



**Adult education as a resource
for resistance and transformation:
Voices, learning experiences, identities
of student and adult educators**

Barbara Merrill, Cristina C. Vieira,
Andrea Galimberti & Adrianna Nizinska (eds.)



**ADULT EDUCATION AS A RESOURCE FOR RESISTANCE AND
TRANSFORMATION: VOICES, LEARNING EXPERIENCES,
IDENTITIES OF STUDENT AND ADULT EDUCATORS**

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PALOP students in higher education: The necessary paths of access to academic success

Sofia Bergano, Rosa Novo & Ana Prada

Introduction

The presence of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries (*PALOP*) in Portuguese polytechnic education is a reality. The designation PALOP refers to a group of five African countries where Portuguese is the official language, namely Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and S. Tomé and Príncipe. An exponential increase in the mobility of these students has occurred in recent years, namely in the institution where this study was developed, from 2015 to the present academic year, where there was an increase of 20% of students from those countries.

Although there is already a substantial amount of research about these students (e.g., Doutor et al., 2016; Duque, 2012; Figueiredo, 2005; Pacheco, 1996; Pires, 2000; Rocha, 2012; Vinagre, 2017), and despite this recognition, according to Cortesão and Pacheco (1991), educational institutions still tend to consider PALOP students as a homogeneous group, neglecting their needs and specificities. In this context, the empirical study on PALOP students does not refer only to the uneasiness of the researchers, but also as teachers in a polytechnic higher education institution, a place marked by challenges which are important to unveil. Thus, it becomes imperative for higher education institutions to know the reality in which these students are inserted, and consequently understanding and instigating concrete actions to be jointly developed. The centrality of this empirical and exploratory study is, therefore, (i) to clarify the relevance of studying in Portugal; (ii) to identify the perceived difficulties; (iii) to specify formal and informal support; (iv) to list possible strategies for improving student adaptation.

This article is composed of four parts. First, a brief review of the literature is presented for a better contextualisation of the problem under analysis, followed by a clarification of the methodological framework and the presentation and discussion of the data obtained. Finally, considerations are made regarding the latter, including a reference to the limitations of the study, some proposals for future research and implications for the improvement of the PALOP students' adaptation processes.

Studying abroad: Between the dream and the impact

Studying abroad has concrete implications for students. In cultural (dis)encounters, a whole articulation of the meaning of life is confronted, leading to complex processes of maintenance, rejection or negotiation related to values, social relationships, personal and group identity, habits as well as customs (DeBiaggi & Paiva, 2014).

According to Bruner (2000), the meanings produced and shared among the members of a society provide significance to the individual experience and are transmitted by language. Although most PALOP students share a linguistic heritage with the host country, this does not mean that there are no difficulties in adapting to a new country. In this sense, the literature review has listed several factors that affect their daily life. In fact, although studying in Portugal is perceived as a dream come true (Azevedo & Faria, 2016), research indicates that bureaucratic procedures in

obtaining entry visas and accessing health services are difficult (Rocha, 2012; Vinagre, 2017). These students are still faced with delays in the payment of scholarships (Pacheco, 1996) whose amounts are insufficient to meet their needs (Doutor et al., 2016; Duque, 2012). Therefore, the issue of economic deprivation causes several problems, namely, the difficulty in covering not only current expenses but also accommodation. Without guaranteed access to student residences, the option is a room with a price difficult to sustain (Figueiredo, 2005; Jardim, 2013).

In the context of interpersonal factors, the studies developed by Pacheco (1996) and Pires (2000) highlight the difficulties in adapting to a new culture, in understanding the rules and norms guiding behaviour, in adopting new values, attitudes and behaviour patterns. Other authors (e.g., Ferro, 2010; Figueiredo, 2005) also emphasise the difficulties in adapting to both climate and food. Another obstacle pointed out is the lack of intercultural communicative competence resulting from group differences, thus preventing efficient communication (Ferro, 2010; Rocha, 2012). The manifestations of racism in everyday life experiences are also relevant (Novo & Prada, 2019). Apart from that, the difficulties in the European variant of the Portuguese language are significant (Figueiredo, 2005; Pacheco, 1996; Pires, 2000). As already revealed by Pires (2000), the mastery of the Portuguese language, both written and oral, must be a key prerequisite for a better academic and cultural integration of these students. Another difficulty experienced by them is the deep feeling of loss of family and friends, interconnected with feelings of uncertainty and loneliness (Duque, 2012; Pacheco, 1996; Rocha, 2012).

