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Intervention with Students with Learning, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: Why Do We Take so Long to Do It?

João Lopes
University of Minho
Portugal

Abstract

Learning, emotional and behavior disorders of school-aged children and youth are major issues in school related research. In this paper we approach three specific topics that in our view are central for the understanding of the problem and the effectiveness of intervention in this area: (1) the issue of comorbidity of emotional, behavioral, and learning disorders, (2) the influence of academic underachievement in the development of EBD; and (3) the timing of interventions with emotional, behavior and learning disorders (EBLD). We discuss why in the context of the Portuguese educational system (a) there is little recognition of comorbidity (each disorder is usually treated independently of other associated disorders), (b) why the influence of learning failure in the development of EBD is rarely considered, and (c) why interventions with learning and/or behavior disorders are often timeless. Central to this paper is the idea that dealing effectively with learning failure is one of the best ways to deal effectively with EBD.

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The field of emotional and behavior disorders (EBD) has evolved rapidly where much is known about the characteristics, etiology, developmental course, and treatment of most categories of EBD. Nevertheless there are three important issues that in our view should be taken into account: (1) the issue of comorbidity of emotional, behavioral, and learning disorders, (2) the influence of academic underachievement on the development of EBD; (3) the timing of interventions with emotional, behavioral, and learning disorders (EBLD). We will consider these three issues in the context of the Portuguese educational system (regular education and special education).

Recognition of comorbidity of emotional, behavioral and learning disorders

Comorbidity of emotional, behavioral and learning disorders is a very complex issue in Portugal, as in the United States, because of the complex-

ity of classification. The main problem is that "categories" of EBD, learning disorders, mental retardation, or other psychiatric categories are not used in educational settings (Kauffman, 2002; Lopes, Monteiro, Sil, Rutherford, & Quinn, 2004; Lopes, Velasquez, Fernandes, & Bártolo, 2004). Indeed there are strong claims against the need or usefulness of categorizing developmental problems. Official documents of central Portuguse government (e.g., Ministério da Educação, 1999) allow the use of categories only for "statistical purposes". Categorization for educational purposes is "dissuaded".

If categories themselves are rejected as inherently harmful, the study of comorbidity cannot logically receive much attention. We think this is unfortunate since not classifying a problem will not make it disappear and will likely worsen it.

For some (e.g., Correia, 2003), labels in special education are a way of segregating children since their peers and teachers may react more to those labels than to specific behaviors of the labeled child. However, scientific evidence shows that peers and teachers more often react negatively to real behaviors of children and youth with disabilities than to professional labels (Weiner, 1982).

Categories of disordered behaviors are seen by some as social constructions and not real problems. This is puzzling since despite the fact that these social constructions represent real problems for the students who exhibit them, for their peers and teachers, and for their parents. In a study of problem students in the classroom context, Lopes (2002) found that a significant number of special education teachers expressed the idea that if the cause of some kinds of disruptive behavior is psychosocial (e.g., poor parenting) then the student *does not* have the problem.

Our findings suggest that preconceptions against categories and labels strongly support some of this confusion. The fact that the Special Education Department of the Portuguese Ministry of Education advises that "*categories should only be used for statistical purposes but not for educational planning*" (Ministério da Educação, 1999) seems to have a considerable impact over special and general educators' conceptions of disability. We must stress that the Portuguese educational system is highly centralized, with almost every special education teacher depending on the decisions and directions of Ministry of Education. Moreover, there is no real discussion about the use of categories and classifications in the scientific community. This is why Portugal does not have a clear classification system for special needs children. Although almost no one denies the usefulness of classification of adult mental disorders, the closer any classification system comes to children and to education the higher the probability of rejection of the concept of classification (Lopes, 1999, 2002).

The problem is that when no scientific classification system is available, everyone uses their own system. Communication becomes difficult between professionals, since no one can be sure that the category he/she is talking about is understandable to others. One example is that "mental retarda-

tion" as a category was substituted between 1998-2002 for the category of "learning disabilities" in the classification system of the Special Education Department of Ministry of Education (and only for "statistical purposes"). Consequently for some time Portugal had severe, moderate and mild learning disabled children but not mentally retarded children!

Table 1 shows the number of children and youth identified for special education in 2001 and 2003 (source: Departamento de Educação Básica Lisboa: Ministério da Educação).

