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Micaela Sousa

André Fonseca

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# INFORMAL LEARNING IN VIOLIN TEACHING – A STUDY ON THE INCLUSION OF TRADITIONAL FOLK MUSIC FROM THE AZORES

#### **ABSTRACT**

In Portugal, music teachers in official music schools make minimal use of traditional Portuguese folk music, and there is a notable absence of research examining its use in the classroom and the informal learning practices associated with it. In light of these considerations, an educational project was developed in 2021/2022 as part of the supervised teaching practice at the Conservatório Regional de Ponta Delgada (CRPD), which involved seven violin students between the ages of 9 and 14. This project was about learning traditional folk songs from the Azores, which were prepared using informal learning practices - such as learning by ear, memorizing without scores, improvisation - and performing them in public. Concurrently, a study was conducted to analyze the impact of this intervention on the students' learning process. A further aim of the study was to assess the applicability of combining formal and informal learning practices in the teaching of violin at the CRPD. As such, a qualitative study was conducted, employing a range of data collection techniques, including direct classroom observation with field notes, video recordings, semi-structured interviews with students, anonymous surveys of parents and concert attendees, as well as 27 violin teachers. The data were subjected to content analysis techniques, organizing them into categories and sub-categories. The outcomes of this analysis demonstrate that it is possible to integrate formal and informal learning practices in violin teaching at the CRPD. Moreover, it was shown that this merging of approaches had a beneficial effect on the students' motivation, while simultaneously facilitating the advancement of technical, musical, cognitive, and social abilities. Furthermore, the broader implementation of informal learning methodologies an increased receptivity to diverse musical styles and a more nuanced understanding of the students' social context and life experience contribute to a more multifaceted, meaningful and comprehensive learning process.

Keywords: Music; Learning; Teaching; Skills; Informal.

## 1. Introduction

In Portugal, teachers of specialized arts education rarely use traditional Portuguese folk music (Alves, 2016; Domingues, 2022). Moreover, when such music is used, the methodology predominantly adheres to conventional teaching methods, namely the use of written scores, as opposed to learning through ear training and imitation.

Indeed, there is a limited body of literature examining the use of traditional Portuguese folk music in an educational setting (Alves, 2016; Santos, 2022; Domingues, 2022) and the informal learning practices associated with this musical tradition (Ferreira & Vieira, 2013). Furthermore, there appears to be no research examining the attitudes and values of popular musicians and their potential impact on learning outcomes (Green, 2017; Mariguddi, 2022).

With this in mind, a project was designed and implemented during a supervised teaching practice at the Conservatório Regional de Ponta Delgada (CRPD), which focused on teaching Azorean folk songs through informal learning methods, and culminated in a public performance in collaboration with Viola da Terra¹ students (Sousa, 2022). Concurrently, an empirical study was conducted to assess the impact of the project and investigate the role of informal learning in the context of music education.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In recent decades, a growing body of research has highlighted the importance of informal learning environments beyond the traditional classroom setting (Rice, 1985; Bailey and Doubleday, 1990; Eraut, 2000; Malcolm et al., 2003; Sefton-Green & Soep, 2007).

Indeed, Green (2000, 2017; Mariguddi, 2022) highlights that, in addition to formal education, there are alternative means of transmitting and acquiring musical skills and knowledge, known as informal music learning practices. As posited by the author (Green, 2017), informal learning encompasses a set of practices through which musicians learn independently through observation and imitation, often with the assistance or encouragement of others.

Green's research gave rise to what Mariguddi (2022, p. 442) describes as the informal learning model, which is based on five principles (D'Amore, 2009; Green, 2017):

- Learning music that students like, choose, and identify with.
- Learning by ear and through imitation.
- Learning together with friends and colleagues.
- Acquiring skills and knowledge in a personal way.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Traditional stringed instrument from the Azores.

 Maintaining an interconnection between listening, performing, improvising, and composing.

As Green (2017) asserts, peer and group learning are indispensable elements of informal music learning practices. This approach entails the formation of musical groups from an early age, the sharing of creative building blocks such as chords or scales, and the refinement of improvisation and composition through collaborative negotiation. It also encompasses observing other musicians during performances or rehearsals, exchanging advice and technical tips, discussing theoretical information, and talking about music in general.

