

## BLACK WOMEN ON QUOTAS AT THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF PARANÁ: LIVED EXPERIENCES AND EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The aim of this study was to analyze, based on the trajectories of scholarship students at a State University of Paraná (UNESPAR), narratives in pedagogical letters about the experiences of these students and the pedagogical actions promoted by the institution through racial quotas. The research adopted a qualitative approach, using the production of pedagogical letters as the method. This investigation is part of a section of the doctoral thesis in education from the State University of Maringá (UEM). Scholarship students from any semester or year of one of the undergraduate courses offered at one of the seven campuses of UNESPAR were invited to participate. The invitation was sent to 1,250 individuals, of whom 37 responded to the questionnaire, and 8 students contributed with pedagogical letters. Of these, only the letters from students enrolled in teaching degrees were selected for this subset, totaling four female students, as the pedagogical letters directly address educational issues, reflecting on the inequalities and challenges faced by scholarship students. The study highlights the need for the continuation of public inclusion policies, ongoing training for faculty members, and the creation of spaces for dialogue on diversity and anti-racism in universities, particularly in teaching, a profession historically marked by gender and racial inequalities.

**Keywords:** Black women; Education; pedagogical letters; Racial quotas.

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## MULHERES NEGRAS COTISTAS DA UNIVERSIDADE ESTADUAL DO PARANÁ: ESCREVÊNCIAS E PERCURSOS FORMATIVOS

**Resumo:** O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar, a partir das trajetórias de estudantes cotistas de uma Universidade Estadual do Paraná (UNESPAR), relatos em cartas pedagógicas sobre as experiências vivenciadas por essas alunas e as ações pedagógicas promovidas pela instituição por meio das cotas raciais. A pesquisa adotou uma abordagem qualitativa, utilizando a produção de cartas pedagógicas como método. Esta investigação faz parte de um recorte da tese de doutorado em educação da Universidade Estadual de Maringá (UEM). Foram convidados(as) a participar estudantes cotistas de qualquer semestre ou ano de um dos cursos de graduação oferecidos em um dos sete campi da UNESPAR. O convite foi enviado a 1.250 pessoas, das quais 37 responderam ao questionário e 8 graduandos(as) contribuíram com cartas pedagógicas. Destas, foram selecionadas apenas as cartas de estudantes de licenciatura para este recorte, totalizando quatro mulheres estudantes de licenciatura, pois as cartas pedagógicas abordam diretamente questões educacionais, refletindo sobre as desigualdades e desafios enfrentados pelas cotistas. O estudo aponta a necessidade de continuidade nas políticas públicas de inclusão, formação contínua dos(as) docentes e criação de espaços de diálogo sobre diversidade e antirracismo nas universidades, principalmente no magistério, profissão historicamente marcada por desigualdades de gênero e raça

**Palavras-chave:** Cotas raciais; Cartas pedagógicas; Educação; Mulheres negras.

## MUJERES NEGRAS BENEFICIARIAS DE LAS BECAS DE ACCIÓN AFIRMATIVA DE LA UNIVERSIDAD ESTATAL DE PARANÁ: ESCREVIVENCIAS Y CAMINOS FORMATIVOS

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar, a partir de las trayectorias de estudiantes becadas de una Universidad Estatal de Paraná (UNESPAR), relatos en cartas pedagógicas sobre las experiencias vividas por estas estudiantes y las acciones pedagógicas promovidas por la institución a través de las becas raciales. La investigación adoptó un enfoque cualitativo, utilizando la producción de cartas pedagógicas como método. Esta investigación es parte de un extracto de la tesis doctoral en educación de la Universidad Estatal de Maringá (UEM). Se invitó a participar a estudiantes becadas de cualquier semestre o año de uno de los programas de grado ofrecidos en uno de los siete campus de la UNESPAR. La invitación fue enviada a 1.250 personas, de las cuales 37 respondieron al cuestionario y 8 graduadas(os) contribuyeron con cartas pedagógicas. De estas, se seleccionaron solo las cartas de estudiantes de licenciatura para este recorte, totalizando cuatro mujeres estudiantes de licenciatura, ya que las cartas pedagógicas abordan directamente cuestiones educativas, reflexionando sobre las desigualdades y desafíos enfrentados por las becadas. El estudio señala la necesidad de continuar con las políticas públicas de inclusión, la formación continua del profesorado y la creación de espacios de diálogo sobre diversidad y antirracismo en las universidades, especialmente en la docencia, una profesión históricamente marcada por desigualdades de género y raza.

