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Research Article

Between Avoidance and the Need to Learn: Emerging Dynamics in the First Weeks of Classes in Higher Education in Angola

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This article portrays an investigative study on the socio-pedagogical dynamics that emerge in a situation where higher education is influenced by curricula, structures and knowledge without cultural adaptation. It uses the perception of students and former students from the Angolan higher education, in the province of Benguela, and the Grounded Theory methodology. The results indicate that students feel that learning is not meaningful and, therefore, adopt subversive dynamics of absence and memorization, which negatively influence teaching and learning. Thus, there is a need to contextualize and decolonize teaching practices and to encourage the professional development of teachers in this regard.

1. Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, higher education frequency has increased two and a half times over the last twenty years (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2022), which suggests that an elitist process has been abandoned and that one of massification (and on the way to universalization) is underway, so that countries are equipped with the skills necessary for their development and for adapting to rapid social and technological changes (Brennan, 2004; Trow, 2007).

However, this process is transnational and relies on importing curricula, knowledge, teachers, and organizational practices (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016), tending to impose a hegemonic profile of skills (Maringe & Foskett, 2010), in which places with few scientific resources are subject to the interests of those who are able to respond to the growing demand for higher education. This challenges teaching

and teachers, who are exposed to hidden tensions (Colette, 2019; Tran et al., 2021) between what they hope to teach and the student`s cultural reality (Kim, 2009; Smith, 2009).

Despite the problems that these tensions suggest – what should teaching practices look like when there is cultural distancing between teachers and the teaching context? – there is little light shed on the socio-pedagogical dynamics that emerge in these contexts.

Angola can be a laboratory to observe the situation, since, on the one hand, higher education is socially valued and, on the other hand, it is rooted in political-economic legacies and dependences, which subject the Angolan higher education (AHE) to uncontextualized teaching practices, curricula, and human resources, within the framework of a system of competitive public-private coexistence.

A good starting point to understand the situation is the perspective of the students, because they have the dual position of understanding their needs and the intentions of those who decide (Harding, 2004), particularly in the specific moment of the first weeks of classes, essential in defining socio-pedagogical relationships, not least because there are indicators that seem to contradict the social relevance of AHE and indicate that student attendance in the first weeks of school is very low – which seems to signal one of the hidden and not verbalized tensions teachers and students face.

Therefore, how do students characterize absence and presence in the initial period of classes? How do they explain these characteristics? What social dynamics and teaching practices emerge as a result of student attendance? And what are the interactions between these dynamics and practices?

2. Angolan higher education

Higher education does not escape the complex nature of education and while it may seem like a system based on top-down centralities, there are also emerging, self-organized, and adaptive processes involved.

Angola is a recent country (independent since 1975), artificially added by colonialism. This has resulted in the coexistence of many cultural identities instead of a national one. For example, several national languages and the official Portuguese language cohabit (Eduardo & Amador, 2020), none of which corresponds to any political region. In addition, the country's short history has witnessed historical-political-social sediments, largely influential on AHE's social and organizational structure.

First, *as a portrait of freedom*. Public education until independence was discriminatory, in favor of the settlers (Eduardo & Amador, 2020; Liberato, 2014). Part of the education of the indigenous people was

the responsibility of missionaries, who promoted values of equality between people and encouraged the higher education of Angolans; another part was provided by the Portuguese state to an indigenous elite selected to study in the metropolis. Many of the beneficiaries would become figures in the struggle for independence (Liberato, 2014), which materialized the vision of higher education as a path to end oppression and to a better life (Kandingi, 2016; Mbaz, 2018).

Second, the *nationalization of education and the beginning of scientific dependence.* After Angola's independence, education was nationalized (Law No. 4/75 of December 9, 1975), to universalize education and call on the university to implement the State's socialist option (Decree No. 31/80, of April 10). However, given the lack of resources, Angola resorted to political partnerships and received Bulgarian, Cuban, Congolese, Russian, and Vietnamese teachers (Filho et al., 2021; Quinta, 2016) and the beginning of the AHE was marked by dependence on imported knowledge, theories, methodologies and curricula.

Third, the *exodus from education and getting used to training abroad.* The peace did not last and the country entered a civil war (between 1975 and 2002, with interludes), which led to the exodus of those who, having resources, sought education abroad (Liberato, 2012), a reduction of opportunities for study, due to military mobilization and diversion of public funds to the war, which led to an appreciation of the quality of foreign higher education.

Fourth, a *hybrid and competitive public-private system.* The peace in 2002 gave momentum to a new Education Bases Law (Law No. 13/2001, of December 31) which recognized state limitations and laid the foundation for the transition to a market economy, opening doors to private initiative in education and originating a hybrid system, competitive and little regulated. On the one hand, the AHE continued to be subject to foreign curricula and professors or, being national, trained abroad in view of the demand for qualified staff to feed the new institutions (in 2022 there were 28 public institutions and more than 60 private institutions) (Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, 2022); on the other hand, the teaching career at AHE seems to be subject to immobility (Mendes & Manuel, 2020), or to fortuitous admission (Dinis & Borralho, 2021), which has contributed to an apathetic behavior from universities towards their own research capabilities (Mendes & Manuel, 2020).

