a dialogical, critical, and socially transformative education practices.

However, beyond the forms of knowledge that structure curriculum and pedagogical practice, it is essential to consider the tension between medical-clinical

and pedagogical approaches in addressing “learning difficulties”. This tension has historically permeated the educational field and has become intensified in contemporary debates on inclusive education. The pathologization of school failure, that is, the tendency to explain students’ learning difficulties primarily through clinical and/or neurological diagnoses, constitutes a process of individualization and depoliticization of structural inequalities that affect learning experiences, displacing responsibility away from the school as an institution responsible for fostering meaningful knowledge construction and means of human emancipation.

The critique of this tendency is evident in the work of Patto (2015), who denounces the indiscriminate and uncritical use of diagnostic categories as a strategy to conceal institutional limitations related to students who require curricular flexibility. According to the author, when “learning difficulties” are faster associated with presumed neurological disorders, a process of medicalization would take place and reduce the complexity of educational phenomena, disregarding the concrete conditions of school organization, and naturalizing historically constructed inequalities. Instead of problematizing inadequate pedagogical practices, rigid curricular structures, insufficient ongoing teacher education, and precarious teaching conditions, the school transfer responsibility for school failure to the student and, and, indirectly, to their family. Such logic reinforces mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization while functioning as a device that silences institutional responsibilities, contribution to a culture that pathologizes behaviors and learning processes that, in many cases, would instead require curricular adaptation to this specific diversity.

This scenario is particularly concerning when considering the advancing of public policies aimed at educational inclusion. In the Brazilian context, the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (PNEEPEI) (Brazil, 2008) represented an important milestone by proposing the overcoming of segregated educational models and defending the right of all students to participate in inclusive learning environments. However, its implementation faces epistemological and institutional challenges, particularly due to the persistence of clinical perspectives that conflict with inclusive pedagogical approaches.

As Esteban (2002) research findings state that, there is a significant risk that educational inclusion becomes merely nominal, with students remaining physically present in school but symbolically and cognitively excluded. In this context, clinical

diagnosis may function as a mechanism of regulation and control aligned with the logic of coloniality.

In contrast, critical pedagogy, opposes this logic by asserting that “learning difficulties” must be addressed through the transformation of pedagogical practices, active listening, and the valorization of diversity. From this perspective, effective inclusion is not to be achieved through labeling, but through the reconfiguration of the school as a space of dialogue, recognition, and collective knowledge production.

This debate is further expanded by Vera Maria Candau (2020), who argues that critical intercultural education requires confronting the structures that produce inequalities and cultural inferiorization. In dialogue with this perspective, Walsh (2013) proposes the articulation between education, interculturality, and decoloniality as a strategy for confront colonial structures of knowledge and being, advocating for cognitive justice and emancipatory educational practices.

Based on these reflections, the theoretical framework reinforces the need to move beyond perspectives centered on individual deficits toward an understanding of learning difficulties as relational, institutional, and a political phenomenon. Breaking with the hegemony of medical-clinical interpretations is therefore essential to ensuring the right to education as an emancipatory social practice.

Adopting a decolonial and critical intercultural perspective implies in recognizing that learning difficulties emerge at the intersection of curriculum, power, and difference, requiring pedagogical practices that promote recognition, participation, and emancipation. In conclusion the discussion developed throughout this theoretical framework highlights the interdependence between learning difficulties and the colonized teaching model. Consequently, it becomes, necessary to rethink school practices, curriculum, and teacher education processes in ways that promote an epistemological change that values diverse forms of knowledge and strengthens horizontal dialogical relationships.

### **3 Methodological pathways of the research**

The methodological design of this study was based on the State of Knowledge approach proposed by Kohls-Santos and Morosini (2021), characterizing the investigation as a qualitative-exploratory study. This method is grounded in a categorization approach inductive *a posteriori*. The methodological choice enabled the

emergence of analytical categories from an in-depth examination of empirical material, without the prior imposition of interpretive frameworks, such perspective, ensures greater fidelity to the nuances of the collected data. The analytical process was conducted through thematic analysis, which allowed the identification of recurring axes of meaning within the selected studies, in accordance to Alves (1992) and Santos, Gonçalves, Lima and Crenitte (2016) (2016). This approach made it possible to understand the multiple dimensions underlying the phenomenon of “learning difficulties” within the context of Basic Education, while respecting the complexity of the object of study and supporting the construction of a contextualized State of Knowledge, with the purpose of contributing to the academic community’s research on the topic. The research procedures involved a bibliographic survey conducted in two databases: the Brazilian Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD) and the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO). Initially, 2,360 studies were retrieved from BDTD and 217 articles from SciELO, using the descriptors “learning difficulties” and “Basic Education,” as presented below.