## 2.1 Attitudes and Values of Popular Musicians

In addition to analyzing learning practices associated with the acquisition of skills and knowledge of musical performance and technique, Green (2000, 2017) investigated the attitudes and values associated with this process. The author found that the learning practices of popular musicians are more spontaneous than those of musicians in formal education contexts. This type of learning is more in line with mother tongue development and is influenced by their cultural experiences (Green, 2000, 2017).

Green (2017) found that popular musicians expressed not only enjoyment, but also a love and passion for music. The author concluded that the most important values for these musicians could be grouped into two categories: 1) performance and creativity, and 2) personal and emotional aspects, such as cooperation, trust, shared musical tastes, and passion for music.

## 2.2 Combining formal and informal learning

The existing literature shows that formal and informal learning encompass the transmission of specific skills and knowledge. It also shows that both modes of learning have their inherent conflicts, advantages and disadvantages (Feichas, 2010).

Although there is a distinction between formal and informal learning, they are not separate spheres that are mutually exclusive. Rather, they can and do overlap, and should not be seen as opposites (Green, 2000, 2017; Folkestad, 2006). In most learning situations, both types of learning are present and interact simultaneously, even at different levels (Folkestad, 2006).

In this regard, Feichas (2010) argues that pedagogical approaches based on informal practices can foster the appreciation of musical abilities and expertise, acknowledging the diverse stages of student development and broadening musical perspectives. The author states that this approach values all musical genres equally, attenuates Eurocentric perspectives, and increases levels of motivation. Consequently, this pedagogical approach can be considered a pedagogy of diversity and inclusion.

# 3. Purposes of the study

This article presents the findings of a study conducted as part of an educational project that sought to elucidate and examine the pedagogical potential of informal learning practices intrinsic to traditional Azorean folk music in the context of formal violin teaching at the CRPD.

To achieve this objective, a project was devised and implemented with the specific aim of enabling students to learn traditional Azorean folk songs through the use of informal learning strategies. The project culminated in a public performance by the students.

The qualitative study sought to assess the impact of the intervention and answer the following research questions:

- What are the implications of using informal learning practices and traditional Azorean music for students' development?
- What is the feasibility of combining formal and informal learning practices in violin teaching at the CRPD?

Furthermore, the study aimed to gain insight into the perceptions and practices of a group of violin teachers regarding the inclusion of informal strategies in violin lessons.

# 4. Description of the research project

The empirical challenges identified and the subsequent literature review resulted in the implementation of an action research methodology (Fine & Torre, 2021). Vilelas (2009) posits that action research begins with the identification of a specific problem and the subsequent delineation of an intervention, which is then subjected to verification in order to ascertain whether the problem has been resolved. An intervention and research project were therefore devised and are outlined below.

# 4.1 Intervention methodologies

The project was carried out in the following stages:

- 1) Selection and adaptation of the repertoire
- 2) Guided music listening sessions
- 3) Work carried out both in and outside the classroom
- 4) Preparation for and holding of a public performance

The selected repertoire comprised the following pieces: "Mané Chiné" (Pico Island), "Chamarrita" (São Miguel Island), "Canção de Embalar" (popular) and "Sol Baixo" (Santa Maria Island).

These songs were chosen and adapted to align with the individual learning needs and abilities of each student.

In the context of classroom-based learning, students learned the selected songs through guided listening to audio recordings and video presentations. Subsequently, the songs were analyzed aurally and broken down into smaller parts, with each student then required to reproduce each part with their voice and then with the violin. Once they had learned the Azorean folk songs, the students were instructed to improvise over the main melody. Throughout the process, the use of sheet music was avoided (Green, 2000, 2017; Mariguddi, 2022).

In addition to the work in the classroom, interaction with the students took place via digital platforms. This interaction facilitated the exchange of ideas, the submission of assignment requests, the sharing of explanatory videos, and the monitoring of student progress.

In preparation for the public performance, the students engaged in rehearsals with the Viola da Terra teacher and his students. All the participants in the project, including students and teachers, performed at the public event. The atmosphere on stage was relaxed, and everyone sang, played and improvised together.

## 4.2 Study methodologies

In addition to the intervention described above, a study was conducted to evaluate the impact of the project's implementation and to address the research questions.