In this process, the AHE maintains its strong social value and its frequency is often a family undertaking in which families contribute to finance the study of one of their members and create expectations of social return after completing the course.

So, this set of sediments seems to have originated a degree of scientific dependence, in which teaching is based on imported knowledge and without cultural adaptation.

3. First contacts with higher education

The literature has shown that the first days and weeks of contact with the curricular units are relevant for academic success in higher education. Svinicki and McKeachie (2001) advise that the first classes should serve to promote the desirable behaviors, activities and interaction styles throughout the semester and, therefore, can introduce students to social dynamics, learning expectations and rules that will be important for the success of teaching practices.

On the one hand, in the first days, the first value interpretations about the educational environment are issued (Morris et al., 1996), relevant to the establishment of positive relationships (Foster & Hermann, 2011), which is important because the closeness, communication, and engagement between teachers and students are at the root of better learning (Quin, 2017) and better teaching (Li et al., 2022). The creation of the necessary conditions for mutual relationships of trust and respect is based on interaction and communication between students and between students and teachers (Scogin, et al., 2015; Tormey, 2021), which the institutions themselves can actively manage, to promote the inclusion of students and success (Reed & Jones, 2021), although some evidence suggests that student behavior in is particularly influenced by values and behaviors learned in secondary education (Park & Swanson, 2021).

This relationship potential can be developed through activities as different as those that lead students to participate in the construction of operating rules in the classroom (DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005). The reciprocal interview, in which students, in small groups, share doubts and talk more directly with the teacher about the curricular unit (Foster & Hermann, 2011) and the sharing of information about themselves and the course (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011), seem to contribute to comfortable learning environments and to the clarification of teacher expectations towards students (Case, et al., 2008), also because the perceived availability of social support and socialization with educational agents can positively influence students' adaptation to higher education (Turkpour & Mehdinezhad, 2016).

On the other hand, the first contacts serve pedagogical purposes, in which students must have active access to the structure of the curricular unit and the learning objectives and the teacher must start

teaching with activities that diagnose the knowledge that the student already possesses (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011), which is one of the operative principles of the Meaningful Learning Theory.

4. The Meaningful Learning Theory

The Meaningful Learning theory (Ausubel, 1963, 2000; Novak & Gowin, 1984), proposes that learning occurs in the interaction between existing knowledge in the student's cognitive structure and new knowledge. Thus, it involves the acquisition of new meanings from the presented material, provided that (a) it is plausible (potentially meaningful), (b) non-random and non-literal, and (c) that the learner's particular cognitive structure contains relevant ideas anchored, with which the new material can interact, giving rise to new meanings (Ausubel,1963, 2000).

At the *teaching* level, it is necessary for the teacher to get in touch with the students' prior knowledge, which allows him to bring his teaching practices closer to the culturally significant ideas brought by the students and to present the general structure of the learning objectives, so that they can be situated cognitively. Over time, the *assessment* process is permanent and formative, so that students and teachers can understand the integration of new content (Ausubel, 2000; Moreira, 2003). To that extent, the teacher`s role is to interact with students, to access the connection that they are establishing with the new contents; and that of creating learning experiences that facilitate a journey in which new content replaces and/or integrates previous ones.

In terms of *learning*, the student is expected to share meanings with the teacher and colleagues (Ausubel, 2000; Moreira, 2003). These processes reflect the ability of students to integrate new knowledge from their pre-existing knowledge, which values the ability to recognize, in the context of their experiences, the validity of scientific theories - and may allow future interventions that are reflected and not merely reproductive.

It becomes a relevant theory in the context of the AHE because it can respond to local weaknesses. In particular, it can be useful in linking the knowledge that students already have and that comes from their learning in the context, with the theories that are used in teaching and that are imported directly from other contexts. Thus, meaningful learning can reduce the distance between what is taught and the reality in which students will apply their learning.

5. Methodology

It is assumed that the AHE is structured in the sedimentation of historical, political, and scientific elements that, interacting with the context, have impacts and create tensions on teaching practices and pedagogical relationships that can benefit from a focused understanding.

To that extent, the objective of this research is to contribute to increasing this understanding, from the perspective of students about the interactions that occur in the first weeks of classes, given the suggested tension between the AHE social value and student attendance in those time frames.

Given the scarcity of knowledge in this area and region and the objective of the research, the process gains shape through questions aimed at accessing the perception of AHE students (Figure 1):

- how do they characterize the absence and presence of students in the initial period of classes?
- how do they explain the characteristics of absence and presence?
- what social dynamics and pedagogical practices emerge?
- what are the interactions between these dynamics and emerging practices?

As a result, we chose to design a research that would promote rooting in the context. Thus, the investigation:

- Is inscribed in the interpretative paradigm, because it is intended to understand, through interpretation, reality from the perspective of those who live it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994);
- takes a qualitative approach, since it mobilizes perceptions to understand the phenomenon and the beliefs at the base of the actors' actions (Merriam & Tisdell,2016);
- resorts to the modality of *Grounded Theory*, with a constructivist tendency, because it intends to develop a comprehensive local theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006).