**Table 1** – Selection Criteria and Characterization of the Studies Included in the Analysis

<b>Selection Criteria</b>	<b>Database</b>	<b>Descriptors Used</b>	<b>Number of Studies Retrieved</b>	<b>Number of Studies Selected</b>
Selection based on title, abstract, and keywords	BDTD	Learning difficulties and Basic Education	2,360	12
Selection based on title, abstract, and keywords	SciELO	Learning difficulties and Basic Education	217	5

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

The analysis of the literature revealed that, despite the large number of studies initially retrieved, only a limited portion met the criteria of relevance and analytical quality, reinforcing the importance of a critical selection process. This refinement selection enables the identification of key contributions regarding the relationship between learning difficulties, rigid curricula, and colonized pedagogical practices, as well as initiatives involving context-based educational interventions.

Among the selected studies, recurring approaches were identified that conceptualize learning as a social phenomenon (Vygotsky, 1978), emphasized the need for a more curricular flexibility (Pereira, 2011), and highlighted the importance of critical pedagogical interventions (Patto, 2015; Esteban, 2002). The combination of

these findings strengthened the development of the theoretical framework by articulating concepts of emancipatory education, critical pedagogy, and the valorization of diverse forms of knowledge, aligning with the educational contributions proposed by Freire (1996) and Gadotti (1997).

Based on this process, a systematic refinement procedure was carried out: initial selection based on titles, followed by the analysis of abstracts and keywords, and finally, the full reading of the studies that met the relevance criteria for the research. As a result, 11 master's dissertations, 1 doctoral thesis, and 5 scientific articles were selected, totaling 17 studies, as presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4. The inclusion criteria considered publication period (2001–2023), focus on the context of *Basic Education*, and alignment with the central hypothesis of this study, that learning difficulties are related to colonized teaching practices.

**Table 2 – Selected Dissertations**

Title	Link	Author(s)	Type	Year of Publication
Learning difficulties or difficulties in the teaching-learning process? A case study	<a href="#">Link</a>	Iára Castagnaro Biscaro	Dissertation	2001
A perspective on learning difficulties	<a href="#">Link</a>	Maria dos Milagres Fernandes Diniz	Dissertation	2007
The invention of learning difficulties by the school	<a href="#">Link</a>	Júlio César da Silva	Dissertation	2017
Could psychopedagogy be a possibility for addressing learning difficulties?	<a href="#">Link</a>	Priscila Fernandes Correa de Araújo	Dissertation	2014
Learning difficulties from the teacher's perspective	<a href="#">Link</a>	Andreia Osti	Dissertation	2004
The self-concept of children with learning difficulties in writing	<a href="#">Link</a>	Gabriela Raeder da Silva Carneiro	Dissertation	2002
Learning difficulties: implications of family and school	<a href="#">Link</a>	Márcia Elisa da Silva Antunes	Dissertation	2010
Learning difficulties or school difficulties? A study on teachers' perspectives	<a href="#">Link</a>	Zuleide Blanco Rodrigues	Dissertation	2009
Learning from the perspective of children with complaints of learning difficulties	<a href="#">Link</a>	Keli Prata Silva	Dissertation	2009
Reading comprehension in children with learning difficulties in writing	<a href="#">Link</a>	Karla Aparecida Zulocoto	Dissertation	2001
Diagnosis of learning difficulties: construction, conceptions, and expectations	<a href="#">Link</a>	Kátia Regina do Carmo Pereira	Dissertation	2011

**Source:** Prepared by the authors (2023).

**Table 3 – Selected Dissertation (Doctoral Thesis)**

Title	Link	Author	Type	Year of Publication
Students with learning difficulties vs. a school system with teaching difficulties	<a href="#">Link</a>	Dayse Maria Borges Keiralla	Doctoral Thesis	1994