The participants in the project were seven CRPD students, their parents, the audience present at the public performance and 27 violin teachers. Data collection took place between November 2021 and May 2022.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study, ensuring respect for the principles of confidentiality and voluntariness.

The research was conducted using a qualitative paradigm (Taherdoost, 2022), which is concerned with collecting reliable and systematic information on specific aspects of social reality.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, anonymous questionnaires, direct observation with field notes and video recordings.

Semi-structured interviews are a widely used tool in the social sciences (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). They facilitate a more nuanced understanding of individual differences, flexibility in time management, a diverse approach to topics, and adaptation to the interviewee (Afonso, 2005), thereby enabling researchers to clarify interviewee responses (Máximo-Esteves, 2008). In this case, the interview format proved effective given that the participants were children. Seven students, aged between 9 and 14, were interviewed using two different scripts of questions: one for the active group of three students and another for the control group of four. The interviews were conducted to obtain the students' opinions and perceptions about the project, traditional folk music, and the informal learning process.

The student selection was based on practical factors: the active group included the supervised teaching practice students, and the control group included students whose classes were observed without direct participation. They all belonged to the collaborating teacher's class at the CRPD.

Regarding questionnaires, the literature demonstrates that this method is an effective means of gathering qualitative data, offering benefits such as the ability to reach a large number of individuals, ensuring anonymity, and avoiding the direct influence of the researcher (Somekh & Lewin, 2005; Fonseca, 2014; Young, 2015). The selection of this methodology ensured the acquisition of anonymous and impartial perspectives from three groups: three parents of the participating students, 16 members of the audience at the public performance, and 27 violin teachers. A different questionnaire was prepared for each group.<sup>2</sup>

The questionnaires for the students' parents and the violin teachers were made available on the Google Forms platform and shared via a link. The 27 teachers were selected using purposive sampling (Robson, 2002, p. 265; Gray, 2004, p. 324), whereby the selection of participants is based on the specific profile of the research needs (Robson, 2002; Yin, 2011) to obtain the broadest possible perspective of the object of study (Yin, 2011). In this instance, teachers employed in Portugal were selected, representing a diverse range of age groups, levels of education, years of experience and geographical locations. Questionnaires were distributed to the audience in both paper and digital formats immediately after the concert.

In this context, direct observation is a reliable and valuable data collection method (Afonso, 2005; Ekberg et al., 2021). This method facilitated the documentation of the students' spontaneous responses. Similarly, field notes are considered a valuable resource for collecting information, as they encompass interpretative notes, ideas, questions, feelings, and other impressions that emerge during observation (Máximo-Esteves, 2008). Direct observation with field notes was carried out during 13 violin lessons, eight rehearsals and the public performance, which were recorded on video (about 8 hours of recording). The reactions of the teachers involved in the project were also documented.

## 4.3 Data analysis

The data gathered using the aforementioned instruments were subjected to content analysis techniques (Neuendorf, 2017). As outlined by Belei and colleagues (2008), content analysis entails a comprehensive reading of all transcribed material, identifying words and phrases relevant to the research question and classifying them into categories or themes based on syntactic or semantic similarities. This approach was used to organize the data collected through direct observation, interviews and questionnaires into categories and subcategories, from which response indicators were drawn and the respective response meanings interpreted.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The script of the three questionnaires can be found in another article published about this research project: https://publi.ludomedia.org/index.php/ntgr/article/view/971

Three main categories emerged from the analysis: motivation, skills learning, and general perceptions. Each category had subcategories, as shown in the table below.

**MOTIVATION** SKILLS LEARNING **GENERAL PERCEPTIONS** Direct references Technical and musical Informal learning practices to motivation Repertoire Cognitive and social Other musical genres Traditional Azorean folk music Teacher's role concert Formal education Cultural valorization Musical identity

Table 1. Categories and subcategories

Table 2 provides an illustrative excerpt from the analysis grids relating to one of the initial categories and subcategories presented in Table 1, along with the associated sense of responses and response indicators.