The procedures for data collection, selection of participants, and data analysis followed the chain inherent to the research modality (Figure 1).
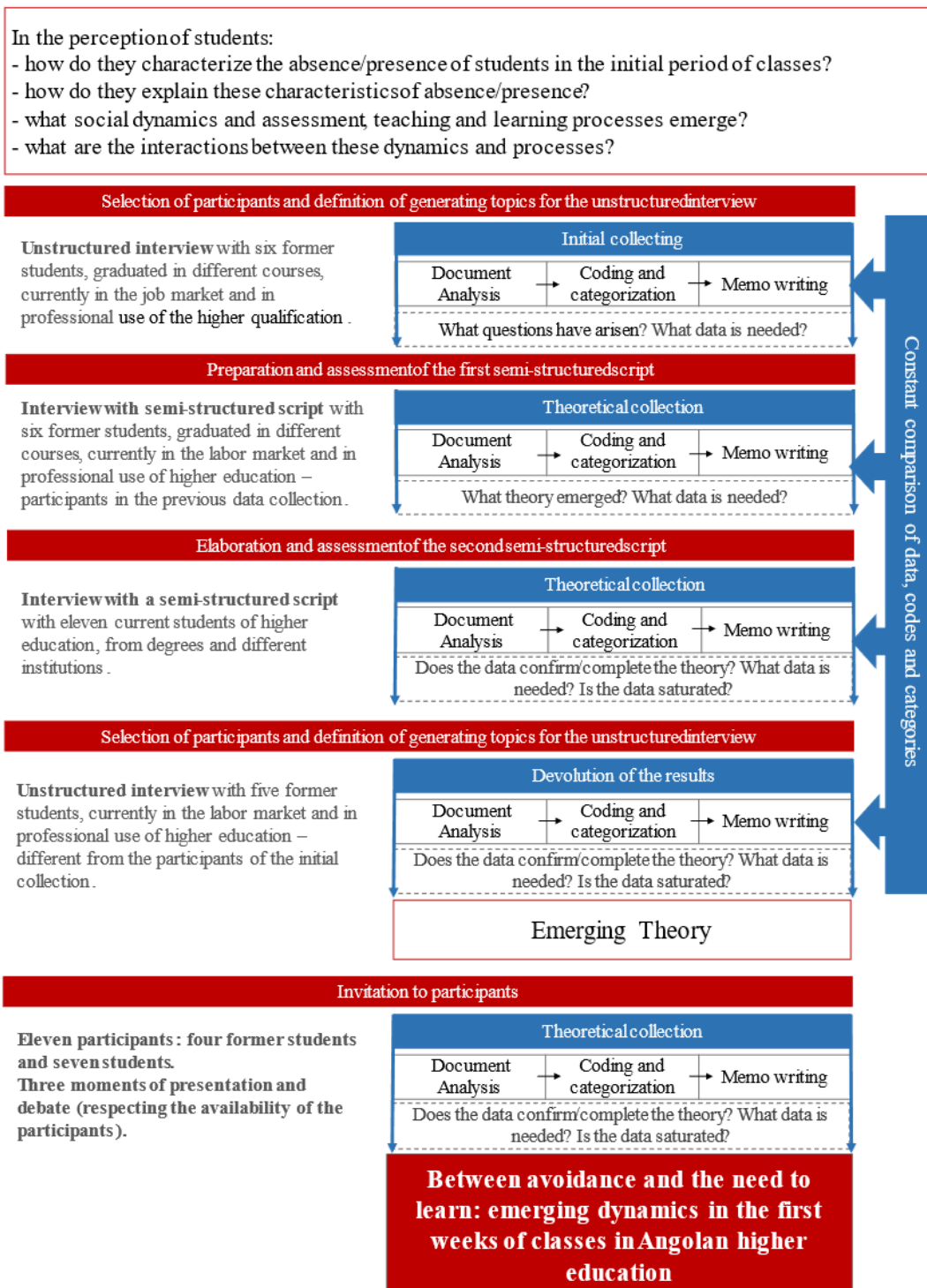
In the perception of students:
- how do they characterize the absence/presence of students in the initial period of classes?
- how do they explain these characteristics of absence/presence?
- what social dynamics and assessment, teaching and learning processes emerge?
- what are the interactions between these dynamics and processes?

Selection of participants and definition of generating topics for the unstructured interview

Unstructured interview with six former students, graduated in different courses, currently in the job market and in professional use of the higher qualification.

Initial collecting
Document Analysis → Coding and categorization → Memo writing
What questions have arisen? What data is needed?

Preparation and assessment of the first semi-structured script

Interview with semi-structured script with six former students, graduated in different courses, currently in the labor market and in professional use of higher education – participants in the previous data collection.

Theoretical collection
Document Analysis → Coding and categorization → Memo writing
What theory emerged? What data is needed?

Elaboration and assessment of the second semi-structured script

Interview with a semi-structured script with eleven current students of higher education, from degrees and different institutions.

Theoretical collection
Document Analysis → Coding and categorization → Memo writing
Does the data confirm/complete the theory? What data is needed? Is the data saturated?

