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

Editors

Guida de Abreu
Tony Cline
Hannah Lambert

Department of Psychology
University of Luton

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Chapter 11

Conclusions and Recommendations

Guida de Abreu & Tony Cline

As explained in the Introduction a major reason for this project was to gather together the scarce information that is available on the schooling of Portuguese children overseas, in particular in English speaking countries. This information was deemed of great importance as children of Portuguese origin form a large group in British schools in some areas (see for instance, Abreu et al. Chapter 1, Barradas Chapter 2 and Thompson Chapter 3). Since the conference in November 2001 and the final editing of this material in 2003 we have the impression that more Portuguese students have been arriving in British schools. In particular the presence of recently arrived Portuguese students is being noted in schools in rural areas of Midlands of England as verbally reported by Head Teachers and Minority Ethnic Co-ordinators to the editors (see also Newnham, 2003). The continuous increase in the numbers of recently arrived Portuguese students in an educational context where the government is committed to assuring equal opportunities and levels of achievement for all students (see DfES, 2003) has heightened the need among educationalists for specific information about these students.

In this final section 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.

Key findings in the British context

- As a whole the survey findings presented by Abreu et al. (Chapter 1) show that there is a problem with the educational (under-)achievement of Portuguese
children, but there has been very little discussion of the possible reasons underlying the phenomenon. These findings are supported by Barradas's and Thompson's analyses in relation to the situation of Portuguese students in Lambeth Local Education Authority.

- The invisibility of the Portuguese students in the educational statistics does not contribute to active development of intervention programmes to address their special needs as students who come from a linguistic and cultural background that is different from that of their schools (Abreu et al, Chapter 1 and Barradas, Chapter 2).

- Though initial language competence and socio economic status are perceived by educators as the two main reasons underlying the under-achievement of the Portuguese group Thompson's comparative analysis challenged simple assumptions. She concluded that "The underachievement of Portuguese background pupils in Lambeth cannot, it appears, be explained through focusing on their having proportionally more early stage learners of English than other groups, or having more pupils from lower socio-economic group, or having more who are recent arrivals." She argued for a more complex assessment of the impact of development of first language (Portuguese) on the second language acquisition (English).

- The way of life of Portuguese people in Britain is influenced by their own historical heritage and adaptation to the local ways of life. However, this did not result in a single homogeneous community. As Nogueira and Porteous (Chapter 3) argue it may be more adequate to refer to "a collection of smaller communities linked together by a common language and national heritage". In spite of this a common feature of the Portuguese people is to rely heavily on their families and informal networks. This, when combined with lack of fluency in English language, may put them at risk of isolation and social exclusion.

- There will not be a single, simple solution to the complex range of challenges and problems that were described in the chapters in this collection. The educational
outcomes that were recorded by different authors did not result from a single cause but from the interaction of many factors, such as:

- Students’ and parents' life stories revealed complex migration experiences coloured by strong emotions. For instance, as illustrated by Abreu et al. (Chapters 1 and 4) they became aware of “disruptive” events that uprooted them from their birthplace and had to cope with separation from their family, friends, and familiar places.

- The post-migration adjustment process as described in Chapter 4 is also a very complex one. The story of how “their initial crying was transformed into gaining control of their environment both at home and at school” is also a story of re-construction of sense of self and new identities for both parents and children. In fact, for parents it frequently involved the construction of an identity which was at odds with the school's expectations since they became too dependent on their own children.

- Very often as recent migrants in a new country, students endured the difficult living conditions of their parents (poor housing, long hours of work), faced the dangers of the big city (e.g. London) and missed the freedom of life in their communities back home. The impact of the parents' long hours of work on their children was an issue that the teachers noticed.

- When interviewing the teachers it was apparent that the types of difficulties experienced by Portuguese students in one school or area of Britain were found to differ from those found those reported by this group in another area. It is not appropriate, therefore, to identify a single approach that we can be sure will successfully address all the issues. However, we noted that few of the teachers had received additional training or preparation for the extra challenges they faced.
Key findings from Overseas

- Overall the findings and analyses presented by the colleagues who worked in Canada and France were in agreement with what was described for the British context. For example, underachievement at school was also a concern in Canada (Nunes, Chapter 7 and Januario, Chapter 8) and France (Barreno, Chapter 6).