Experiences of culture clash in a new environment can be stressful (Liu and Winder, 2014). In this context, Habimana and Carazon (2006) emphasise that there are four levels in which cultural clash occurs: (1) the environment, which causes reactions related to urban density and housing, weather and food conditions; (2) the level of education, which, in turn, refers to internal requirements and institutional operating rules, specifically, requirements with timetables, course units, relations with teachers and colleagues; (3) the social aspect, with difficulties of intercultural communication with people in general and the confrontation with prejudiced and ethnocentric eyes and (4) the personal aspect, which includes the financial problems reflected on daily survival.

The different levels in which the individual participates directly or indirectly, have an impact on each other (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) and sometimes interfere drastically in the emotional balance of the students themselves. Interestingly, Habimana and Carazon (2006) refer to a certain similarity between the feelings instigated by the cultural clash and the 'mourning' process, accentuating the process of adaptive adjustment to the situation of loss that exists in both situations. However, the notion of 'culture clash' has been transformed and terms such as 'adaptation' and 'acculturation' have been used more and more (Zhou, Jundal-Snape, Topping & Todman, 2008), so the abovementioned difficulties depend on multiple factors, including: students' cognitive, social, affective and behavioural maturity; prior knowledge of the culture of the country in which students choose to continue their studies; the support received by the country of origin and the host country; the similarity or dissonance between the cultural characteristics of their country of origin and the host country (Pacheco, 1996). As Pacheco (1996) mentions, the network of relationships is very important for the adjustment of students and can be monocultural, when centred on the relationship with their peers; bicultural, when extended to colleagues, teachers, employees and/or partners of

the society in which they are inserted, or even multicultural, when based on the similarity of their cultures or conditions.

In conclusion, and paraphrasing Fumham (1997 quoted by Pires, 2000) “*a experiência de estudar num país estrangeiro deixará provavelmente uma marca para toda a vida*” [the experience of studying in a foreign country will probably leave a mark for a lifetime] (p. 151). The positivity or negativity of it will depend on several factors, but regardless of the circumstance that leads students to academic mobility, everyone will feel, to a greater or lesser extent, the impact of cultural differences.

Methodology

The most appropriate methodology regarding the objectives defined for this work conform to the interpretive research paradigm. Since the central concern is to give participants a voice through their discourse, a systematic way of interpreting the meaning is built, so that the issues underlying the study can be understood by the social actors who experience it. In this sense, an empirical, exploratory, qualitative study was initiated. We chose this methodology since it allows a greater interpretative and naturalistic approach to the object of study, without neglecting the possibility of accessing the interpretation and the meanings that the participants make of their lives (Amado, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Interpretative research methodologies, based on less structured data collection instruments will allow access to information that is not so limited by the experience of those who build or propose the instrument. This will allow participants to freely proceed with their readings of reality without a possible and influenced conception underlying the logic of the construction of the data collection instrument.

Group of participants

The group of participants consists of students who meet the following criteria: (i) being a PALOP student at a specific polytechnic institute; (ii) attending the bachelor's or master's degree in the 2018-2019 academic year and (iii) accepting to voluntarily participate.

Nineteen students participated, sixteen females and three males. The average age of the participants is 23.6 years, with a minimum age of 20 years and a maximum of 33 years. As for nationalities, ten are from Cape Verde, seven are from São Tomé, one from Angola and one from Guinea. The average length of stay in Portugal is 2.21 years, with six being in the country for one year, seven for two years, four of them for four years and two for five years or more. Most of them already knew someone residing in the country when they arrived (57.9%; n = 11) (Table 1).