Selection of participants and definition of generating topics for the unstructured interview

Unstructured interview with five former students, currently in the labor market and in professional use of higher education – different from the participants of the initial collection.

Devolution of the results
Document Analysis → Coding and categorization → Memo writing
Does the data confirm/complete the theory? What data is needed? Is the data saturated?

Emerging Theory

Invitation to participants

Eleven participants: four former students and seven students.
Three moments of presentation and debate (respecting the availability of the participants).

Theoretical collection
Document Analysis → Coding and categorization → Memo writing
Does the data confirm/complete the theory? What data is needed? Is the data saturated?

Between avoidance and the need to learn: emerging dynamics in the first weeks of classes in Angolan higher education

Constant comparison of data, codes and categories

Figure 1. Overview of the investigation.

Note: Adapted from Sbaraini et al. (2011).

5.1. Data collection

In the initial data collection, the unstructured interview was chosen, since this strategy allows the free emergence of data (Creswell, 2012; Merrian & Tisdel, 2016) and access to an overview of the situation, which was intended. It was organized from three generating topics: characterization of the situation of absence and presence in the first weeks of classes, pedagogical interactions, and the causes and effects of absence and presence.

In the second and third collections of data, a semi-structured script was used, organized from the patterns emerging in the first data collection and the need for deepening or collecting new data that would allow understanding of the situation. Taking into account the need for relatively quick validation of the scripts, these instruments were prepared by one author and critically analyzed by the others (which led to changes), with an interview being carried out to test the ability of each script to gather useful data and address missing knowledge (which also led to script changes).

The scripts were organized to address the categories that emerged from the previous collections:

- in the script for the second data collection, the characterization of presence and absence in the first weeks of classes, teaching and learning practices, the role of agents, and the absence and presence impact;
- in the third data collection script the perception of absence, the causes and effects of absence, learning, and teaching.

In the fourth data collection, we used, again, the unstructured interview, since we intended to explore a specific dimension (the relationship with knowledge), which was underdeveloped in previous collections, which advised an interview environment with few theoretical constraints.

5.2. Participants

Participants were invited by convenience. In the first and second collections, in the profile of former students of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the province of Benguela, holders of degree courses in different areas and with professional experience, as it was intended to access critical and global perceptions, which would be possible through participants who had experienced the integrality of the AHE and put their learning in confrontation with reality. These collections were intermittent, since the participants were the same, but subject to different instruments to collect information. Six former students were interviewed.

In the third data collection, in the profile of being current students at an HEI in the province of Benguela – ensuring that there were students from the eight HEIs existing in the province –, in attendance of different courses and HEI, which allows access to data on current perceptions. Eleven students were interviewed.

In the fourth data collection, the same criteria were used as in the first collection, since it was considered that the necessary data could be better accessed by participants who took a distant and reflected view on the frequency of the AHE. Five students were interviewed.

5.3. Data analysis

The analysis was aided by the *QDA Miner program* and preceded by the validation of the transcript by the participants (Creswell, 2012; Lessard-Hébert et al., 1994). The transcripts were sent to them so that they could confirm the statements and, if they intended, correct or add elements. Two participants chose to add circumstantial information.

The analysis took into account the stages and processes of the Grounded Theory methodology with a constructivist tendency (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, et al., 2009) (Figure 1), intended to ensure that the data validates the emerging theory and to establish a reflexive and intimate relationship between the researcher and the data, to assist the construction of categories and, subsequently, of a theory capable of understanding social processes, namely: immediate treatment of data, constant comparison, writing memos and opening the researcher to data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Therefore:

- in data processing, the codes were formed immediately after the collection of data, by approximation with the agents' statements (in vivo coding), line by line for the first two moments of analysis. The codes were compared and grouped into representative categories, with active questioning about the meaning of the data (for example: What do the participants want to convey?) (Holton, 2007). The data was handled by one researcher, with the others adopting the role of critical reviewers of coding and categorization. However, the negative cases were analyzed together, which involved the discussion of data that did not appear to support the emerging patterns (Patton, 1999);
- a constant comparison was made between the codes and categories of each collection, which led to the dynamic reorganization of categories;

- written and visual memos were prepared, which assisted researchers in the reflective process of theory building and contributed to the development of concepts. Each researcher's memos were prepared independently and then put into dialogue, which supported the process of constructing concepts and guided new collections of information. This procedure contributed to the data being exposed to the different interpretations of the researchers and the inductive divergences resolved by the explanatory power that the data offered.

After analyzing the data from the fourth collection, we realized that concepts were consolidated and clearly rooted in the data, which translates into theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006) and led to the closure of the collecting process.

As a last step, the epistemological perspective was adopted stating that scientific knowledge involves the interests and points of view of those to whom it is addressed or who are the object of study (Harding, 2004). Therefore, the emerging theory was returned to the participants, with the aim of ensuring that perceptions were faithfully portrayed by the researchers and that the theory created is coherent with the perceived reality and has the potential to help social change (Cho & Trent, 2006). The return process revealed that both objectives were met.

5.4. Ethical procedures and researchers' expectations

Participants became aware of the research objectives, methods, and use of data and, in particular, about the confidentiality of participation and the right to, at any time, choose to cease participation and request the non-use of data (formalized by signing the free, prior and informed consent, verbal confirmation at the beginning of each interview).