CATEGORIES **SUB-CATEGORIES** SENSE OF RESPONSES **RESPONSE INDICATORS** General Informal learning The introduction of "Musical elements from different genres and perceptions practices informal learning backgrounds, and the work of imitation practices into formal through listening, are small steps that can violin teaching is seen as prove fundamental in the development of the positive and necessary musician. Whether in the instrumental field or in the development of attentive listening skills." (Violin teacher) "I think all these aspects can, and some should, be included in formal education." (Violin teacher) "We need to identify the best of both worlds (if there are any) and apply a transformed pedagogy." (Violin teacher)

Table 2. Data processing table (excerpt)

The above process was applied to all data sets, resulting in the following findings.

## 5. Results

The results suggest that the use of informal practices in music learning had a positive impact on students' motivation, as well as on their technical, musical, cognitive, and social development.

Regarding the beneficial impact of using informal practices on student motivation, two violin teachers said that "Students tend to be more motivated when these practices are used," and "These practices have a very positive effect on student motivation." One parent reinforced these statements: "My child reacted very positively to the more exploratory part of traditional melodies. I noticed that it was a great incentive for her, as I often saw her in her room practicing and trying to create melodies on top of the original. She took the initiative herself to show me her progress and spoke about the whole process with visible enthusiasm."

All the parents of the students who were the focus of the intervention indicated that the informal techniques employed had a favorable effect on their children, particularly in terms of their enthusiasm for learning the violin.

The incorporation of informal learning in this project involved rehearsals and a public performance, during which the students engaged in collaborative activities with their peers and teachers. The data collected suggest that these instances of collective learning have the potential to increase students' motivation. One violin teacher said: "Doing various exercises together with colleagues, one singing, the other playing, also sparks motivation, when you realize that they correct each other, without the direct help of the teacher, and with that a game can be developed between them."

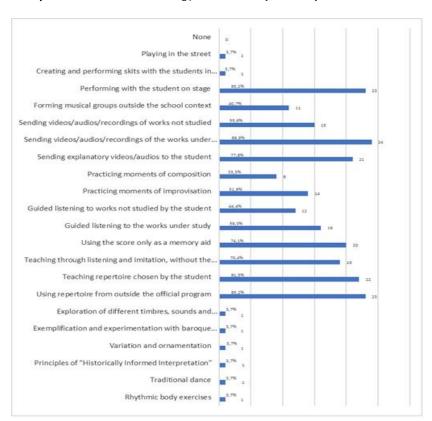
In line with this, the data collected on the students' preferences indicate a clear preference for collaborative musical activities. Of the seven students interviewed, five (72%) indicated a preference for playing in a group, while only one (14%) stated a preference for solo performance. One student (14%) had no preference. Regarding the acquisition of technical musical skills, the findings indicate that learning through ear training and imitating the actions of a teacher or audio recordings are regarded as effective learning methods, as one violin teacher attested: "Learning by imitation and sending recordings have proven to be useful learning tools, in my experience. The students found it easier to recognize, grasp and reproduce the musical text. In addition, it allowed them to develop a better sensitivity to the timbre, dynamics, and expressive dimension of the repertoire they worked on."

Likewise, the data collected seem to indicate the advantages of learning to play without a score. Two intervention students corroborate this: "We focus much more on the music. It's not just looking at the paper and seeing what's there. It's listening, it's completely different," and "I think it's better because when we have the score, sometimes it takes me a long time to memorize. So it was easier."

Similarly, guided listening was presented as a valid learning strategy.

Two violin teachers said: "Listening to recordings at an early stage of a new piece has been extremely beneficial in helping with rhythmic and melodic listening, which helps students get to know and subsequently play a particular piece," and "I think it's extremely important to approach lessons in different ways, one of which is listening to/watching musicians through digital platforms, because with this practice students end up getting to know and recognize performers, genres, and so on. This practice of visualization also translates into a direct evaluation that the student makes of the instrumentalist they are listening to, whether it is of a technical, melodic or theatrical nature, among others."

The data also indicate that improvisation is an important technique for the technical and creative exploration of the instrument. This is supported by the following statements from two violin teachers: "The instrument program has tended to abandon the stimulus of improvisation, which has been part of music history for centuries. Since it is necessary to resort to this experimentation in order to know the results that can come from it, I believe that this path can give students space to broaden their horizons and explore their idiosyncrasies in a healthy way," and "I think it is fundamental to give students a basis for improvisation. I believe that improvisation is inherent to a deep knowledge and mastery of the instrument." Concurrent with the collection of data on the impact of informal pedagogical strategies on student learning outcomes, a survey was conducted to examine the informal music learning practices that violin teachers use in their teaching practice, as illustrated in the graphic below.