**Palabras clave:** Cuotas raciales; Cartas pedagógicas; Educación; Mujeres negras.

## Introduction

This study presents a segment of a doctoral thesis involving four Black female undergraduate students enrolled in licensure programs at the State University of Paraná (UNESPAR), who self-declared as brown and/or Black. The research commenced following approval from the Permanent Committee for Ethics in Research with Human Beings (COPEP)<sup>4</sup>.

An invitation to participate was extended to 1,250 individuals, with 37 responding to the questionnaire. Eight undergraduate students agreed to contribute pedagogical letters detailing their experiences as quota students at the higher education institution. From these, four students pursuing licensure were selected for this segment, as their pedagogical letters directly relate to education, serving to expose and reflect on the inequalities and challenges faced by quota students, in addition to bringing forth issues related to the theme in question.

In 1935, the expression "affirmative action" was first employed in the National Labor Relations Act in the United States. The objective of this expression is to eliminate barriers that hinder the access of certain groups to positions of power, such as in universities and the job market. The term encompasses a set of public policies aimed at benefiting minorities who have faced discrimination (Oliven, 2007; Vaz, 2022).

In alignment with Law 10.639/2003 (Brasil, 2003), which mandates the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African History and Culture in school curricula, it is fundamental to integrate themes related to Black identity into discussions about racial quotas in higher education. According to Gomes (2020), Law 12.288/10 (Statute of Racial Equality) and Law 12.711/2012 (Law of Social and Racial Quotas in Federal Institutions of Higher Education - IFES) undoubtedly represented a significant advance in democratizing access to higher education in the country by allocating vacancies for minority groups. These laws aim to overcome inequalities through institutionalized public policies and highlight the necessity of such legislations for inclusion and social reparation.

However, much remains to be done regarding the retention of these students. The expansion of access does not fully translate into effective maintenance, and challenges persist in ensuring continuous support for these groups.

<sup>4</sup> Certificate of Ethical Appreciation Submission - CAAE, number 70640523.6.0000.0104. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee - CEP on July 17, 2023, under opinion number: 6.187.196.

Furthermore, in accordance with Article 1, § 1 of Resolution No. 1 of June 17, 2004, from the National Education Council (CNE) (Brasil, 2004), and Article 5 of Deliberation 04/06, approved on August 2, 2006, from the State Education Council of Paraná (CEE), it is recommended that institutions reformulate their teaching programs to include the Education of Ethno-Racial Relations in disciplines and curricular activities in undergraduate and postgraduate courses (Brasil, 2014).

These transformations in the educational landscape are intended to value the culture of the Black Brazilian population. Therefore, universities must incorporate ethno-racial issues into their curricular proposals, recognizing the Law as an achievement of social reparation and rethinking institutional racism and quota policies.

It is crucial to revisit history and reflect on the marks that continue to influence our memory concerning Black identity. This leads us to evaluate the 21st century and acknowledge that we are still far from achieving true democracy regarding racial issues. Nevertheless, achievements such as the promulgated Laws should be celebrated by this group, which has suffered damage to its dignity.

Therefore, the objective of this study was to analyze, based on the trajectories of quota students at the State University of Paraná (UNESPAR) as reported in pedagogical letters, the experiences lived by these students and the pedagogical actions promoted by the institution through racial quotas.

In his writings, Gadotti (2011) emphasizes that a letter enables complicity between the writer and the reader. Furthermore, he mentions that the writer invites dialogue, thus representing a powerful pedagogical tool for teaching. These strategies were fundamental to achieving the proposed objectives related to trajectories and paths.

### **Research Participants: Black Women**

To conduct this research, we requested authorization from the Pro-Rector of the State University of Paraná (UNESPAR). Following authorization, we opted to allow the letters to be exclusively drafted by interested students, ensuring that all participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF).

The Pro-Rectory provided the emails and telephone numbers of the quota students, enabling the researcher to directly contact them to present the research objectives and invite their participation. The undergraduate students wrote their letters with the aim of responding to questions related to racial quotas and their trajectories.

The selection criteria were: choosing quota students, who identified as Black and/or brown, and were enrolled in any semester or year of an undergraduate program offered across one of UNESPAR's seven campuses.

We contacted potential participants via email and messages, inviting them to participate. Students were informed that participation in the research was voluntary, with the freedom to refuse or withdraw at any time, without any negative consequences. Acceptance was formalized through a standard form provided by the researcher. Participants signed the Free and Informed Consent Form, and the project received approval from the Permanent Committee for Ethics in Research with Human Beings (COPEP) of the State University of Maringá.