As for the researchers, we clarify that the first researcher was a professor at AHE and had direct contact with the situation of lack of attendance by students; that the second author has teaching experience in higher education in Portuguese-speaking African countries and extensive research on teaching practices in higher education and the professional development of teachers; that all authors have experience in educational research with a qualitative approach; and our interpretative path is based on the theorization that education has a complex ontology, which causes surprises, in which each of its agents has the capacity to interact and modify the system itself.

6. Results

The results suggest that the first weeks lead to emerging dynamics that influence the interactions between students, between them and professors, and with the knowledge, which lasts throughout the semester and condition teaching practices.

Students organize their academic life according to an informal calendar, in which teaching begins two to three weeks after the official date. This means that the initial frequency is of social relationships, instead of classes, because students establish functional relationships with professors and colleagues to collect knowledge (in fascicles, notes, and explanations from colleagues), and adopt memorization strategies, which allow them to perform positively – which, for many students and professors, corresponds to success, even if it does not result in learning. In this process, they consider that the causality of absence is external to them, which reflects the avoidance of what they do not control, namely the disparities between the knowledge they memorize and the reality they experience.

Then, four organizers of socio-pedagogical interaction emerge (Figure 2): the informal calendar, the cycle of collection and reproduction of knowledge, functional relationships, and the external locus of causality.

Frequency of relationships with peers instead of classes. Teaching delay expectations.

Informal Calendar

Collection and Reproduction cycle

Students collect fascicles and other materials that they memorize.

Establishing relationships with peers that allow access to materials. Attendance in classes is focused on the course and not on competence.

Functionality

External Locus

The causes of attendance are beyond the control of students.
There is escape or protection regarding knowledge that is often not significant.

Figure 2. Emerging Theory.

Note: Elaborated by the authors.

6.1. Informal academic calendar: initial absence as the norm

Students organize their initial experience in each semester based on an informal, socially constructed calendar, according to which the first classes are not to be attended. It is so strongly normalized that negative feelings emerge about the professors who advance the teaching processes from the first day and also about the students who expect the teaching to start immediately.

6.1.1. The informal calendar

In the students' perception, the first week of each semester is attended by less than 25% of the students (except for the medical course, where attendance is very high from the beginning). Absence seems to extend, with less than 50% of students attending the second week. The exception is the first semester of the first year, when students attend in greater numbers, because they are curious to get to know their colleagues, the institution, and to establish bonds.

> [...] the first year is an exception, because there's that excitement, new school and all
> that. I see that the more the person, the student advances in level, the more they tend to
> become sloppy[...] (Student #10).

Regardless the student attendance, the perception is that, in most cases, teaching activities are postponed until the third week of classes. They understand that until this week, many teachers do not teach, because either they are not dedicated to the subject, with the argument of not harming the absent students, or they choose to occupy the time talking about their life experiences and do not present themselves prepared for teaching.

6.1.2. Normalization of the informal calendar

This calendar is socially normalized. The students claim that the absence has cultural and family roots in the years of schooling prior to university, in which they learned that students should not attend and teachers will not be present.

> [...] in primary education, ah, normally the teachers, when they went to class, first they
> didn't go to teach, or the parents, sometimes, some said, ah, it's the first week, maybe
> the teachers won't come. (Former student #2)

Faced with the expectation that teaching will not progress in the first few weeks, students impose social criticism on regular students who break the hidden agenda.

> [...] it's like it's a law, it's established in the students' culture, the first week is not for classes, if there is any class, they feel wronged and, therefore, they call the students who go snitches, they are betraying a tradition and the teachers who go are the "gourmands", who are greedy, [...] and that's bad. (Former student # 4)

As a result, the frequency that becomes truly relevant is not that of classes, but that of social relationships with colleagues who are in a position to interpret the moment from which it is important to be present in classes.

6.2. The cycle of collecting and reproducing knowledge

Although students recognize that absence at the beginning of the semesters has negative effects on learning, they choose to maintain this behavior and overcome any losses through a cycle of re-collection and reproduction of knowledge (search and use for the moment or demand), according to perceptions that success is ensured by memorization and uncritical reproduction of knowledge, as this guarantees the results that allow access to the academic title (the success criteria). The movements are interdependent: students sometimes collect knowledge because they know they can memorize it, and sometimes they opt for memorization because they know they can collect it from various sources. These dynamics generate feelings of devaluation and lack of enthusiasm in the students present, lack of information about learning objectives and assessment criteria, and face-to-face interactions with colleagues and teachers.

6.2.1. Inhibition of Enthusiasm

The inhibition of enthusiasm is rooted in the perceived absence of teaching. Students feel, in the balance between existing resources and benefits, that their attendance is irrelevant.

This, in a general way, demotivates the student, which is why many, in the end, fall into this vicious circle, because there is no point in going to school in the first week if I know that the teacher is not motivated to teach new subjects, or if this also generates a little, you know, "jealousy", because the student will feel that the teacher will only be motivated to teach when the class is at 100%. So, the other year, there are people who can fall into the same cycle, also in the second week, because it's

expensive and a little irritating for me to go the first week and there's nothing new and I'm just in the class and the teacher ranting just to burn time. (Former student #3)

These feelings are added to those provoked by the absence of colleagues, which also seem to contribute to the withdrawal of enthusiasm.