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

**Table 4 – Selected Scientific Articles**

Title	Link	Author(s)	Type	Year of Publication
Performance of children at risk for reading difficulties submitted to an intervention program	<a href="#">Link</a>	Nathane Sanches Marques Silva; Patrícia Abreu Pinheiro Crenitte	Scientific Article	2016
Prevention and remediation of learning difficulties: adaptation of the response-to-intervention model in a Brazilian sample	<a href="#">Link</a>	Roselaine Pontes de Almeida; Carolina Julien Mattar de Toledo Piza; Thiago da Silva Gusmão Cardoso; Mônica Carolina Miranda	Scientific Article	2016
Indicative signs of childhood stress in students with learning disorders	<a href="#">Link</a>	Janaína Borba Garbo Santos; Thaís dos Santos Gonçalves; Ricardo Franco de Lima; Patrícia de Abreu Pinheiro Crenitte	Scientific Article	2016
Orthographic performance of students with developmental dyslexia and dyslexia associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	<a href="#">Link</a>	Débora Cristina Alves; Erasmo Barbante Casella; Alexandre Arcanjo Ferraro	Scientific Article	2016
Speech disorders and learning difficulties in Basic Education	<a href="#">Link</a>	Bárbara Niegia Garcia de Goulart; Brasília M. Chiari	Scientific Article	2014

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

In accordance with Alves (1992) and Santos, Gonçalves, Lima and Crenitte (2016), the analysis of bibliographic data was conducted through thematic synthesis, enabling the organization of the contributions into six main axes: (1) the conception of learning difficulties within the school context; (2) teachers' perceptions; (3) family-school relationships; (4) students' self-perception; (5) implications associated with specific disorders; and (6) proposals for pedagogical intervention and curricular resignification. Each axis was critically examined, in order to identify the convergences and tensions among the authors, with particular emphasis on the colonial context of the curriculum.

Furthermore, a documentary analysis of educational policies was conducted, comparing them with the practices identified in the studies analyzed. This procedure ensured methodological triangulation, thereby strengthening the validity of the

conclusions. The research maintained ethical rigor by properly referencing all academic sources, respecting the principles of copyright and intellectual property.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the systematization process carefully followed the methodological recommendations proposed by Morosini and Fernandes (2014) to ensure transparency and reproducibility. Each stage of the investigation was thoroughly documented, including search procedures, selection criteria, and methods of source categorization. Such methodological rigor not only enhances the reliability of the findings presented, but also ensures that future research may replicate, review, or expand upon the results outlined in this research, contributing to the ongoing advancement of research on the learning difficulties field.

#### **4 What the analysis of the selected studies reveals**

The systematic analysis of the 17 selected studies enabled the organization of contributions into interrelated thematic axes, allowing for an in-depth understanding of learning difficulties and their manifestations within the school context. The identified axes were: (1) the conception of learning difficulties within the school context; (2) teachers' perceptions; (3) family–school relationships; (4) students' self-perception; (5) implications associated with specific disorders; and (6) proposals for pedagogical intervention and curricular resignification.

Regarding the axis “institutional conceptions of learning difficulties,” the analyzed studies indicates that...

[...] the institutional conception of learning difficulties remains strongly grounded in unifactorial perspectives, generally associated with emotional and family-related factors, with little attention given to pedagogical practice as a source of exclusion (Osti, 2004).

From this perspective, school failure becomes naturalized as an individual student responsibility, legitimizing referrals to specialists and reinforcing medicalized interventions (Keiralla, 1994; Silva, 2017). This movement contributes to the individualization and pathologization of learning difficulties, disregarding pedagogical and structural factors that influence the learning process. Furthermore, it transfers the focus from teaching practices, weakening critical reflection on the role of the school in the production of such difficulties.

Curricular rigidity and the lack of pedagogical flexibility contribute to widening the gap between theory and practice, limiting the recognition of local knowledge and diverse ways of learning. This scenario limits the development of more meaningful and inclusive educational experiences. Such evidence reinforces the urgency to decolonize pedagogical practices, promote curricular flexibility, foster student protagonism, and value a more diverse forms of knowledge, as argued by Castro and Pinto (2023).

The theoretical framework adopted in this study, based on authors such as Vygotsky (1978), Freire (1996), and Quijano (2005), problematizes the of institutional tendency to naturalize learning difficulties as the exclusive responsibility of the individual. The critique of banking education (Freire, 1996) and of the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2005) provide important tolls for understanding how rigid curricula and Eurocentric epistemologies contributes to legitimizing exclusionary practices, that directly reflect the patterns identified in empirical studies (Osti, 2004; Silva, 2017). Thus, the theoretical foundation reinforces that learning difficulties must be understood as relational and political phenomena, rather than merely clinical or individual.