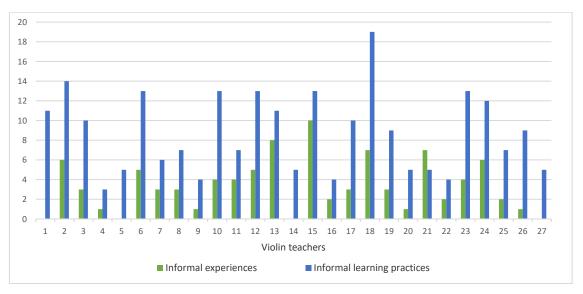


Graphic 1. Informal music learning practices used by the surveyed violin teachers

As shown in Graphic 1, all 27 teachers surveyed (100%) reported using or having used informal music learning strategies in their pedagogical practice. These included sending videos, audio, or recordings of the works under study (24; 88.9%), performing with the student, and playing repertoire from outside the school's official program (23; 85.2%).

In addition, the teachers surveyed indicated that they engage in other practices to a lesser extent, including performing in a street environment (1; 3,7%), practicing body rhythmic exercises (1; 3,7%), and creating and performing skits with the students in concert (1; 3,7%). As these practices appear to be connected to the teachers' personal experiences and artistic sensibilities, it was deemed appropriate to examine the relationship between the informal experiences of the teachers surveyed and the use of informal practices in their teaching activity.

As Graphic 2 shows, the teachers who have used more informal learning practices in their pedagogical approach reported more non-formal experiences in their musical careers. These experiences can be observed in the cases of teachers 2, 6, 10, 12, 15, 18 and 24.



Graphic 1. Informal experiences of the violin teachers versus the use of informal learning practices in their classroom

In terms of the development of students' cognitive and social skills, the data obtained showed that the acquisition and development of these skills is enhanced through the use of informal learning practices. This is corroborated by the following statements from two violin teachers surveyed: "The effects are very wide-ranging: (...) the development of the ability to analyze and consciously interpret the repertoire played; memorization tools; the development of autonomy and responsibility in individual study; the motivation to discover more about the versatility of their musical instrument, as well as broadening their musical horizons," and "These practices are very important because they are significant complements to what our syllabus is for the instrument."

Regarding social integration, it was found that the use of informal learning methods facilitates the application of classroom-based content to students' everyday lives, thereby promoting their social integration. This information is supported by the following statements made by some of the violin teachers surveyed and members of the public present at the traditional folk music concert: "In general, these practices make it possible to integrate the learning of the instrument into the wider context of the student's musical and/or socio-cultural experiences, promote the broadening of their musical knowledge, allow exposure to certain artistic and interpretative phenomena, and foster the identification of the individual with the whole," and "The traditional aspect, as well as expressing the satisfaction of sharing a whole cultural legacy, makes these young people from the CRPD feel part of the music itself and not purely performers."

With regard to perceptions of informal music learning practices, the data collected seem to indicate that the introduction of this type of practice into formal violin teaching is viewed as a positive and necessary development, particularly by some violin teachers. Two teachers stated the following: "Musical elements from different genres and backgrounds and the work of imitation through listening are small steps that could prove fundamental in the construction of the musician. Whether in the instrumental field or in the development of attentive listening skills. The more varied the practice, the more interesting the learning and access to information will be," and "Violin teaching has made great progress over the last three decades. I believe that the current panorama is the result of Portuguese teachers coming into contact with innovative methods which, curiously, establish a constant dialogue between 'classical' and popular music."

Most violin teachers (23; 85%) responded positively when asked about the value of introducing informal music learning practices into formal violin teaching in schools and conservatories. However, two respondents (8%) disagreed, arguing that these practices should only be introduced into formal teaching from a cultural and historical perspective and that they are not relevant to students' technical development. The remaining two respondents (8%) had no opinion on the matter.