> [...] usually, we go to school not only with the purpose of being able to learn or to study, but it is also to be able to meet your classmate, or your friend, the one who is always close to your desk and [...] I would be sad if I didn't meet my classmate, or close colleague, my partner, at school on the first day of classes. [...]. (Student # 7)

6.2.2. *The recovery of learning: the genesis of collection and reproduction*

Afterward, many students operate on the expectation that the lost learning recovery will be the sole responsibility of the student.

> [teachers] still tell us that it is our responsibility to look for the subject taught, because they will not repeat the explanation [...]. They do not repeat. They advise to look for it with the colleagues who showed up. (Student #8)

The strategies that most students use to recover teaching content assume the character of collection (use, throw away, and move on) and reproduction, in a process that rarely involves interaction with teachers.

> [...] going directly to the teacher, where he would have to explain a lot more and we would also feel more inhibited, because we know that we are the ones who chose to skip class, so we prefer to turn first to colleagues and only then to teachers [...]. (Student #1)

The first target of the collection is always the scientific authority of the teacher and his exact words, through fascicles that, with the advent of digital communication, take on more immediate forms (recording of classes, depositing notes on social networks, using videos on Youtube). Therefore, it translates into a process in which the teacher is understood as the index from which students identify the essential and as the almost exclusive author of the knowledge that allows achieving objectives.

> [...] which makes those who do not come to the first classes seek contact with those who came to the first classes to find out what the professor is like, what the subject is like, if the professor left fascicles, whether books or fascicles [...]. (Student #10)

Thus, memorization emerges as a totalitarian strategy for teaching and learning and many students seem to abandon the adaptation and contextual reflection of knowledge and socio-pedagogical interactions and give up active roles. Furthermore, many students act under the perception that the memorization strategy is not disadvantageous when compared with the results of face-to-face strategies.

> What comes at the beginning may not have very good results and the one who comes after three weeks of the start of classes has a better performance than the one who was there from the beginning. (Student #10)

6.3. Functional relationships

Students manage relationships with colleagues and professors based on the usefulness they can provide in terms of access to knowledge. In this process, there is a dissociation between knowledge and competence and the personalized management of resources, to ensure that each of the investments (presence, transport, time, relationships) has clear results for the conclusion of the course.

6.3.1. The criterion for success: the academic title

On the one hand, students are focused on ensuring the memory and reproducibility needed to complete the degree, and the measure of success that students value is the grade.

> [...] the university is something that guarantees us something that sustains us for the public exam or for a job. Most of the students, my colleagues, are employees. What you want is not knowledge, what you want ... if they could pay to simply have the degree, they would pay without thinking twice. Because what you want is not knowledge, it's a diploma. (Student #10)

Therefore, the reference that many students use to judge their actions is the grade.

> [...] it is indifferent. If I don't show up my grade will be the same, so they show up the second week to take the test and attend classes. It's not that there shouldn't be classes, it's just that usually, professors don't teach, they give correction classes. (Former student #3)

6.3.2. Servitude and power

On the other hand, functional relationships are based on positions of servitude and power, namely in the use of colleagues who attend classes, for access to knowledge, and in the secondary gains that these attendant students achieve. Thus, the option of being, or not, assiduous in the first weeks of classes is a decision about a position of power (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999).

Regular students are put at the service of those who do not attend classes ...

> At school, I was never at enmity with anyone, I liked talking to everyone and having a little bit of each one, because when I need something, then, I go there and get it. And in this case, how did I get away with it? I always picked the smartest classmate, who I know would never miss a class. So, I would take this one and ask for the notebook to pass on the material and also an explanation. (Student #7)

... and they feel pressured to make summaries that express the classes and to hand over their notes, which leads to negative feelings and revolt.

However, these same attendant students seem to have secondary gains, because they operate in the expectation (and in the awareness) that teaching will not advance and, even so, they find conditions that justify their presence: access to the teacher (this is the reference for the reproduction of knowledge), the role of interpreters and translators of teaching and the teacher's expectations (the access of absent colleagues to teaching becomes dependent on them) and the regulation of the teaching and learning process (the teacher assesses his action by the effect that is to have in attending students).

> [...] we have this function of being, like a thermometer for the teacher to be able to measure the classroom. When [the teacher] sees that those people who have been there since the first day are interacting, collaborating, then the lesson can continue, it can move forward. The others who were also missing, they even bother to fit in. But, if the ones that since the first day [...] are also not yielding, then the teacher does not advance. [...]. (Student #5)

In this process, students who are assiduous from the beginning also build a purposeful image with the teachers, which may be the source of valuable connections.

6.3.3. Conscious resource management

Absent students, on the other hand, opt for resource management (commuting time, transport costs, the effective benefits of being present), the cost-benefit rationale, and the ever-present awareness of the limits.