Studies categorized under the axis “teachers’ perceptions,” according to Osti (2004) and Bíscaro (2001), indicate that teachers frequently attribute learning difficulties to factors external to the school environment. In Osti’s (2004) study, 40% of teachers associated these difficulties with emotional problems, 27% with family-related issues, only 7% recognized the relevance of pedagogical practices, and merely 3% acknowledged that the teacher’s own stance could contribute to the emergence of such difficulties. Bíscaro (2001) further highlights the discrepancy between institutional discourse and pedagogical practice, emphasizing the need to appropriate the principles of the Pedagogy of Differences and to adopt educational practices oriented toward the construction of knowledge that recognize the legitimacy of diverse epistemologies emerging from cultural plurality. These findings reveal the persistence of a pedagogical logic that transfers responsibility for school failure from institutional structures to learners themselves, reinforcing the urgency of critical and reflective teacher education.

From a theoretical perspective, the tendency to blame students is rooted in colonized pedagogical practices sustained by epistemologies that marginalize local knowledge and cultural diversity, as argued by Castro and Pinto (2023). In this regard, the need for critical teacher education identified by Bíscaro (2001) and Osti (2004) is

theoretically supported by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1996; Gadotti, 1997), which advocates the development of educators capable of engaging with students' social realities and overcoming homogenizing practices.

According to Antunes (2010), the axis "family–school relationships" reveals that families frequently perceive themselves as guilty or powerless in the face of learning difficulties, while schools often distance themselves from shared responsibilities. The analysis demonstrates that both teachers and families only begin to recognize possibilities for intervention when encouraged to critically reflect upon their own roles within the educational process, highlighting the importance of collaborative and dialogical strategies between family and school.

The theoretical framework adopted in this study indicates that the coloniality of school practices contributes to the tendency to hold families responsible for learning difficulties (Patto, 2015; Esteban, 2002). At the same time, it argues that horizontal dialogue and shared responsibility constitute essential conditions for overcoming exclusionary educational models. This perspective converges with Antunes's (2010) findings, which emphasize the importance of collective reflection so that both schools and families may assume their responsibilities in addressing learning difficulties.

Students' self-perception, which constitutes the axis "learners' perceptions," reveals that children experiencing learning difficulties frequently internalize repeated experiences of failure and feelings of incapacity, directly affecting both their academic trajectories and socio-emotional development (Carneiro, 2002; Silva, 2009; Zulocoto, 2001). School self-concept appears to be strongly influenced by teachers' attitudes, the recognition of achievements, and the quality of pedagogical feedback received throughout the learning process. Children who develop a positive self-concept tend to demonstrate greater resilience and a stronger capacity to overcome difficulties, whereas devaluing pedagogical practices contribute to negative self-perceptions, discouragement, and demotivation.

Silva (2009) demonstrates that students are often aware of their limitations, although they do not necessarily associate them directly with the learning process itself. This dissociation between recognizing difficulties and understanding their educational implications reveals an important weakness in pedagogical mediation. Consequently, there is a need for more reflective and affective-cognitive mediation processes capable of helping learners recognize, interpret, and reframe their own

educational experiences, thereby strengthening autonomy, participation, and engagement in their learning trajectories.

Critical psychopedagogy (Garcia, 1999) and Freirean pedagogy argue that learners must be recognized as active subjects in the construction of knowledge. This perspective aligns with empirical findings (Carneiro, 2002; Silva, 2009; Zulocoto, 2001), which demonstrate the profound impact of school practices on students' self-concept and motivation. Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1978) conception of learning as a social and dynamic process helps explain why students who receive support, recognition, and positive feedback tend to develop greater confidence and stronger capacities to overcome educational difficulties.

