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**The Education of Portuguese Children in Britain:  
Insights from Research and Practice in England and  
Overseas**

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## **Introduction**

### **Guida de Abreu & Tony Cline**

Currently the scarce information about research and education of Portuguese students overseas is widely dispersed among those involved. This is because the projects are scattered geographically and such published accounts of practice and research as exist are not readily accessible<sup>i</sup>. To cover this deficit in November 2001 a working conference sponsored by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Portuguese Department of Education and the Department of Psychology of the University of Luton was held at Luton, England. The conference was a means of building up a network of professionals concerned with the education of Portuguese children overseas, both in research and in practice, and provided an opportunity to describe and critically analyse the current situation in Britain in the context of developments in other countries. This publication is a product of the collaboration realised in this conference. It includes contributions from colleagues working in Britain and overseas. The contributions from colleagues working in France and Canada, countries with a large number of Portuguese migrants, offered relevant insights to enhance our understanding of the situation in Britain.

We have three main reasons for preparing this publication. First, children of Portuguese origin form a large group in British schools, but there is no research based work published in Britain about their educational needs and experiences<sup>ii</sup>. Findings from the project, "Portuguese children in UK and Channel Islands Schools" (Abreu, Silva, & Lambert, 2001) strongly suggest that there are reasons to be concerned about their school (under) achievement and consequently about their possible future social exclusion. In recent years, an increasing number of Portuguese families moving to work in England have been sending their children to schools that are linguistically and culturally dissimilar from their home environment. Between home and school, these children are likely to be exposed to different traditions of learning and also to contrasting representations (and related practices) of child development and schooling. The impact of these experiences on the Portuguese child's learning in school has not been addressed.

Second, the Portuguese group is under-researched not only in Britain, but in other countries. Thus, understanding the experience of Portuguese children in the British system of education may shed light on their schooling in other migrant contexts (e.g. other European countries). In addition, it may benefit from research that has been carried out and practices that have developed in overseas countries where there is a longer established Portuguese community (e.g. Canada). This dimension will be addressed in this book via the contributions of colleagues working in France and Canada. Both countries have very large Portuguese communities.

Third, the examination of the schooling of Portuguese children can offer insights into the experiences of children from other migrant groups, in particular, into those who, like them, are "invisible". Children of migrants are a fast growing group in various societies. This phenomenon is affecting even small countries where a decade ago the population was homogeneous and stable. These levels of migration and displacement of families in current societies are not yet matched by an understanding of the impact of different approaches to education for their children.<sup>iii</sup> Teachers trained to teach monolingual and monocultural children suddenly realise that this is not the reality of their classrooms. This feeling of being unprepared and not knowing how to address the situation results in teachers and schools searching for solutions and explanations which sometimes do not fully address the specific cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social needs of these particular groups of children<sup>iv</sup>.

## **Overview of the structure**

Part one sets the scene. In the first chapter, Guida de Abreu, Teresa Silva and Hannah Lambert introduce the reader to the landscape of the schooling of Portuguese children in British Schools. Findings of a survey of the Portuguese children's performance in formal examinations considering data from various parts of Britain (London, South Coast and Jersey) are analysed illustrating that there are serious reasons to be concerned about their relative underachievement. Chapters 2 and 3 present findings from research exploring specific aspects of the experiences of the community in London areas. In Chapter 2, Olga Barradas steps out of the gates of the school and

explores the relationships between school-drop out and social exclusion. In Chapter 3, Maria João Nogueira and David Porteous provide a snapshot of the life of a Portuguese community in a South London Borough.

In part two (Chapters 4-5) Guida de Abreu, Teresa Silva and Hannah Lambert describe how they attempted to understand Portuguese students' (and parents') daily lives, by observing what happened in classrooms, listening to what was said, and arranging individual interviews. Following a socio-cultural view of human development and learning (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1989; Valsiner, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978) they explored the experiences of the children considering:

- Their personal life trajectories and experiences as children of a community linguistically and culturally different from that of their schools. How did these influence their academic engagement and achievement?
- The living conditions, social practices and resources in the students' households, which could contribute to reducing or widening the gap between their home and school lives. In particular, the experiences and support provided by their parents. What type of social, symbolic, linguistic and cultural capital was available and valued by the families (Bourdieu, 1995)? How did these resources impact on the students' engagement with formal schooling?
- The knowledge and strategies that English schools had developed to respond to the particular needs of Portuguese students, considering teachers' views and experiences and also the schools' policies. How did these contexts and practices impact on the students' engagement and learning in British schools?