Subsequently, we received eight letters, and from these, we selected those from four women, students in licensure programs: two from União da Vitória, one from Curitiba, and one from Paranavaí, all cities located in Paraná. The selection of undergraduate students from licensure programs allows for an analysis of how they perceive education and the role of women in this field. They likely reflect on their own role as future educators and how gender issues might impact their academic and professional trajectories.

The undergraduate students were informed that, if necessary, photographs and audio and/or video recordings could be made during the research, although this proved unnecessary. The information obtained was used exclusively for scientific purposes and treated with the utmost secrecy and confidentiality to protect the participants' identities. Fictitious names were chosen by the academics to preserve their identities.

Following the letter drafting, there was a phase of reading and analyzing them. This study provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on different narratives about the Black population and to reconsider their own life stories, understanding the importance of the study on Black identity.

The questionnaire aimed to collect information on the participants' personal identification, occupations, economic conditions, educational trajectories, as well as their

opinions on racial quotas. These data provided a comprehensive view of the participants' "opinions, beliefs, feelings, interests, expectations, and lived situations" (Gil, 1999, p. 132).

The pedagogical letters were utilized as a listening strategy to comprehend the lives, anxieties, challenges, and possibilities of resistance and overcoming for the quota students involved in the research. Thus, this study aimed to give visibility to the life stories and formation of the participating women through the narratives expressed in their pedagogical letters.

Regarding Black women, Gomes (1995, p. 115) points out that "professionally occupying this space, previously permitted only to men and whites, signifies much more than a simple professional insertion. It is the rupture with one of the various stereotypes created about the Brazilian Black." The author further highlights:

The arrival in teaching for the young Black woman is the culmination of multiple ruptures and affirmations: the struggle for the continuity of studies – a fact that even today stands as a complicating factor in women's history; the search for a profession with a school education that guarantees her a space in the job market; the prospect of acting in a profession that allows her another timeframe to dedicate to another job or that enables her to reconcile domestic activities (Gomes, 1999, p. 60).

With the insertion of Black women into the teaching profession, they fought for the possibility of a better future, despite the teaching career often being associated with dedication to household care. Even with women entering the teaching profession, they continued to be concerned about their families. In this context, Almeida (2006, p. 77) emphasizes that women "were consistent in desiring more instruction, greater knowledge, and the preservation of family unity," which demonstrates that they challenged many prejudices and overcame oppression and submission. Thus, the possibility of exploring gender studies in the field of education emerged.

The trajectory of women throughout history has been marked by many struggles and challenges. Although the social value of women was traditionally linked to the private sphere, they managed to gain space in the public sector, which demonstrates the strength of women in pursuing their objectives, despite the persistence of gender inequalities. Therefore, it is fundamental to highlight women in teaching, given the significant relevance of the theme to society. Women, especially Black women, continue to be seen as inferior to men.

The history of Brazilian female primary teaching is, principally, a history of women, of an invisible force that fought consciously and spontaneously in

defense of their beliefs and their will [...] At no point did they set aside their concern for childhood, for family, or cease to express their repudiation of violence and all forms of exploitation and oppression (Almeida, 1998, p. 77).

Therefore, it is essential to recognize and value the achievements of women, providing students with access to different representations that show women in prominent and powerful roles. Their role extends beyond domestic services; they are striving for a better world and fighting for a society where all people are respected and valued.

### **Pedagogical Letters as Methodology**

In the 21st century, the use of letters as a research strategy in the school routine is uncommon, largely due to the pervasive use of technology in schools and society. Nevertheless, writing remains essential, as "[...] through writing, it is possible to develop distinct competencies and skills, besides possessing great representativeness as a means of communication, inevitably in the digital and virtual age in which we currently live" (Portal, 2012, p. 16).

While the use of technological resources is relevant, their exclusive application in the classroom limits other possibilities; this is one of the reasons for utilizing letters as a research strategy. Thus, we employed pedagogical letters as both a methodology and a didactic strategy. Letters, in general, can be written or printed and serve to communicate with one or more individuals and/or organizations, aiming to achieve a specific purpose. In this case, they served as a means to give visibility to the voices of the participating Black women.

The distinction between letters and pedagogical letters lies in the content each seeks to reveal. Pedagogical letters are written with the purpose of denouncing the reality of education, whereas not all letters possess this pedagogical characteristic. An example of the latter would be letters written by romantic partners, which aim to express affection, love, and endearment.