The axis "learning disorders" indicates that specific conditions, such as dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), are strongly associated with learning difficulties and higher repetition rates, as discussed by Alves, Casella, and Ferraro (2016) and Goulart and Chiari (2014). Pereira, Jesus, Catarino, and Pereira (2021) highlight that schools frequently fail to recognize these specificities, thereby intensifying processes of school failure and exclusion. Alves, Casella, and Ferraro (2016) demonstrate that children with dyslexia or ADHD tend to perform significantly worse in orthographic tasks when compared to their peers without such conditions, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive curricular adaptations, as also discussed by Silva (2017). Additionally, Goulart and Chiari (2014) indicate that speech disorders are directly associated with learning difficulties and grade repetition, particularly among younger children.

The theoretical critique of the pathologization of school failure proposed by Patto (2015) provides important support for the discussion concerning dyslexia, ADHD, and speech disorders. While clinical studies frequently emphasize performance differences and diagnostic classifications, the theoretical framework adopted in this study argues that schools must move beyond classificatory and exclusionary logics by adopting inclusive pedagogical approaches capable of recognizing diverse ways of learning. In this regard, the National Policy on Special Education from the Perspective of Inclusive Education (Brazil, 2008) and the contributions of Esteban (2002) are fundamental for the development of policies that prevent clinical diagnoses from becoming mechanisms of exclusion and segregation.

Regarding the axis “intervention strategies,” recent studies emphasize the importance of systematic interventions adapted to the Brazilian educational context (Santos *et al.*, 2016; Silva, 2017), as well as psychopedagogical practices aimed at addressing students’ cognitive and affective needs (Araújo, 2014). Although teachers with specialization in psychopedagogy report greater confidence in dealing with learning difficulties, the strategies they adopt frequently resemble those implemented by non-specialized teachers, revealing the need for continuing education processes capable of promoting innovative, critical, and context-sensitive pedagogical practices.

Authors such as Freire (1996), Gadotti (1997), and Pereira, Jesus, Catarino, and Pereira (2021) support the defense of flexible curricula and emancipatory educational practices, demonstrating that pedagogical intervention must not be restricted to technical dimensions, but must also incorporate political, cultural, and ethical commitments. Within this perspective, critical psychopedagogy (Garcia, 1999) emerges as a strategic field of knowledge by emphasizing mediation processes that address both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. This interpretation aligns with the studies developed by Araújo (2014), Santos, Gonçalves, Lima, and Crenitte (2016), and Silva (2009), which collectively reinforce the need for innovative practices adapted to the social and cultural realities of Brazilian schools.

Finally, the axis “construction of the concept of learning difficulties within institutions,” according to Silva (2017) and Keiralla (1994), demonstrates that institutional conceptions of learning difficulties frequently legitimize exclusionary practices and the medicalization of school failure. Children are often perceived as “incapable” during specific stages of learning, while schools fail to recognize possibilities for pedagogical mediation and support. A critical understanding of this concept therefore requires reflection upon school practices, assessment models, and teacher–student relationships, highlighting the importance of inclusive educational policies and curricular transformation.

The theoretical framework demonstrates that the construction of the concept of learning difficulties is profoundly shaped by processes of coloniality and medicalization, producing mechanisms of student exclusion (Quijano, 2005; Mignolo, 2007; Patto, 2015). This interpretation supports the findings of Silva (2017) and Keiralla (1994), which denounce the institutional legitimization of school failure. Conversely, authors such as Castro and Pinto (2023) and Esteban (2002) propose alternative

perspectives grounded in inclusive curricula and decolonizing pedagogical practices, demonstrating how theoretical reflection can illuminate new possibilities for educational transformation.

To facilitate the understanding of the findings that support the construction of this State of Knowledge, the following table presents the main convergences and divergences identified among the analyzed studies. The organization of these elements enables a clearer visualization of the similarities, tensions, and distinctions present within the reviewed literature. In doing so, the study seeks to systematize the nuances revealed through the qualitative-exploratory analysis, providing a broader and more critical understanding of the theoretical and methodological articulations that emerged throughout the investigation.