Procedures

The study was authorised by the management of the Higher Education Institution's (HEI) organic unit regarding the application of the data collection instrument in the classroom. The students were contacted and invited to participate in the study. The objective of the study was explained, and it was clarified that the collaboration would be voluntary and that the collected data would be anonymous.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characterization of the study's participants (n=19)

Variables		n (%)	Mean	Min. /Max.
Gender	Female	16 (84,2%)		
	Male	3 (15,8%)		
Age			23,6	[20,33]
Nationality	Cape Verdean	10 (52,6%)		
	Sao Tome	7 (36,8%)		
	Angolan	1 (5,3%)		
	Guinean	1 (5,3%)		
Average length of stay	1 Year	6 (31,6%)	2,21	[1,13]
	2 years	7 (36,8%)		
	3 years	4 (21,1%)		
	5 or more years	2 (10,5%)		
Did you know anyone in town when you arrived?	Yes	11 (57,9%)		
	No	8 (42,1%)		

After data collection, we followed these steps for content analysis, as proposed by Bardin (2008): pre-analysis, coding, and treatment of results, inference, and interpretation. Initially, to ensure anonymity, each participant was assigned a code consisting of the letter 'E', corresponding to the word 'student' in Portuguese, followed by the letters 'f' or 'm', corresponding respectively, to a female or male participant, and a single-digit (Ef1, Ef2, ... Em1, Em2...). Then, several fluctuating readings were carried out to cover the set of all individual responses in each questionnaire and, subsequently, the set of responses to each question. In addition to the general knowledge of the material, this process allowed us to group it into thematic categories due to content similarity, thus seeking to meet the criteria of completeness, representativeness, homogeneity, relevance, and exclusivity (Bardin, 2008).

Instrument

The instrument used to understand the phenomenon studied was a questionnaire assembled from the literature review, containing closed questions referring to sociodemographic data (gender, age, nationality, length of stay in Portugal and people previously related to in the host country). There were also four questions to which the participants were invited to write a text, as shown below: (1) Describe what it means to you to study in Portugal; (2) Identify the biggest difficulties you felt or feel; (3) Whom did you address - to overcome the difficulties (people or organisations)?; (4) According to your experience, what could be done to facilitate the adaptation of students from PALOP countries?

Discussion and results

In this section, we will report the results of the content analysis of the questionnaires carried out with the descriptions of each thematic category and their frequency, as well as with some examples of the texts written by the students, according to the proposed questions.

Regarding the first question - Describe what it means to you to study in Portugal-, the data analysed suggest the following categories: employability/recognition of European diploma (F = 13); quality and recognition of the institution/faculty staff (F= 9); interpersonal relationships with people from different countries (F = 8); personal maturity (F = 6); and, finally, the affordable cost of living

compared to other European countries (F = 1) and the improvement of the Portuguese language (F = 1).

The first category underlies the relevance of employment, thus resulting from the need for the governments of the countries of origin to resolve the lack of qualified people there (Pires, 2000), as noted in the following report: '(...) my country values more those who go away to study, because they believe that when they return, they have more competences, and are better equipped to occupy certain positions' (Ef2). On the other hand, the recognition of the quality of the institution and its faculty stands out, followed by the appreciation of mobility and its positive consequences, pointing to an unavoidable reality in the present day.

Regarding the second question - Identify the biggest difficulties you felt or feel - the following categories can be stressed: adaptation to the climate (F = 13); financial difficulties (F = 11); homesickness (F = 8); search for accommodation (F = 6); integration with Portuguese colleagues (F = 5); culture, values and customs (F = 4); higher academic demand (F = 4); people's reaction to skin and hair colour (F = 4); Portuguese language (F = 3); access to health/social assistance services and legal documents (F = 2).

The problems identified by the PALOP students embody aspects related to cultural characteristics that hinder adaptation to the country and emphasise the four levels of 'cultural clash' proposed by Habimana and Carazon (2006).