[...] a letter will only have a pedagogical character if its content can interact with the human being, communicate the human within oneself to the human in the other, provoking this pedagogical dialogue. Being a bit more incisive in this reflection, we would say that a Pedagogical Letter necessarily needs to be *pregnant* with pedagogy. To carry pedagogical blood, flesh, and bone (Camini, 2012, p. 35).

Thus, pedagogical letters serve a critical or reflective function concerning the educational field, while ordinary letters are more informal and can address any type of theme, particularly those of a personal nature.

Camargo (2011, p. 11) emphasizes that, "[...] subjects who write and read letters leave marks; marks that can provide clues for an interpretation of the constitution of the writing subject, within the writing itself."

Handwriting is still employed at certain times in the educational environment, such as during assessments, university entrance exams, and in the teaching of the Portuguese language. However, this practice has become less common in contemporary society.

A letter is a document, a piece for dialogue, prose, a more direct, colloquial communication, addressed to an interlocutor. In them, there is a sense that is simultaneously objective and subjective, colloquial and formal, prosaic and poetic. Within the realm of information and knowledge exchange, epistles more directly presuppose a relationship between the self and the other (Moraes; Paiva, 2018, p. 11).

Therefore, pedagogical letters, as a means of communication, transcend the simple exchange of information, offering a space for a more intimate and personal dialogue. They combine objective and subjective aspects, in addition to conveying perceptions about education through the writer's perspective. In this way, letters establish a relationship between the writer and the reader, promoting the exchange of information and feelings.

Furthermore, during the research, we adopted a qualitative approach and utilized pedagogical letters as methodological instruments. We also collected quantitative data to clarify aspects related to the group of women investigated, aiming to achieve the proposed objectives (Godoy, 1995).

According to the Aurélio dictionary, in addition to possessing various meanings, including that of correspondence, a letter means "1. A written message for one or more people, sent by mail, inside an envelope. 2. Each piece of a deck of cards" (Ferreira, 2008, p. 92).

The production of letters demands considerable time for writing, reflecting on what is being written, and analyzing the final product before sending. In modern times, immediacy leads few people to write letters.

Authors Sousa and Cabral (2015) emphasize that letters possess a language determined by the communicative intention between interlocutors, also serving as an easily accessible pedagogical instrument. Regarding the use of letter writing, Paula (2018) highlights that:

Writing letters was an activity proposed by educators in schools and was not limited to practicing a textual genre focused on university entrance exam essays. The writing of letters went beyond the classrooms, especially love letters, which were carefully drafted by enamored couples. For the illiterate, there were scribes, responsible for writing and sharing the emotions of people who did not have access to schooling processes. Formal, informal, and love letters were part of people's daily lives. The waiting for letters and their reception were expressive moments. The world was known through the descriptions of friends and relatives. The waiting, the time, the quality of the text, the calligraphy of the letters, the envelopes, and the ink of the pens—all these elements were carefully prepared by those who drafted the letters to impress the reader. The writing was authentic, creative, fictional, or realistic, depending on the context and situation. Letters were documents and testimonies of a distant time that seems unlikely to return (Paula, 2018, p. 17).

It is important to note that, according to the author, there was planning involved in writing letters, from the type of paper to the color of the pen. Both writer and recipient were connected, even at a distance, through these letters, and Paula (2018) laments the disappearance of this custom in daily life.

Narrative is part of human history and, therefore, should be studied within its social, economic, political, historical, and educational contexts. "It is common to hear, through various narratives, that human beings are, by nature, storytellers, and that generations repeat this act almost involuntarily" (Sousa; Cabral, 2015, p. 150).

Camini (2012, p. 8) stresses that "pedagogical letters need to be written, read, and responded to, as this creates a cultural circle that, in addition to promoting communication, generates knowledge and liberation."

Pedagogical letters have an educational character, serving to denounce the reality of education, while informal letters express feelings of affection and reciprocity between people. Therefore, it is fundamental that pedagogical letters address themes related to education.

## **Research Pathways**

With authorization to conduct the research, we were able to contact the Pro-Rector, which provided the contacts of quota students. This resulted in a total of 1,250 invitations sent via email, to both men and women. Of these, we received 37 questionnaire responses. However, for this specific research, we chose to select only future female teachers, and thus obtained four responses from four Black female academics who agreed to participate.