**Table 5** – Convergences and Divergences in Studies on Learning Difficulties

	<b>Recurring Findings Identified in the Literature</b>	<b>Divergent or Emerging Perspectives in the Literature</b>
<b>Institutional conceptions of learning difficulties</b>	Learning difficulties are frequently interpreted through unifactorial explanations, particularly those associated with emotional and family-related factors. The literature also reveals a persistent emphasis on referrals to specialists and on the medicalization of school failure.	Certain studies challenge this reductionist perspective by advocating curricular flexibility and more inclusive pedagogical approaches grounded in the recognition of diversity and contextual realities (Castro; Pinto, 2023; Pereira <i>et al.</i> , 2021).
<b>Teachers' perceptions</b>	Teachers frequently attribute learning difficulties to factors external to the school environment, revealing a persistent disconnection between institutional discourse and pedagogical practice. Limited critical reflection on the role of teaching practices in the production of school failure is also recurrently identified.	Osti (2004) highlights low levels of teacher self-criticism regarding pedagogical responsibility, whereas Bíscaro (2001) advocates the incorporation of the principles of the Pedagogy of Differences as a pathway toward more culturally responsive and inclusive educational practices.
<b>Family-school relationships</b>	Relationships between families and schools are frequently marked by blame, fragmented responsibilities, and limited dialogical engagement, weakening collaborative responses to learning difficulties.	While some studies emphasize families' feelings of helplessness and exclusion from educational processes (Antunes, 2010), others suggest that collaborative reflection may foster cooperation and shared responsibility.
<b>Learners' perceptions</b>	The literature consistently highlights the significant socio-emotional impacts associated with learning difficulties, including low self-esteem, feelings of incapacity, and the development of negative self-concepts. Teachers' attitudes and pedagogical feedback emerge as significant factors shaping students' self-concept.	Divergences emerge in the ways students interpret their own difficulties: some directly associate their experiences with learning processes (Carneiro, 2002), whereas others do not establish this connection (Silva, 2009).
<b>Learning disorders and</b>	Strong associations between dyslexia, ADHD, speech disorders, and academic difficulties are recurrently identified in the literature, particularly regarding repetition rates and school underachievement. The	Certain studies remain grounded in predominantly clinical and diagnostic perspectives focused on performance differences (Alves; Casella; Ferraro, 2016), whereas others criticize

<b>academic difficulties</b>	studies also emphasize the need for context-sensitive curricular adaptations and pedagogical mediation.	schools' failure to recognize students' specific educational needs and contextual conditions (Pereira <i>et al.</i> , 2021; Silva, 2009).
<b>Intervention strategies</b>	The literature recognizes the importance of systematic, psychopedagogical, and culturally responsive practices. Critical teacher education emerges as a central dimension in addressing learning difficulties and promoting inclusive educational experiences.	Studies indicate that teachers with psychopedagogical training tend to report greater professional confidence; however, this does not necessarily translate into innovative or transformative pedagogical practices (Araújo, 2014).
<b>Conceptual construction of learning difficulties</b>	The predominant conception of learning difficulties remains strongly shaped by pathologizing and medicalizing perspectives that legitimize exclusionary educational practices and the institutionalization of school failure.	Certain authors advocate a reconceptualization of learning difficulties grounded in inclusive educational policies, curricular transformation, and the recognition of epistemological plurality and diversity (Silva, 2017; Keiralla, 1994; Castro; Pinto, 2023).

**Source:** Prepared by the authors (2023).

The comparative analysis of the studies demonstrates that, despite significant advances in research on learning difficulties, the field continues to be largely structured by reductionist conceptual frameworks. The literature consistently indicates that most studies attribute learning difficulties to factors external to the school environment, particularly familial, emotional, or clinical factors. This tendency reinforces the displacement of responsibility for the teaching and learning process onto students and their families. Identified across both institutional conceptions and pedagogical practices, such perspectives legitimize medicalizing interventions and referrals to specialists, thereby contributing to the pathologization of school failure.

At the same time, the divergences identified in the literature reveal important epistemological and pedagogical tensions. More recent studies, in particular, problematize these restrictive interpretations and emphasize the need to reconceptualize learning difficulties through inclusive perspectives, curricular flexibility, and the recognition of epistemological plurality. While part of the literature remains grounded in diagnostic and clinical paradigms, other studies broaden the debate by incorporating pedagogical dimensions, including mediation practices, shared responsibility between family and school, and critical and reflective teacher education.

Another significant aspect concerns students' perceptions of their own learning experiences. Across all analyzed studies, learners demonstrate awareness of the emotional impacts associated with learning difficulties, manifested through low self-esteem, feelings of incapacity, and the development of negative self-concepts.

Nevertheless, important divergences emerge regarding how students interpret the origins of these difficulties. While some directly associate their experiences with the learning process itself, others fail to establish such connections, highlighting the importance of pedagogical mediation capable of fostering greater critical awareness of learning processes and school experiences.