Table 1
Percentage of children referred for special education by disability

Category of Disability	*2001*	*2003*
Hearing	1.4%	3.9%
Hearing and Vision	1.0%	0.5%
Physical Health	10.9%	2.4%
Cognitive, sensor and/motor	12.2%	10.5%
Emotional and Personality	10.9%	9.9%
Vision	1.4%	1.6%
Cognitive	19.4%	21.8%
Motor	15.9%	9.9%
Communication, Speech and Language	3.4%	20%
Other	32.6%	18.8%

The category "others" is the most problematic. It refers to "*children and youth that show mild reading, writing or math problems or even to mild motor, perceptive, linguistic, socioemotional, or health problems that may be evident in some moment of school trajectory" (Ministério da Educação, 2001).* Clearly it is so broad that almost anyone can receive this label. There are no guidelines or specific criteria for diagnosis and teachers that must assess these problems have no specific expertise or knowledge about disability categories. This may justify its wide variation from 2001 to 2003 and may retract teachers from using classifications that do not seem reliable.

We also feel that the concept of "devaluation of special" education (Kauffman, 1995, 2002) contributes to the avoidance and rejection of categories and classification. Devaluation of special education can be seen by the "melting" of special education into regular education. Some 15 years ago there were a number of special schools in Portugal; now there are only a few for children and youth with severe mental retardation.

Paradoxically, the devaluation of special education is often expressed by special educators not by general educators. Special educators themselves frequently proclaim that there is nothing they do that a good general education teacher cannot do (Correia, 2003). Not surprisingly, that view is not shared by most general education teachers. Indeed, in a recent study about general teachers' perceived competency to teach special needs students,

most of the 299 Portuguese basic school teachers acknowledged their willingness to teach special students but also reported their perceived incompetence to teach these students (Camisão, 2005). These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted in Portugal (Lopes, 2004; Monteiro, 2000).

Further evidence of widespread devaluation of special education can be found in multilateral agreements. For example, the "Declaration of Salamanca" (1994), signed by Portugal and 91 other countries and 24 nongovernmental organizations, is often seen as a condemnation of special education (Correia, 2004). Indeed the document asserts that all schools must be inclusive, which means that special students must be taught in regular classrooms alongside their nondisabled counterparts, and that most functions of special teachers should be addressed by regular teachers. However, in the same document there is a statement that this "*must be done unless there are reasons that force other procedures*" (Declaração de Salamanca, 1994, p. 1).

The result of the Declaration of Salamanca was a systematic avoidance of categories, a failure to recognize developmental problems, and consequently a failure to develop effective interventions for children's problems.

The influence of academic underachievement in the development of EBD

The influence of academic underachievement on the development of EBD is another issue that in our view has not received sufficient attention in the literature. The development of knowledge in the area of academic underachievement in the area of EBD has been extraordinary (Cullinan, 2004; Rutherford, Quinn, Mathur, 2004). However, neither the direct association of these two conditions nor the direct or indirect influence of academic underachievement on the emergence and/or maintenance of EBD has been systematically addressed.

We can think of this association in several ways:

- Academic underachievement (AU) may be a risk factor for the development/ maintenance of EBD.
- EBD may be a risk factor for the development/maintenance of AU.
- Though independent, there may be a significant correlation between EBD and AU.
- Other factors may be risk factors for the development maintenance of EBD.

Whatever the direction of the association it is well established that academic underachievement is associated with low self-esteem (La Greca & Stone, 1990; Midkiff, & Griffin, 1992; Slomkowski, Klein, & Mannuzza, 1995), low sociometric status (Fliceck, 1992; Kuhne, & Wiener, 2000; LaBuda, & DeFries, 1989; Lopes, Cruz, & Rutherford, 2002), poor motivation (Lemos, 1993; Shelley, 1993; Zimmerman, Bandura & Martinez-Pons, 1992), and behavior disorders (Frick et al., 1991; Hinshaw, 1992a); that EBD is far more

common in poor learners than in successful learners (Hinshaw, 1992b; Lane, 2004; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1986); and that early intervention is a relatively low-cost way to blunt learning problems and school-based EBD (Lopes, 2001; Lopes, Velasquez, Fernandes, & Bártolo, 2004; Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1994).