We made this choice because the trajectory of women, especially Black women, in the field of Brazilian education is marked by incessant struggles against intertwined systems of oppression concerning gender, race, and social class. Furthermore, since colonial times, Black women were among the last to enter the teaching profession, facing not only barriers imposed by patriarchy but also racial prejudice and educational exclusion.

The necessary information, along with the link for completing the ethno-racial self-declaration and the semi-structured questionnaire, was sent to these participants. Additionally, we requested that they produce a pedagogical letter about their trajectories as Black quota students, which was to be sent via email to the researcher.

The questionnaire was structured in a Google Forms document titled "Interviewee Identification Form" and organized into the following sections: Identification, Employment and Financial Situation, Academic Trajectory, and (Survivorship) and School Trajectories. The responses from the four undergraduate students in licensure programs were analyzed, and all aforementioned stages are detailed below.

**Table 1 - Identification**

Students	Gender	Race/Racial	Date of birth and age	Civil status	City of study	City of residence
Juju	Female	Parda (brown)	21/09/1995 28 años	Married	Porto União	União da Vitória
Nathy	Female	Parda (brown)	31/08/2005 18 years old	Single	União da Vitória	União da Vitória
Negra	Female	Parda (brown)	02/03/1998 25 years old	Single	Guaíraçá	Paranavaí
Vitória	Female	Black	25/04/2004 19 years old	Single	Curitiba	Curitiba

**Source:** Authors' collection (2023).

In Table 1, it is observed that all interviewed women who wrote the selected letters identified as female. They are undergraduate students in Biology, History, Geography, and Visual Arts.

Regarding ethno-racial self-declaration, Juju, Nathy, and Negra declared themselves as *pardas* (brown), while Helena identified as *preta* (black). As for birth dates, Juju was born in 1995 and is 25 years old; Nathy was born in 2005 and is 18 years old; Negra was born in 1998 and is also 25 years old; and Vitória was born in 2004, making her 19 years old.

Only Juju is married, while the other participants are single. The three reside in different cities: Juju and Nathy are in União da Vitória-PR, Negra lives in Paranavaí-PR, and Vitória in Curitiba-PR. When questioned about the city where they study, Juju and Negra reported attending institutions in different locations from where they reside: Juju studies in União da Vitória, although she resides in Porto União-PR, while Negra lives in Guaíraçá-PR and studies in Paranavaí-PR.

**Table 2 - Identification**

Students	Means of transportation used to reach the Higher Education Institution.	Attended high school at an institution	Type of secondary school attended	If you have children, number and age	Religion
Juju	Motorcycle and car	Public school	Normal Mode / Teaching	Yes 1 - 11 years	Evangelical
Nathy	Bicycle	Public school	General Education	No	Umbanda
Negra	Public or Collective Transportation	Public school	General Education	No	No religion
Vitória	Public or Collective Transportation	Public school	General Education	No	Umbanda

**Source:** Authors' collection (2023).

Table 2 highlights information regarding the transportation used to reach the higher education institution. Juju primarily uses a motorcycle or car for transport, Nathy goes by bicycle, while Negra and Vitória utilize public transportation to reach the university.

The undergraduate student Juju was the only one to mention that, prior to studying at UNESPAR, she attended a high school in the Normal/Teacher Training modality. The other students completed their high school education under the General Education modality. Additionally, only Juju is a mother of an 11-year-old child, while the others do not have children. Regarding religion, Juju is Evangelical, Nathy and Vitória participate in Umbanda, and Negra does not practice any religion.

**Table 3 - Labor and financial situation**

Students	Profession or paid activity, position or function	Weekly working hours	Monthly income or remuneration	Participation in retention strategies offered by the Higher Education Institution.
Juju	Endemic Diseases Agent	40 hours	Between 1,320.00 and 2,640.00	None
Nathy	Bakery attendant	40 to 60 hours	Less than R\$1,320.00	None
Negra	Teacher	10 to 20 hours	Between 1,320.00 and 2,640.00	None
Vitória	Call Center Operator	20 to 40 hours	Less than R\$1,320.00	None

**Source:** Authors' collection (2023).

Table 3 addresses the participants' employment and financial situation in relation to their profession or paid activity. Juju works as an Endemic Disease Agent, Nathy as a bakery attendant, Negra is a teacher, and Vitória works as a Call Center Operator.

Regarding their weekly work hours, Juju works 40 hours, Nathy's hours vary between 40 and 60 hours, Negra works 10 to 20 hours, and Vitória has a workload of 20 to 40 hours per week. In terms of monthly income, Juju and Negra receive between R\$1,320.00 and R\$2,640.00, while Nathy and Vitória earn less than R\$1,320.00.