Part three is an attempt to learn from colleagues working with children of Portuguese descent in other countries. In Chapter 6 Maria Isabel Barreno, a well known Portuguese writer and journalist examines the situation in France. She has been directing the programme of teaching of Portuguese Language and Culture in France since 1997. Her experiences and insights into the French experience have already been published in a fascinating book in the Portuguese language with the title "Um

Imaginário Europeu". (Barreno, 2000). She started this book with a sentence used also as the title for her chapter, that is, "How to teach Portuguese language and culture to Portuguese children, who are ashamed of being Portuguese". But why are they ashamed? This is the topic she explores through an in-depth analysis of "images" of Portugal exported at the time of the peak of migration to France, when the country was under the dictatorship of Salazar. She will illustrate how traces of these images are still alive and provide some insights into the gap between what Portugal is at present and how it is represented in the imagination of Portuguese migrants and people in their host countries. For Maria Isabel Barreno the image of the Portuguese people as rural, poor, happy and modest, an image widely held and re-transmitted by French society was one exported in the time of dictatorship and "an image which is still alive because we, the Portuguese, have not yet produced another one for ourselves" (p.14). We can identify a certain resonance between Barreno's views and the "images" of Portuguese children held by both English and Portuguese teachers in Britain. Our hope is that the case study of France will help to disentangle aspects common to the process of migration from Portugal to another EU country from those that might be specific to the socio-cultural context of life and schooling in Britain.

In chapters 7 and 8 Fernando Nunes and Ilda Januario provide a detailed account of the experiences of the community in Canada. As children of Portuguese migration themselves they explore the situation from different angles. Fernando Nunes conducted the first national survey of the needs of the Portuguese Community in Canada followed by a doctoral project where he explored academic underachievement (Nunes, 1998). Ilda Januario a researcher linked to OISE/UT, (the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education of the University of Toronto) a centre that has developed research with Portuguese migrants for more than a decade will discuss intervention programmes. She examines her role as an active member of the Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education. The case of Canada where the community is now about 50 years old can provide a lens to look into the future and disentangle generational effects. The school children of Portuguese migrants in Canada are mostly second generation: they were born in Canada. In contrast, in Britain the available information suggests that the largest group in schools are first generation, whereby both the children and their parents were born in Portugal.<sup>v</sup>

Part 4 provides accounts of current initiatives in England to support the education of Portuguese children. In Chapter 9, Amy Thompson explores the relationship between mother tongue development and achievement. This is followed by a chapter by Maria Amelia Estrela providing an account of the programme and strategies adopted by the Portuguese Department of Education in London over the last 25 years to support the maintenance of Portuguese culture and language.

In a conclusion by the editors we attempt to draw out common lessons that can be learned from the various papers describing communities that have shared origins but very different current settings. We reflect on current practices, identify key issues and suggest how these can inform recommendations for schooling practices and an agenda for the future research.

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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Examples of these documents include Abreu, Silva and Lambert (2001) first preliminary report of the Education of Portuguese children in British Schools; pioneer work in one Education Action Zone in London focusing on the Portuguese Community, which is not published.

<sup>ii</sup> At the moment there are no published statistics on the precise numbers of Portuguese people living in Great Britain. There is however clear evidence that the community is growing very rapidly. This evidence includes the number of Portuguese people registering for services with the Portuguese Consulate in London (but, this information is limited, because as EU citizens they are free to enter and leave the country and not all of them register). Another source of evidence is the growing number of Portuguese children in British schools. The current coding system of the child's background makes it difficult to be precise about numbers of Portuguese pupils in British schools. They tend to be categorised as "White European" or "Other European". However, the census from three London LEAs of languages spoken at home by children attending schools in these areas showed that Portuguese was the second language, other than English, in two LEAs around 4.5% of the students and the third in the remaining LEA. There is also evidence that they are a growing group in the South Coast of England. In addition they represent about 10% of the school population in the Channel Island of Jersey.

<sup>iii</sup> For a discussion on this topic and report of the first year of a longitudinal research project see Suarez-Orozco, C., & Suarez-Orozco, M. M. (2001). *Children of Immigration*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard.

<sup>iv</sup> See for instance, Gorgorio et al. account of learning of migrant children in Catalanian schools. In Gorgorio, N. et al. (2002). Immigrant children learning mathematics in mainstream schools. In G. de Abreu, A.J. Bishop and N.C. Presmeg (eds.) *Transitions between contexts of mathematical practices*, 23-52, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

See also Cline, T., Abreu, G., Fihosy, C., Gray, H., Lambert, H., & Neale, J. (2002). *Minority Ethnic Pupils in Mainly White Schools*. London: DfES - Department for Education and Skills.

<sup>v</sup> We based our view that most of the school-children are still first generation migrants on information (i) we gathered in a questionnaire applied to students in the London areas. 57 % of 465 students enrolled in Portuguese classes were born outside Britain; (ii) States of Jersey Education Statistics on the year the child arrived; (iii) demographic profile presented by Nogueira and Porteous in Chapter 3, this volume.