As Witt, VanDerHeyden, and Gilbertson (2004) point out *"If children cannot perform expected work, if there is a lack of consequences for doing or not doing academic work, and/or if the teacher is not competent to teach the subject matter, then there is no behavior management program in existence that can produce enduring behavior change in such classroom" (p. 427).* Unfortunately psychologists and educators in Portugal and elsewhere often limit their intervention efforts with EBD to immediate consequences (negative or positive) with little consideration for the academic circumstances that precede them. One of these important circumstances is academic underachievement (AU). It's our conviction that its likely association with EBD and its role in the course of some developmental problems deserve a more careful consideration from researchers and practitioners.

Table 2 presents a sample of emotional and behavior problems that, in different forms and in different degrees, associate with AU and whose emergence or course would likely be quite different without that association.

Table 2

Individual Parent-Rated problems accounting for more than 10% of the variance in clinical status of children aged 4-16.

• Poor school work (19%)[a b]	• Fails to finish things he/she starts (12%)
• Can't concentrate, can't pay attention for long (18%)[b]	• Defiant (12%)
• Lacks self-confidence (17%)[b]	• Doesn't get along with other kids (12%)
• Punishment doesn't change his/her behavior (17%)[b]	• Has a hard time making friends (12%)
• Disobedient at home (15%)[b]	• Doesn't seem to feel guilty after misbehavior (12%)
• Has trouble following directions (15%)[b]	• Needs constant supervision (12%)
• Sad or depressed (15%)[b]	• Sudden changes in mood or feelings (12%)
• Nervous, high-strung, or tense (14%)[b]	• Angry moods (11%)
• Feels he/she can't succeed (13%)	• Impulsive or acts without thinking (11%)
• Feels worthless or inferior (13%)	• Irritable (11%)
• Disobedient at school (13%)	• Temper tantrums or hot temper (10%)
• Easily distracted (13%)	• Does things slowly and incorrectly (10%)
• Lies (13%)	• Loses trains of thought (10%)
• Looks unhappy without good reason (13%)	• Loss of ability to have fun (10%)
	• Passive or lacks initiative (10%)

Note: Data from Achenbach, Howell. Quay, and Connors (1991, pp. 107-115).

[a] Numbers in parentheses indicates the percentage of variance accounted for by this problem behavior.

[b] Items accounting for 14% or more of the variance are designated as having a large size effect.

It is noteworthy that poor school work is the leading cause of complaints from parents. This suggests that: (1) a significant number of parents are dissatisfied with their child's performance in school and (2) school achievement holds a great value for parents. If this is so, school achievement will likely be a source of satisfaction and pleasure when things go well and a source of unhappiness and conflict when things go wrong.

If we examine Table 2 we can easily identify behaviors most often associated with low achievement (Brophy, 1996; Filgueiras, 1995; Gottefredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994): "Can't concentrate", "Can't pay attention for long", "Lacks self-confidence" "Sad or depressed", "Feels he/she can't succeed", "Feels worthless or inferior", "Easily distracted", "Fails to finish things he/she starts", "Needs constant supervision", "Does things slowly and incorrectly", "Passive or lacks initiative". We cannot say with certainty that these problems *stem directly* from underachievement. However, we can say that *in some circumstances* underachievement may foreshadow any of these behaviors or may exacerbate them.

Distress associated with underachievement goes far beyond the student and usually turns into a kind of "systemic distress". In the classroom, the underachiever may have problems with teachers and peers and may become socially rejected and isolated (Lopes et al., 2002). At home, in addition to problems with parents, marital distress around children's underachievement is not unusual (Jouriles, Murphy, & O'Leary, 1989; Maughan, 1995). Dissatisfied with their child's performance, parents may cast about looking for an explanation, blame each other, blame the child, blame the teacher, blame the educational system, or blame whoever may have a direct or indirect relation with the situation (Lopes, 2001).

This search for someone to blame obviously serves no worthwhile purpose. In searching for solutions some parents try to help the child with homework or with specific difficulties but their emotional involvement may diminish their effectiveness and often what could be a support for the child becomes a source of further anxiety and increased distress (Rebelo, & Correia, (1999). This has much to do with the impact of parents' expectations on children's behaviors. In a related study Patrikakou (1996) found that parental expectations have a strong and direct impact on children's perceptions of parents' expectations and on their academic achievement. Also, Singh et al. (1995) found a close relationship between parental educational aspirations and student achievement.