As for the four women's participation in retention strategies offered by the Higher Education Institution, none of them participated.

**Table 4 - Labor and financial situation**

Students	Participation in the Student Assistance Program (PAE)	Which aid(s) did you have access to	Participates or has participated in social programs or projects
Juju	No	None	None
Nathy	No	None	None
Negra	No	None	None
Vitória	No	None	None

Source: Authors' collection (2023).

In Table 4, the four students reported that they did not participate in the Student Assistance Program (PAE) or any other social programs or projects. Additionally, none of them received any type of aid.

**Table 5** - Academic career

Students	Participant in a study and/or research group, black movement or others	Course chosen at UNESPAR	Start and end of course	Period of study	Student at which of UNESPAR's seven campuses
Juju	No	Biology	2020 2024	Between the 7th and 8th semester	União da Vitória
Nathy	No	History	2023 2027	Between 1st and 2nd semester	União da Vitória
Negra	No	Geography	2018 2021	Between the 7th and 8th semester	Paranavaí
Vitória	No	Visual Arts	2023 2027	Between 1st and 2nd semester	Curitiba I

Source: Authors' collection (2023).

In Table 5, pertaining to academic trajectory, none of the four women participate in study and/or research groups, Black movements, or other similar activities.

Regarding their chosen courses at UNESPAR: Juju opted for Biology, started in 2020, and is currently in her 7th or 8th semester at the União da Vitória campus. Nathy chose History, began in 2023, and is in her 1st or 2nd semester at the União da Vitória campus. Negra opted for Geography, started in 2018, and is in her 7th or 8th semester at the Paranavaí campus. Vitória chose Visual Arts, began in 2023, and is in her 1st or 2nd semester at the Curitiba I campus.

For writing the letters, participants could base their responses on these questions or the broader theme. The questions asked were: 1) During your integration into the institution, what were your greatest challenges and difficulties? How did you overcome them? 2) As a student, did you experience situations of racism, prejudice, discrimination, or religious intolerance? How did you deal with them? 3) What is your opinion on the Racial Quotas Policy and the reservation of vacancies for Black (*pretas/pretos*) and brown (*pardas/pardos*) students in institutions? 4) Can Racial Quotas promote racial equity, provide equal access for Black (*negros/negras*) and brown (*pardos/pardas*) individuals to Higher Education Institutions, and serve as historical reparation for injustices caused to the Black population during slavery? Please comment. 5) Does or did the institution where you study offer classes or any activities related to ethno-racial issues or diversity? In which discipline(s)? Following this, analyses of the letters from the four participating women in the research are presented.

### **Discussion and Analysis of the Letters**

The analysis of the students' letters was conducted through categorical analysis (Bardin, 2011). Responses to each question were carefully read and interpreted with the aim of identifying the main themes, perspectives, and common experiences among the students regarding each topic.

According to Bardin (2011, p. 108), this type of analysis "therefore seeks to identify the units of meaning present in the content, grouping them into categories that allow for data interpretation, with the objective of clarifying the meaning of the messages and revealing the underlying structures of the texts." Therefore, for each topic, some questions were listed, and students who wished could write their letters based on these inquiries, as follows: During your integration into the institution, what were your greatest challenges and difficulties? How did you overcome them? In response to this question, undergraduate student Juju expressed difficulties in her undergraduate program, stating:

Studying in the Emergency Remote Learning mode [...] due to countless difficult assignments that were worth few points, I ended up dropping out of the course at the time; currently [...] I am going into the third semester (Juju, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

This situation is corroborated by Moran (2015), who points out that remote learning poses a great challenge, as the absence of direct interaction can result in emotional detachment, compromising students' motivation and commitment.

Juju's quote reveals a difficult experience with Emergency Remote Learning (ERE), which was a reality for many students during the coronavirus pandemic. Despite temporarily dropping out, she resumed her studies and is now in her third semester, demonstrating resilience in the face of adversity.

Another student mentioned that the routine was exhausting: "Tiredness, I have to endure the tiring routine to have a better future" (Nathy, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

Negra stated: "To graduate within 4 years, and the difficulties are the lack of professors" (Negra, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

This challenge is corroborated by Libâneo (2013) and Moran (2015), who mention that the absence of qualified professors and the overload of activities can compromise students' performance and the quality of education, making it difficult to complete the course within the expected timeframe.