> [...] in my classroom I have colleagues who live in another municipality. [...] So, they notice that in the first week of going to school, for them, they only spend money on the taxi[2]. Therefore, they come in the week that the content is being given, or else, in the week of preparation for the tests. (Student #4)

In this sense, the reference they use to assess the cost-earnings ratio is the subject, in such a way that activities other than content exposure seem to be disregarded.

6.4. External locus of causality

In the students' perception, the causes of absence are external and beyond their control (the teacher's behavior, organizational culture, costs, family, previous learning, and the legacy of tradition) and the proposed solutions are also external (eg., inspection). This causality can be understood as a mechanism that defends students from situations in which knowledge is far from the reality they face (and which is stored in their memories) and the expectations of future intervention that are reserved for them. Therefore, it serves to safeguard internal resources, such as self-image and motivation (Novak, & Gowin, 1984; Weiner, 1980).

6.4.1. Causes and solutions: out of control

As for the teacher's behavior, many students experience a lack of interest or absence from the teacher (as shown earlier), to which is added little perceived pedagogical-didactic competence. The organizational trait that students understand that sustains absence is institutional carelessness.

> [...] Often, educational institutions here in Angola, in the first days of classes, are not well organized, they do not have a list of students' attendance, they are unable to control the classroom, the students and, therefore, there are many absences that are not controlled in the semester and this makes it easier for students to skip class [...]. (Student #2)

6.4.2. Knowledge avoidance

Many students perceive and self-attribute behaviors that express the avoidance of the knowledge offered to them. This is particularly evident in undergraduate students in social and human areas and less so among students whose perception of knowledge and practices of intervention, in reality, are relatively independent of context, such as medicine and computer science courses.

First, this avoidance is reflected as an assessment of inconsistencies between what is perceived as teaching and learning.

> [...] there were two teachers who read to us what was on the slides [...], I even said, "I'm going to skip these classes, because I don't feel that I leave there different from when I arrived". What was I doing? I took the fascicles, read what was written, if I didn't understand something I would research it [...] and I managed to take the test, because I memorized what was in the fascicle. (Former student #5)

Secondly, as an awareness of the inconsistency between learning and reality.

> [...] we study several realities that are far from ours, even the teacher explains "this does not apply here, besides it is more in such and such countries, here in our reality this does not apply", so why are they teaching us? "You're not going to find that", so why don't they teach us what we're going to find? [...] If we are never going to apply, why are we studying? And then we are too lazy to study it. It's very contradictory! So, in the exam we memorize it because we are not going to apply it [...]. (Student #9)

And third, feelings of lack of control.

> We feel sad, because they form copycats. We just pass on information that we can't be sure if it's true or not [...]. We imitate what others do and we feel powerless, I, from my point of view, feel powerless. (Student #3)

6.4.3. Negative identities

However, this set of avoidance behaviors seems to feed the negative image of Angolan students. At the individual level, many students are characterized by their lack of interest, entering "schemes", focusing on the academic title, disorganization, and laziness.

I can say that it's really our laziness, because for us to enter classes in the first week, it's always that week when the teachers may not show up either, there's always that desire of wanting to enjoy the holidays a little longer [...]. (Student #3)

And, not infrequently, many students broaden their perception of the identity of each Angolan, as the ultimate inexorable factor that allows them to attribute a protective meaning to events of failure.

[The absence] continues and will continue to happen. I think this is more an effect of all the other behaviors and habits of the Angolan culture itself, not taking things seriously, or doing things under pressure. (Former student #1)

7. Discussion

Essentially, the results are in line with other investigations that confirm that effective teaching must be sensitive to cultural and idiosyncratic elements of places (Colette, 2019; Kim, 2009; Smith, 2009; Tran et al., 2021), but they also bring new elements that, eventually, can be pondered in other contexts.

First, we advanced the possibility that the Meaningful Learning Theory (Ausubel, 1963, 2000; Novak & Gowin, 1984) is pedagogically useful to AHE, due to the potential link between new knowledge and pre-existing knowledge in the student's cognitive structure.

However, the data suggest the opposite, that the emerging dynamics restrict the foundations of the Theory, because (i) they generate pedagogical relationships that hinder access to learning, (ii) they make the diagnostic evaluation that could support teaching planning unfeasible, (iii) they limit students' access to the integral vision of learning and (iv) generate learning routines by reproduction. This data suggests the possibility of failure of pedagogical theories that are not carefully assessed in context. The situation recommends that it is necessary to draw up and implement a plan to raise awareness of the presence of students and teaching in the first weeks of classes. It should be noted that the current situation seems to dehumanize pedagogical relationships, because it removes the relational, emotional, and trust components that are relevant to academic success (Scogin, et al., 2015; Tormey, 2021). In this sense, this can be a key point of awareness – that relationships and expectations provide more success than memorization –, to be invested in the first year of the courses, in which attendance is greater, there is enthusiasm, and in which negative images about higher education students are not yet consolidated.