Within the field of intervention strategies, the literature consistently emphasizes the relevance of psychopedagogical practices and educational programs adapted to the Brazilian context. However, the studies also reveal a significant critical tension: teachers with specialized training often reproduce traditional methodologies, suggesting that continuing teacher education must move beyond technical approaches and incorporate epistemological, political, and pedagogical reflection. Such findings reinforce the understanding that educational transformation depends not only on methodological adaptation, but also on critical reconsiderations of the assumptions that historically shape pedagogical practice.

The most significant divergences identified in the literature are concentrated in the conceptual construction of learning difficulties themselves. While authors such as Silva (2017) and Keiralla (1994) demonstrate how schools institutionalize exclusionary practices by labeling students as “incapable,” others, such as Castro and Pinto (2023), advocate the decolonization of pedagogical practices and the reconceptualization of learning difficulties through inclusive educational policies and curricular transformation. These tensions reveal the complexity of the phenomenon and underscore the urgency of a theoretical and practical shift capable of understanding learning difficulties not as individual deficits, but as social, pedagogical, and relational phenomena historically produced within unequal educational structures.

In summary, the analysis demonstrates that learning difficulties cannot be understood in isolation as the sole responsibility of students. Rather, they emerge from the complex interaction between pedagogical practices, curriculum, specific learning conditions, family relationships, and institutional contexts. Overcoming such barriers requires a critical, decolonial, and inclusive approach grounded in the recognition of epistemological plurality, the promotion of student agency, and the development of reflective and context-sensitive pedagogical strategies. The following table synthesizes the main contributions emerging from this research.

**Table 6** – Advances of the Present Study in Relation to Previous Reviews on Learning Difficulties

<b>Aspects Analyzed</b>	<b>Previous Reviews/Studies</b>	<b>Original Contributions of the Present Study</b>
<b>Conceptions of learning difficulties</b>	Predominance of unifactorial explanations, with emphasis on clinical, family-related, or emotional factors (Osti, 2004; Silva, 2017).	Expansion of the analysis toward institutional and epistemological dimensions, problematizing how pedagogical practices and homogenizing curricula produce and reinforce learning difficulties.
<b>Medicalization and pathologization</b>	Recognition of the tendency toward medicalization and clinical referrals (Keiralla, 1994; Pereira, 2011).	Development of a critical approach to medicalization grounded in critical psychopedagogy, Freirean pedagogy, and decolonial perspectives, shifting the focus from pathology to school structures and pedagogical processes.
<b>Socio-emotional dimension</b>	Identification of the impacts of learning difficulties on students' self-concept and self-esteem (Carneiro, 2002; Silva, 2009).	Emphasis on learners' voices as a central analytical category, demonstrating how students' perceptions reveal the affective consequences of pedagogical and institutional practices.
<b>Family–school relationships</b>	Relationships frequently marked by family blame and institutional distancing on the part of schools (Antunes, 2010).	Emphasis on shared responsibility and collaborative strategies, proposing pathways for overcoming educational challenges through critical dialogue and collective engagement.
<b>Systematization of the field</b>	Studies analyzed in isolation or through limited comparative approaches.	Development of a comparative framework of convergences and divergences, offering an unprecedented panoramic and critical overview of the State of Knowledge on learning difficulties.
<b>Theoretical-methodological perspective</b>	Restricted use of psychopedagogical frameworks and learning theories.	Innovative integration of three theoretical matrices, critical psychopedagogy, Freirean pedagogy, and decolonial perspectives, thereby expanding the explanatory potential of the phenomenon.

Source: Prepared by the authors (2023).

This table synthesizes the main advances identified in relation to previous reviews on learning difficulties. By presenting these elements comparatively, it becomes possible to more clearly identify the recent contributions that have advanced the field. In this sense, the table not only highlights the development and expansion of academic discussions on the topic, but also contributes to knowledge production by offering new theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical possibilities for research and educational interventions. Consequently, the study broadens critical understandings of learning difficulties and offers important analytical foundations for future research in the educational field.

## 5 Final Considerations

In summary, the State-of-the-Knowledge study demonstrated that, although there is a considerable body of research on learning difficulties, a strong tendency persists toward individualizing responsibility for such difficulties, whether attributed to emotional factors, family-related issues, or specific learning conditions, without sufficiently problematizing the teaching process itself. In this context, it is important to emphasize that pedagogical practices frequently disregard interculturality and epistemological diversity, thereby reinforcing a Eurocentric and exclusionary curriculum.