The student Vitória was the only one of the four who mentioned: "Overall, I had no difficulties" (Vitória, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

It is not common or expected for students not to face difficulties during their undergraduate integration, given that academia can be challenging for many, especially at the beginning, concerning the adaptation process.

Regarding the question: As a student, did you experience situations of racism, prejudice, discrimination, or religious intolerance? How did you deal with them? Generally, three of the four participants wrote that they did not experience situations of racism in their lives. "No, I did not experience it at any time; I really liked the college environment and the people who studied there, even with the short time of experience I had there" (Juju, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

Another participant in the research recalled some experiences that evidenced racism; however, she did not wish to detail how the situation was experienced. She only mentioned: "Yes, I took a deep breath and debated about it" (Nathy, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

The other two participants responded that they had no negative experiences, stating, respectively: "Everything went well during my education" (Negra, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

And finally, the student revealed: "I did not witness any situation of racism" (Vitória, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

However, as Almeida (2019) points out, structural racism is invisible to many precisely because it is embedded in daily practices and institutions, which often leads experiences of discrimination to be ignored or minimized.

We also posed the following question: What is your opinion on the Racial Quotas Policy and the reservation of vacancies for Black (*pretas/pretos*) and brown (*pardas/pardos*) students in institutions?

It is excellent that we have the opportunity to be able to attend a public university, showing society that we, of different colors and races, exist, that we also deserve a better future, with a good education to qualify in the job market. However, these quotas cover few vacancies that are allocated, so it is only fair that they be divided equally among whites, browns, and Blacks (Juju, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

Juju highlights the importance of having the opportunity to attend a public university, which, for many, represents a significant achievement. This statement reflects a positive view on the democratization of higher education in Brazil, especially for historically marginalized groups. She recognizes that racial quotas represent a significant advance but also points out a limitation: the number of available vacancies. However, the racial quotas policy does not aim for an equal division of vacancies among all ethnic groups but rather to compensate for historical and social inequalities that marginalize certain groups, such as Black and brown individuals.

The silence, the denial of racism in the school environment, and the lack of investment in teacher training for the promotion of an anti-racist education have greatly contributed to schools being a place of pain and suffering for Black children, youth, and adults (Santos, 2023, p. 20).

Santos's (2023) quote indicates that by ignoring racism and not investing in teacher training to promote an anti-racist education, schools end up being an environment of exclusion

and suffering for Black students. The silence about racism and the lack of adequate training for educators perpetuate a cycle of discrimination that makes the school experience for Black students difficult, often traumatizing, and obstructs the potential for inclusive and transformative education.

Another student emphasizes: "Very important and necessary" (Nathy, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

Similarly, undergraduate student Negra mentions: "Racial quotas are essential as they will provide opportunities for Black people to enter a public university" (Negra, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

As Vaz (2022, p. 82-83) highlights: "[...] racial quotas, by expanding Black presence in social positions previously monopolized by whiteness, dilute the focus on exclusive or solitary representation – even if positive – naturalizing Black presence and gradually collectivizing the emancipatory achievement."

Through her letter, the student continues to state: "It's a way to include certain social groups that don't have as many chances to go to college; in my view, this program is great in that regard" (Vitória, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

Through her letter, the student emphasized that, as a Black woman and a quota student, she occupies a space historically reserved for the white elite. She recognizes that the presence of Black bodies and knowledge in this environment is scarce, and for this reason, her achievement was celebrated.

The participants wrote in their letters about the following inquiry: Can Racial Quotas promote racial equity, provide equal access for Black (*negros/negras*) and brown (*pardos/pardas*) individuals to Higher Education Institutions, and serve as historical reparation for injustices caused to the Black population during slavery? Please comment. Regarding this question, Juju points out:

In my point of view, everyone should have normal access to vacancies, because this quota policy seems to say that those vacancies are only for browns and Blacks as if we were not equal to others or did not deserve it like everyone else; it seems we have to fight to get one of the few available quota vacancies and are treated as something separate from society (Juju, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

The excerpt from Juju's letter prompts reflection on the perception of racial quotas and their impact on quota students, especially regarding the feeling of being less privileged than others, even though she occupies a place gained due to a social reparation policy.

Thus, "[...] the encounter of young people of different ethno-racial affiliations, via quota policy, is accompanied by yet another tension and conflict. Young Black quota students are, in reality, Black bodies that oppose the ideology of Brazilian color and body" (Gomes, 2017, p. 116).

Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the experiences lived in academia and how they influence the guarantee of rights for young Black men and women, offering Black people the opportunity to access positions of power that were historically denied to them.