Like previous works (Duque, 2012; Pacheco, 1996; Rocha, 2012), the difficulties in dealing with homesickness are often associated with feelings of anguish and loneliness, as can be exemplified in the following reports: 'Life here is (...) children cry and their mothers do not see' (Ef12) and 'Portugal is a country where children cry and parents do not know about it' (Ef11). It should also be stated that the mastery of the Portuguese language (Figueiredo, 2005; Pacheco, 1996; Pires, 2000) may cause difficulties not only in the learning of academic content, but also within the intercultural communication of these students. Therefore, it is relevant to admit that it is necessary to seek for more appropriate answers to solve certain situations.

Regarding the third question - Whom did you address - to overcome the difficulties (people or organizations)? - the following categories have been identified: emotional/financial support from the family (F=13); support from friends (F=11); support from boyfriend/girlfriend (F=2); support from teacher (F=3); work on vacation and/or part-time (F=3); resort to prayer (F=2) and support from the social service of the higher education institution (F=2).

In line with Pacheco (1996), the role of social support stands out as one of the most important factors for the adaptation of students, with the family network and the network of friends being more prominent. This can be seen in the following examples:

- - 'I ask my family to send me money, and they call me every day to give me strength and to tell me not to give up'(Ef1);
- - 'I have a friend here who helped me in all aspects, taking care of the documents and showing me all places around' (Ef10).

Institutional support and turning to religiosity appear with less relevance, the latter being portrayed as follows: '*I turned to God*' (Ef17).

Regarding the fourth question - *According to your experience, what could be done to facilitate the adaptation of students from PALOP?* - the following categories emerged: greater support in housing (F= 11); strengthening of the social and psychological support (F=7); promotion of joint activities with Portuguese and African students (F=6); dissemination of more information (F=3); reduction of fees (F=2) and solidification of the academic guidance (F=1). The perception of most of the participants is in the context of accommodation and the need for social and psychological support, thus reflecting dissatisfaction with life in the host country, as evidenced in the following: *'The most essential thing should be to find a home easily. It is difficult for us to get to a place we do not know and still have problems with accommodation'* (Ef3); *'A support and information office to guide students who have more difficulties'* (Em1). The other categories express questions about the social and pedagogical adaptation of students aimed at the academic environment.

Closing remarks

Students attending higher education in a culture other than their own have to deal with new social and educational organisations, as well as with the problems of adaptation, common to students in general. In this regard, they must be given additional attention, in the sense that their difficulties and the challenges they face are increased when compared with national students.

The domains identified in this study suggest ways to help students improve the quality of their academic and intercultural experiences, while also requiring a greater institutional support. They also alert to the identification of a set of needs that are not necessarily focused on academic domains. Despite being mentioned by the participants, these difficulties appear in the results as not so relevant as other difficulties that are more related to the daily challenges in a country and culture different from their own.

Despite the small number of participants and, although it is an exploratory study whose results cannot be generalized to all PALOP students in Portuguese higher education institutions, the reflections outlined in this article indicate a positive view of studying in a region of the North and backcountry of Portugal. Proceeding to study in Portugal is stressed as a factor promoting the employability of students, which according to them can be explained, among other, by the recognised quality of the higher education institutions themselves and the faculty in the host country. This study also emphasises that the transition experiences positively influence the management processes of adverse circumstances, thus contributing to the role of the individual and interpersonal agency of the students themselves. However, it is important to mention that the main sources of support come from informal contexts, that is, from the relationships established with family members and friends. This is in some way due to the possible perception on the part of these students that higher education institutions do not institutionally recognise these difficulties and, possibly, that is why they try to solve them through their informal social networks.

It is also important to recognise that the changes in higher education, namely regarding the diversity and growing heterogeneity of its students, pose new challenges to the institutions and impose the construction of new responses that reconcile the achievement of their goals in the field of scientific and technical training and also the ethical dimension of being attentive to the other, of learning in and with diversity. Understanding this reality is essential to instigate actions that favour the stay of these students in the host country, without ever neglecting the heterogeneity that

characterises them, since factors such as identity and motivation vary equally among the monocultural group.

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