Secondly, although the investigation has shown feelings of lack of control by students and expectations of hierarchical power in the functioning of the school year, what seems to be reinforced is precisely the dynamics that subvert these expectations and that place power in the students. Education has come to be seen as a complex system, in which each agent has the ability to act (albeit in a barely visible or even hidden way), which translates into a heterarchy. This is what becomes evident, because the perception and expectations of the students about the behavior of the teachers lead to adaptations that influence the quality of teaching (the useful time of the semester, the participation, and the knowledge mobilized).

It should be noted that the first value interpretations about the educational environment, essential in establishing pedagogical relationships (Foster & Hermann, 2011; Morris et al., 1996), seem to be inherited and not experienced. Thus, the trust and interpersonal relationships necessary for effective teaching practices, which emerge from the first teaching contacts (Li et al., 2022; Quin, 2017; Tormey, 2021), are placed at a time that the teacher does not access. Other studies have shown this phenomenon (Ferreira et al., 2011; Park & Swanson, 2021), but here we add the little structure of the opening teaching activities. Therefore, the initial acts of teaching must change the relationships that, occultly, were established. In fact, the students' perception of teaching methods and the teacher's personality result from the translation of reality made by assiduous students, who inform other colleagues, which puts them in charge of relationships. Therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to take command of social support, knowledge of the curriculum and its image (e.g. Case, et al., 2008; DiClementi & Handelsman, 2005; Foster & Hermann, 2011; Svinivki & McKeachie, 2011).

Hence, the data suggest a reinterpretation of the processes of marginalization, since they allow us to consider that students, apparently placed in the role of mere receivers of decisions, marginalize the knowledge presented to them, which translates into a reciprocal marginalization, which strongly influences teaching.

A possible solution is the reconversion of this less visible power of mutual influence of students. Universities can see them as active resources as, for example, peer instructors in the classroom, that are effective in promoting positive pedagogical interactions and learning concepts (Müller et al., 2017). This places students in roles they already assume, of guidance and regulation, but humanizes interactions and calls on the teacher to mediate the process.

Thirdly, this study suggests that the Angolan context should be transported into the classrooms and calls for consideration regarding the professional development of teachers who work outside their

culture or implement curricula or knowledge without cultural adaptation (Colette, 2019; Tran et al., 2021).

The results indicate that teaching practices that rely on homogeneous and universal strategies, without distinction of particularities and needs, are not adequate for the AHE and, therefore, it is not enough for the teacher to be scientifically qualified or to show signs of knowing how to relay information (Dinis & Borralho, 2021). Therefore, we are faced with the need for a teacher professional development (TPD) that balances this relationship. It is, as a viable unprecedented (Freire, 2014), to stimulate the TPD so that the teacher addresses the contents and subjects of the world and Angola, in the Angolan context, to the Angolan students and to each specific student who is in front of him, in the face of a future of hope that is little known and in which such students will act.

We know that much of the coherent TPD occurs in the system that puts teachers in interaction with the places and idiosyncrasies (Opffer & Pedder, 2011).

It may be important for teachers to be involved with reality, which makes the tasks of outreach component to the community, inscribed in the professor schedule, a teaching tool. Another strategy could be mentoring among teachers, which has been shown to be effective in teachers' reflection on teaching practices (Lucey & White, 2017) and could take place between teachers who know and do not know the context.

8. Conclusions

This study offers new knowledge about AHE, specifically in the Benguela province. The image of AHE remains as an emerging, self-organized, and adaptive system (here, maladaptive!), and the transnational influences that are operating lead to the prosperity of HEI, but not to the prosperity of learning. On the contrary, they seem to be at the origin of the massification of memorization, in which the massification of teaching, instead of being aimed at adapting to new complex realities (Brennan, 2004; Trow, 2007), leads to the generalized memorization of contents with little contextual relevance. Now, this suggests that the memorized degree can be followed by an unsafe practice, which subjects students to act without consideration for the reality they face and, consequently, to make more mistakes. Ironically, the dream of higher education can lead to higher frustrations as well.

This new knowledge, taking into account the localized case, serves to advise initiatives involving higher education in countries subject to the asymmetric influence of knowledge, teachers, curricula,

and theories without cultural adaptation. In particular, it challenges investment in interactions that contribute to consistency with the needs of people and countries, and this investment must take into account that student action will be decisive. They hold degrees of influence that, even if they remain hidden, are acting and producing effects. In this case, they profoundly influence teaching (and pose new challenges to the professional development of teachers), they can make pedagogical theories unfeasible and make the uncritical organization of the academic calendar dysfunctional, based on neutralized positions regarding its conditions and expectations – the lack of pondering translates a self-imposed scientific colonialism.

Thus, the emerging dynamics can very well be understood as a rebellion – which suggests that no internationalization movement can simply impose. It is therefore necessary to move on to construction - the conditions could not be better, since the interest and strength of the students were evident.

Footnotes

[1] This work is financed by national funds from FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., within the scope of the project UIDB/04312/2020

[2] In Angola, the name taxi refers to any transportation that is paid for, and can be, for example, a nine-seat collective transport or a seat on a motorcycle.

Legislation

- Law No. 4/75 of December 9, 1975 of the Diário da República (1975). Diário da República: Series I, no. 25.
- Decree No. 31/80 of April 10 of the Diário da República (1980). Diário da República: Série I, no. 85.
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Declarations