For the other students, quotas are fundamental, according to the excerpts from their letters. "Yes, but remembering that this is the minimum because nothing will repair the pains suffered from slavery" (Nathy, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

Negra assesses: "Quotas are fundamental in addition to promoting equity and providing opportunities for Black people to have access to higher education" (Negra, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

Vitória simply states: "Yes" (Vitória, 2023, sic Excerpt from the letter).

In agreement with the four women, we believe that racial quotas serve to repair the historical damages caused to the Black population and to restructure existing relations.

The objective of racial quotas is related to the social inclusion of marginalized ethno-racial groups to mitigate the current negative effects – generally from a historical past – of institutionally and structurally disseminated discriminations in society (Vaz, 2022, p. 80).

Therefore, quotas are fundamental and necessary, as they are a way to ensure opportunities for the new generation of the Black population.

We also inquired: Does or did the institution where you study offer classes or any activities related to ethno-racial issues or diversity? In which discipline(s)? Three of the four students wrote no, and only Juju mentioned she did not remember.

Finally, in response to the question: How do you evaluate your experience at UNESPAR as a quota student? Juju and Nathy mentioned it was excellent, while Vitória and Negra responded it was fair.

Despite advancements in the social situation of the Black population since the approval of the Constitution, when comparing the exercise and enjoyment of fundamental rights between white and Black citizens, there is still a clear inequality. This inequality, according to scholars of racial relations in Brazil, can only be mitigated by recognizing that we are a structurally racist country and that specific social groups have been historically prevented from having the same social conditions because of their color, origin, race, and/or ethnicity (Felipe, 2019, p. 6).

According to the author, Brazil is still a racist country, and when comparing Black and white individuals, it becomes clear that inequalities, in all aspects, still persist.

Felipe (2019) reveals that there is still a significant difference between the social reality of the Black and white populations in Brazil, regarding the "[...] social reality of the Black population playing the leading role in situations of greater poverty, lower schooling, greater police violence against their bodies, etc." (Felipe, 2019, p. 12).

These facts occur due to the marks that Black individuals carry due to the period of slavery; therefore, historical reparations through social actions, among them racial quotas, are necessary.

### **Consideraciones finales**

This study aimed to analyze the experiences of four Black female quota students at the State University of Paraná (UNESPAR), as reported in their pedagogical letters, and the pedagogical actions promoted by the institution through racial quotas. By adopting a qualitative approach with the production of pedagogical letters as a methodological instrument, we gained insight into the challenges these participants faced during their academic journeys.

Female teaching has become a field of resistance and advocacy. Although teaching was seen as a socially acceptable occupation for women, it was still associated with low remuneration. Black women entering this profession not only sought a career that guaranteed some prestige and better pay, but also a space for affirming their identity and achieving autonomy. This was particularly true because education was historically restricted by social class and skin color, reflecting the structural inequalities that have profoundly marked and continue to mark Brazilian society.

Therefore, we chose Black female students from licensure programs to highlight that educational policies and reforms, despite offering advancements, have continued to reflect racial and gender inequalities, especially in spaces that exclude and marginalize the Black population.

The students' letters expressively revealed that they faced no difficulties during their educational paths. Furthermore, the participants underscored the necessity of racial quotas to ensure the access and retention of Black students in higher education.

The research also showed that while UNESPAR promotes inclusion policies, such as racial quotas, there is still a long way to go in terms of pedagogical actions aimed at effectively promoting an anti-racist education. The students' testimonies indicated that, despite some recognition of quotas, the lack of adequate teacher training and specific pedagogical strategies to address racial issues in the classroom still limits the creation of a truly inclusive university environment. This is evident as they mentioned in their writings that they could not recall if UNESPAR offered or had offered classes or activities related to ethno-racial issues or diversity during their courses.

Moreover, the use of pedagogical letters as a methodological tool proved fruitful, allowing the students to authentically express their experiences, challenges, and perspectives. This contributed to a deeper understanding of the reality of Black female quota students at UNESPAR.

Finally, the study signals the ongoing need for public policies focused on the inclusion and retention of Black students in universities. This includes the implementation of affirmative actions, continuous training for faculty, and the creation of more spaces for dialogue about diversity and anti-racism within the academic environment. Such efforts are crucial to ensure that, regardless of their race, class, or origin, students can be respected and valued within this sphere of power.

This research contributes to understanding the experiences of quota students at UNESPAR, emphasizing the importance of higher education as a tool for social emancipation. Thus, the study highlighted that the examination and discussion of Black identity remain essential.

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