It is therefore possible to argue that learning difficulties are structurally connected to teaching difficulties produced within a rigid and colonial educational system. Such a system remains embedded in assessment instruments, curricular organization, and teacher education processes. Reversing this scenario requires the critical revision of official educational documents, the adoption of flexible curricula, and the implementation of pedagogical practices that value students' autonomy and agency. From this perspective, the implementation of pedagogical practices grounded in decolonial approaches demands concrete and intentional actions within everyday school life. In this regard, such practices may be materialized through the recognition of local issues, the valorization of community-based knowledge, and the integration of scientific knowledge within a horizontal perspective of knowledge construction.

This process involves, for example, curricular reorganization through interdisciplinary projects, as well as the adoption of active and collaborative methodologies developed through dialogic circles, field research within local communities, autobiographical narratives, and pedagogical projects that recognize students' knowledge as the starting point for collective and emancipatory forms of learning. In the field of assessment, the replacement of classificatory evaluations with formative approaches is recommended, including portfolios, self-assessment practices, and dialogical evaluations focused on the learning process itself. The inclusion of authors from the Global South, together with the participation of community leaders as educational agents, is also proposed as a strategy for expanding the cultural repertoire legitimized by schools. Furthermore, the relevance of continuing teacher education grounded in both decolonial and pedagogical perspectives is reinforced as

a means of promoting more humanized and inclusive learning environments. Public policies should also encourage context-sensitive response-to-intervention models supported by multidisciplinary teams, thereby avoiding the medicalization of learning difficulties.

At the same time, it is essential to involve the entire school community: including families, students, teachers, and administrators, in collaborative curriculum-building processes capable of integrating local knowledge and community demands with broader national educational guidelines. An expanded understanding of knowledge construction, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), may contribute to the emergence of dynamic, critical, and emancipatory learning environments.

The present investigation advances beyond previous reviews by proposing an integrated analysis that articulates three dimensions rarely examined together in the literature on learning difficulties: the critique of medicalization and pathologization, the socio-emotional dimension of students, and the decolonial perspective in understanding school failure. While most studies tend to emphasize the description of learning disorders or their effects on academic performance, this research broadens the debate by problematizing the institutional and epistemological structures that sustain such conceptions, demonstrating that learning difficulties cannot be reduced to clinical or individual issues.

Another important contribution lies in the articulation between critical psychopedagogy, Freirean pedagogy, and decolonial perspectives. This theoretical dialogue challenges the historical tendency to place exclusive responsibility on students and their families by shifting the focus toward the ways schools organize curricula, assessment practices, and approaches to diversity. Such an approach offers an innovative interpretative framework by revealing that learning difficulties are also produced through historically perpetuated power relations and intentional pedagogical choices, rather than being merely reflections of cognitive deficits.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the field by systematizing convergences and divergences among Brazilian studies conducted over recent decades, demonstrating that despite the plurality of approaches, a common thread persists: the critique of homogenizing school practices. The methodological and analytical distinction of this research lies in the development of a comparative and interpretative framework capable of enabling readers to identify points of consensus and tension with

greater clarity, thereby promoting a comprehensive and critical understanding of the field.

The originality of this study is also expressed through its emphasis on the need to provide students with meaningful opportunities for student voice and participation, recognizing them as active subjects who produce narratives fundamental to the construction of plural forms of knowledge that recognize and value diverse identities and ways of being, knowing, and understanding the world. By advocating the expansion of spaces for dialogue and participation, this research proposes a reconfiguration of educational policies and practices toward an ethical and decolonial perspective committed to recognizing multiple forms of existence and learning. The analysis further demonstrates how self-perception and the construction of school identity are profoundly shaped by pedagogical practices. Incorporating learners' perspectives therefore adds greater analytical depth to the debate and contributes to the reconfiguration of educational policies and practices.

Finally, it is hoped that this State-of-the-Knowledge study may serve as a foundation for future investigations and concrete educational actions, contributing to the redesign of less hierarchical pedagogical practices and curricula. By challenging colonial structures and constraints, it becomes possible to advance toward an educational model genuinely committed to equity, diversity, and the formation of critical, autonomous, and socially engaged subjects.

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