- In addition, the overseas analysis shed some light on issues that need to be considered. Thus, for instance Barreno's analysis of the situation in France raised the following very important questions which in our view also need to be addressed in Britain:

  - *Which ‘Portuguese community’ are we talking about?*
  
    Barreno argues that: "There appears to be no middle way in France. Either people are completely assimilated into French society or they remain very visible because they experience problems." Her view, is "that it is always the problematic cases that we are aware of – not the others." This seems to reflect quite well the situation in England. An example of this is that official results of the performance of Portuguese children in schools are only reported in Lambeth area, an area in which they struggle and underachieve. However, as Estrela (Chapter 8) explains, the community is also settled in other areas of higher socio-economic standing.

  - *Why was bilingual-bicultural development problematic in the French context?*
  
    In Barreno's view bilingual and bicultural development of Portuguese young people is not supported in French schools or society and developed by those who remain defensive against French society. Examples of this includes

    - teachers advising parents not to teach their children their language of origin, and even to speak French at home;
    - a curriculum that does not offer proper cover of Portuguese history, so the children only acquire "perspectives of Portuguese people that are held by the French and had no other means of feeling positive about their Portuguese identity";
very limited provision for learning Portuguese as a second language in local schools. Plus the aggravation that when this is available "teachers and the local education authority advise many Portuguese background pupils to learn another language rather than Portuguese".

We believe that these are also issues that need to be examined in the British context as echoed by Maria Amelia Estrela (Chapter, 10).

The performance data that the Portuguese-Canadian colleagues presented in this report are more sophisticated and more comprehensive than the data we have currently available in Britain. However, Januario (Chapter 8) remarked that "it was not easy to gain the confidence of the school boards. We had a hard time getting access to the academic achievement statistics of the Catholic School Board, which had a less strong tradition of organised parental involvement."

The sophisticated presentation of the Canadian data highlighted issues, such as:

The high proportion of Portuguese school-children assessed as Learning Disabled. Januario reported that the statistics "showed that in 1996-1997, 3 to 4 times more Portuguese children were assessed as Learning Disabled (LD) than the average for the boards in question, and 10 to 20 times fewer Portuguese children were assessed as Gifted."

The students of Portuguese-background are underrepresented in advanced secondary programmes and more of them drop out of school (Nunes, Chapter 7 and Januario, Chapter 8).

The trend of underachievement has not been reversed amongst newer generations of Portuguese born Canadians. Nunes (Chapter 7) argued that the trend has not been reversed because the marginalised position of the community has not been challenged. In his view academic underachievement persists across the generations because the young people continue to find themselves in the same limited societal roles and identity patterns as their
parents. Thus, underachievement is not caused simply by the transmission of traditional roles and practices, but rather by the failure to challenge the community’s marginalized position.

- As a whole the analysis of the Canadian context offered good insights into what we do NOT wish to be the situation in Britain for the new generations of students of Portuguese origin. Ilda Januario also discussed some practical projects which were being implemented to improve the situation of students of Portuguese background, which included more attention to bilingual development and providing mentoring and role models.

### Some implications for educational practice and research

- Do not overlook or simplify the educational needs of invisible white minorities, such as the Portuguese students.
- Review the categories that are used for recording educational achievement by ethnicity. If this is not possible in the national statistics it could be addressed by each school, which in the end is the level that counts for the individual student.
- Re-examine the schooling needs of young people who arrive as new migrants in the last year or two of compulsory schooling.
- Study the reasons why young people drop out of secondary school in some inner city areas and the processes by which they do so.
- Provide opportunities for mainstream teachers to engage in in-service training and gain basic information about the background and needs of Portuguese pupils in their schools.
- Re-examine not just how schools could benefit from the additional resources that were often emphasised during our teachers' interviews but also from a more systematic approach to communicating and sharing good practice in work with Portuguese students.
- Fund experiments/trials of Portuguese teaching in mainstream schools as a basis for improving attainments in English language.
- Carry out comprehensive community surveys of the kind proposed by
Nogueira and Porteous not only in the major metropolitan areas of Portuguese settlement in Britain such as Lambeth but also in 2 – 3 representative coastal areas where Portuguese immigration has been attracted by the possibilities of employment related to tourism and agriculture.

- Disseminate the work of the Portuguese Department of Education in London and develop structures to adjust this service more closely to the needs of the community in Britain.
- Promote active partnerships between the teachers of the Portuguese Department of Education in London and mainstream school teachers

We conclude this work with the hope that the information presented shed some light on the experiences of Portuguese students when schooled overseas, and also on how these can be addressed to promote their learning and equity in their new overseas communities.

References