Research suggests that younger underachievers may be more prone to develop internalized disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression) than older underachievers because they struggle to succeed but keep failing (Lopes, 2001; Lopes et al. 2004). There is some evidence that older underachievers may exhibit more externalized problems because of their perception that effort is not enough and this, along with low ability, may trigger avoidance of school work and increase the likelihood of behaviors that are in conflict with classroom order (Hinshaw, 1992a, 1992b; Loeber, Wung, Keenan, Giroux, Stoutthamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Maughan, 1993). Some un-

derachievers presume that they will get more attention from peers if they misbehave – a perception that is often an illusion according to most sociometric studies (e.g., Asher & Dodge, 1986; Bickett & Milich, 1990; Cruz, 2000; Pettit et al., 1996; Santos & Lopes, 2003).

The point we wish to emphasize is that while the association of learning problems and EBD has long been recognized, the impact of underachievement on the development of some EBD, as well as the long-term negative impact of underachievement itself, has not generated the attention the problem warrants. Longitudinal studies show that underachievement may significantly impact the everyday life of underachievers. Simple tasks such as filling out forms, writing letters, or writing bank checks may pose serious problems and represent a perceived threat to the individual (Maughan & Hagell, 1996). Maughan (1995) found that a significant number of adult underachievers felt a sense of powerlessness over their lives, failed to participate in community life, depended more on mental health systems and social security, were more anxious, and had lower self-esteem then their higher performing counterparts.

Timing, mode and trends in intervention for emotional, behavioral,r and learning disorders

The timing associated with when to intervene on behalf of children with emotional, behavior and learning disorders (EBLD) and the strategies we rely on have much to do with the way we think about these problems. First, children with EBLD are underserved (e.g., Forness, 2004; Lopes et. al., 2004; Stanovich, 1986). We often react too slowly, too late, and despite, as Kauffman, Brigham and Mock (2004) state, "...research demonstrating the importance of early identification and intervention, late identification – the opposite of prevention – seems to be the norm" *(p. 18).* This is particularly true for learning disorders where the "Mathew Effect"[1] (Stanovich, 1986) impacts the development and maintenance of some categories of EBD.

The avoidance of categories is not the only reason why late remediation is the dominant model in Portugal. There are a number of other reasons deserving further consideration:

The prevalence of administrative strategies over teaching strategies

Administrative strategies have a long tradition in the management of school problems. These are particularly obvious for learning problems. In practice, there are two main administrative strategies for addressing learning problems: retention and social promotion, neither of which deals effectively with the problem of underachievement. In fact, recent literature (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Dauber, Alexander, Entwisle, 1993; Karweit, 1991; McCollum, Cortez, Maroney, & Montes, 1999; NASBE, 2000; Owings, & Kaplan, 2001) shows that:

- Retention negatively impacts academic achievement, classroom

behavior, attitudes toward school, and school attendance. Retained students show high levels of truancy.

- Social promotion also negatively impacts academic achievement. It promotes failure since students are not taught basic skills for school learning and/or to find a job.

The primary reasons for the failure of these strategies are (a) they have little to do with the problem, (b) they are not preventive, and (c) they are usually untimely (Karweit, 1991; Lopes, 2001, 2003; Wheelock, 1998). Retention is no more than the recognition of the ultimate mismatch between what the student knows and what he should know. This mismatch should have become identified early in the school year. The student should have been "retained" in each failed task and should have been retaught until he could master them. Simply repeating the grade does not seem to be the best way to deal with the problem.

According to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) (1997) social promotion is particularly insidious since the problems of underachievement are ignored and students may perceive that effort and achievement are not important ("we'll get there anyway"). Moreover, if achievement is irrelevant teachers themselves may see no reason to establish or seek to attain high achievement standards for their students.

In our view, retention and social promotion represent a deficit in teaching. In the short-term retention/social promotion appear to address the problem of poor school work but, in the long run, they fail to remedy the problem of poor student knowledge and skill deficits. As Witt, et al. (2004) put it, "Realistically, it is futile to try to manage behavior when students are working at a frustration level that hinders skill acquisition" (p. 431). Because retention and social promotion fail to adequately address the problem, it follows that an educational system that makes extensive use of these strategies is not really addressing learning and associated emotional/behavioral problems. These strategies are not supported by empirical evidence and are contradicted by the results of international studies in reading, mathematics, and science literacy (e.g., TIMSS - Instituto de Inovação Educacional, 1996; PISA – OECD, 2000).