Furthermore, regarding their perceptions of informal practices, several teachers proposed using such practices in the conventional methodology of formal violin teaching, because they facilitate a more comprehensive and holistic approach to teaching. Two teachers said: "The above-mentioned practices will certainly result in a training framework that is more conducive to the different expectations of each student in relation to instrumental teaching. In the same way, it could improve artistic performance, whatever the musical career path the students choose. Finally, it will enrich the curriculum itself," and "I believe there should be a balance between the two in order to train more versatile and complete violinists."

Finally, the data collected seem to indicate that enthusiasm for different musical genres and the effective implementation of informal learning practices seem to be directly related to teachers' prior knowledge of them. Violin teachers said: "I think it's important to introduce this kind of learning, but it would be important for violin teachers (in this case) to receive training in this area because most of them are not familiar with or aware of it.

Another solution could be to hold workshops for students with teachers who specialize in these methods"; "There needs to be more training for teachers in these areas, such as jazz language, improvisation and even the creation of working groups that work with instrument teachers to research the local and national songbook"; and "We need to intervene with teachers so that they can transmit this knowledge and these values to their students with confidence and motivation. I think we can then have a more complete and rewarding education."

## 6. Conclusions

In response to the research questions, the study results showed that it is feasible to combine formal and informal learning practices in violin teaching at the CRPD and that this combination has a positive impact on the students' learning process. These findings corroborate the advantages highlighted in the literature regarding the use of other musical genres in formal education and the informal practices associated with them (Green, 2000, 2017; Folkestad, 2006; Feichas, 2010).

Indeed, the data collected demonstrate that the intervention has boosted students' motivation and facilitated their exploration of traditional Azorean folk music and its practices in an imaginative and unrestricted way.

The results suggest that the informal learning strategies in question had a positive impact on the development of student's listening and memorization skills. Furthermore, the violin teachers surveyed identified additional benefits, including improved ability to recognize, understand and reproduce melodies; development of sensitivity to the timbre, dynamics and expressiveness of the repertoire; development of metacognitive skills; and development of memorization strategies.

Also, in terms of the students' technical and musical abilities, the development of their creative and improvisation skills is notable. This was done through the creation of complementary melodic lines and accompaniments during the lessons, which allowed a more expressive exploration of their creative abilities. These findings support the position put forth by numerous authors who contend that improvisation, often overlooked as a learning strategy, offers substantial and valuable learning benefits, particularly in relation to autonomy, composition, and understanding the harmonic structure of music (Green, 2017).

Furthermore, it was found that group learning and group performance fostered individual and collective responsibility among the students involved, thereby facilitating the acquisition of social and cognitive skills such as precision, discipline, and concentration. In addition, the violin teachers surveyed emphasized the advancement of autonomy and responsibility in individual study, confidence on stage, and the broadening of musical horizons.

The results observed concerning student motivation and skill acquisition lead us to conclude that a pedagogical approach that integrates informal learning practices with formal violin teaching is a valid and viable modality with pedagogical benefits.

Nevertheless, this research highlights the benefits of formal instruction, while also acknowledging its limitations, from a more eclectic and inclusive perspective. Indeed, research indicates that integrating other musical genres into formal education, specifically traditional folk music and the informal practices associated with it, has a beneficial impact on the learning process (Green, 2000, 2017; Folkestad, 2006; Feichas, 2010).

Considering these findings, it seems prudent to consider the efficacy of the conventional teaching methods employed at accredited music institutions, particularly in relation to the wider integration of informal learning techniques and strategies, and a more accommodating attitude towards diverse musical genres (Green, 2000, 2017; Feichas, 2010). Such flexibility and receptivity, coupled with a greater awareness of students' social contexts and realities, will facilitate a more varied, meaningful, effective, and comprehensive learning process.

### 7. Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship and/or publication of this article. The material has not been published, in whole or in part, elsewhere and is not currently being considered for publication in any other journal. All authors were personally and actively involved in the work that originated this article and assume responsibility for its content. All ethical standards were met regarding the protection of study participants, according to the Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association.

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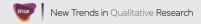
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#### Micaela Sousa

University of Aveiro, Portugal
bttps://orcid.org/0009-0004-7155-9052
sousa.micaela42@ua.pt

#### André Fonseca

University of Aveiro, Portugal
bttps://orcid.org/0000-0003-1408-9467
□ andre.fonseca@ua.pt