Maturationistic perspective of learning

Another possible reason for the delay in onset of intervention for learning and behavior problems is the dominant "maturationistic" perspective of learning. For some (e.g., Goodman, 1993; Smith, 1979) learning to read and write is as natural as learning to speak. Therefore, if a student fails in the initial efforts to grasp basic skills in reading and writing, he/she may need more time to reach the point of maturation necessary for natural learning.

In Portugal this maturationistic perspective is now the prevalent view of poor achievement. Until recently, however, school personnel held a rather

different view about learning and school failure. Some 30 years ago retention was a dominant practice at the first grade level (around 40%). The assumption was that only certain students had the ability to read and write and that only a few would ever go to college. For political reasons, schooling was seen as unnecessary and even undesirable. Therefore, there was little interest shown for underachievers. It was "their problem" and the educational system had neither the preparation nor the will to deal with it. The problem was swept under the carpet (Lopes, 2001).

In spite of recent efforts to have every child in school until they are16, we share the common illusion that being in school is enough for learning to occur. However, accumulated research shows that whether we are talking about academics or behavior, the sooner effective instruction takes place, the better (Blachman, 1997; Cicchelli & Baecher, 1995; Juel, 1988; Kendziora, 2004; Slavin, Karweit, & Wasick, 1994; Stanovich, 1986). Unfortunately our approach to dealing with underachievers is one that does not support intervention for first graders because of the argument that it is too early (Ministério da Educação, 1999) and that it may be traumatic for children. This position defies all we know about the development of underachievement, behavior disorders, and developmental problems in general. Once again, results from empirical research are largely ignored in most Portuguese teacher education schools and in the Portuguese Ministry Departments of Education.

Stone (1996) suggests that developmentalism or maturationism inhibits early teacher and parent interventions and favors inaction over prevention and treatment. Stone asserts that educators' responses must be subordinate to what constitutes optimal child development. Neither social behavior nor academic learning are to be pushed. These are expected to develop naturally.

As far as we can see, the dominant "maturationism" or "developmentalism" perspective in the Portuguese educational system results in the devaluation of early reading failure and the deferment of intervention to the later grades. Indeed most teachers wait until 4^{th} grade to decide about the course of any intervention (Rebelo, 2002). Awareness of their students' deficits makes them fear "what others are going to think" about these deficits in the 5^{th} grade. They are also aware that students' efforts to respond positively to new teachers and to behaviorally demanding tasks will be difficult. That is, they know that skills not taught or learned previously make children vulnerable to failure.

Foorman, Francis, Shaywitz, Shaywitz, and Fletcher (1997) assert that early reading remediation is essential and that delaying intervention can have long lasted effects. The classic study by Juel (1988) shows that underachievement in first grade is the best predictor of underachievement in fourth grade. Other researchers (e.g., Covington, 1992; Lemos, 1993; Stipeck, 1984) emphasize the importance of early interventions, stating that first graders persist in learning despite being unsuccessful because attributions to effort and/or ability are still somehow undifferentiated. However, be-

ginning in second grade, repeated failure results in student perception that effort alone is not enough and that lack of ability may be the main source of failure. Therefore underachievers tend to avoid academic tasks or establish that tasks are too easy or too difficult (situations where "excuses" are easier). As a result, non-compliance, disruption, self-devaluation, or school phobia, are most likely to occur, and may reflect adaptive responses to an environment that is perceived as threatening (Brophy, 1996; Brophy & Good, 1986; Hatzichristou, & Hopf, 1993; Holman, 1993).

Who is responsible for children with emotional, behavioural, or learning disorders?

The movement for inclusion of all students, including students with EBLD in general classrooms, is relatively recent in Portugal. One consequence is that most of these students find themselves caught in a kind of "no man's land responsibility". General education teachers are struggling to adapt classroom practices for these hard-to-manage students and most of them refer-and-remove students to special education (whether they have learning, behavioral, or emotional problems or some kind of mental disability) and, in turn, relinquish responsibility to their colleagues (Lopes et al., 2004). For their part, special education teachers place emphasis on the core rationale of inclusion: "there are no special students; only students"! Therefore teaching students (*all students),* according to special educators, is a responsibility of the general classroom teacher. This may explain why most teachers in studies conducted by Sil (2002) and Monteiro (2000) stated that school failure has much to do with "bad programs", "bad politics", "students' parents", and other reasons that were unrelated to themselves (teachers). That is, factors unalterable by teachers are perceived as the main cause of school failure. While these teachers were right about the negative effect of some of these outside factors, it is remarkable that few accepted any responsibility of the problems of underachievement.

Portuguese special education law (P.L. 105/98) stipulates that special students must be taught in general classrooms whenever possible and that special education and general education teachers must cooperate in that effort. Unfortunately, that is rarely the case. In a study involving 25 Portuguese general education classrooms, Seabra (1999) found that collaboration occurred in only two of them. Direct classroom observations by Lopes (2001) and Roque (2000) showed that most situations of special teachers coming into classrooms were viewed as "*interruptions*". This may be because most special teachers come to classrooms only once or twice a week, usually when instruction is underway and usually to work exclusively with students with disabilities. Lopes et al. (2004), in a study that included 430 regular and special teachers, found that most teachers express satisfaction with collaboration. However, it is tempting to infer that for these teachers cooperation meant "not interfering" with each other. They reported no joint planning, little discussion about special education students, and some

mutual recrimination for negative outcomes in classroom. Not surprisingly Lopes et al. (2004) suggested that the majority of the teachers reported satisfaction with collaboration because they did not engage in much collaboration.

One challenge associated with collaboration is the problem of who has classroom authority. Authority involves "who's in charge"; who has academic authority and personal authority. Kauffman and Hallahan (1995) emphasize that even in the most favourable situations it is likely that one of the members of the dyad, usually the general education teacher, sooner or later reports that he/she has the legitimate authority over the students. Even the students are often confused about who is the lead teacher, and some students may contest the authority of the special education teacher.

As we previously suggested, the problem of authority may not mirror completely the quarrel over classroom responsibility. It may happen that regular teachers feel comfortable relinquishing responsibility for special students to special teachers but are reluctant to share authority over the classroom in general.

The point we wish to emphasize about authority/responsibility is that it is difficult to legislate responsibility for the remediation of students' learning/ behaviour problems as no one willingly assumes that responsibility for delays in intervention. This systemic failure may be particularly true for learning, behavioural, and emotional problems because they do not impede teaching/learning, whereas externalized problems compel general teachers to respond to classroom disruptions.

Conclusion

We have examined some issues that have yet to receive the attention from researchers in EBLD they deserve: 1) the issue of comorbidity of emotional, behavioral, and learning disorders, (2) the influence of academic underachievement on the development of EBD; and (3) the timing of interventions for students with emotional, behavioral, and learning disorders.

In the last few years new and exciting research has been conducted in these areas. For example Rutherford, Quinn, and Mathur (2004) report significant evidence to show (1) that comorbidity of emotional, behavioral, and learning problems are the rule rather than the exception, (2) that underachievement may significantly account for some of the most common emotional problems that develop in school years, and (3) that early intervention is an important condition of treatment effectiveness.

We strongly feel that we have the knowledge to deal effectively with a number of problems related to underachievement and associated emotional and behavioral problems.

The question becomes: why are we not putting the accumulated research into practice?

In the Portuguese educational system the notion of early intervention is usually associated with the common belief that "labeling people" is nega-

tive. As Kauffman (2002) points out, this attitude stems from the longstanding and simplistic educational slogan "label jars, not people". Unfortunately the idea that children "must not be labeled" usually means that their difficulties will not be adequately addressed.

Second, the "wait and see" policy (Foorman et al., 1997) regarding developmental problems seems to dominate the Portuguese educational establishment. It is not that we do not know that unresolved problems will likely increase in severity and intensity. Even so, there is often the common belief that sooner or later learning will occur. The trouble is that when it becomes so serious that we can no longer ignore it, the problem may be extremely difficult to resolve.

Third, we must limit our expectations as to what we can and what we are able to do. It is not possible to make *all* children typical or good learners (Kauffman, 2002). However, considering that in Portugal we estimate that at least 20-30% of students fail in basic school, it is not unrealistic to assume that appropriate policies and practices could reduce substantially these numbers.

If we succeed in better addressing these three overlapping areas we might be more responsive to the diverse learning and behavior problems that affect not only these children but also theirs peers, their teachers, and their families. Moreover, we can reduce the negative impact of these problems on classrooms and schools and, in turn, create a more positive learning environment.

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Footnotes

[1] Stanovich (1996) stated that in reading the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, i.e., those who learn to decode continue to improve through reading and those who do not learn to decode early become increasingly distanced from the rich in reading ability. Stanovich called it The Mathew Effect, an analogy with the biblical text from Mathew.

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