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Education that works

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

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## Chapter 2

### **‘A disappearing act’: Portuguese Students – Social Inclusion and Academic Attainment<sup>1</sup>**

**Olga Barradas**

#### **Summary**

Olga Barradas presents in this chapter an overview of some of the disadvantages experienced by Portuguese pupils in UK schools today. The findings of her study focusing on the educational attainment of this group of students are discussed. Particular attention is paid to the apparently markedly low attendance of Portuguese pupils in UK schools and to the implications of this. Providing an invaluable insight into the lives of these individuals, Olga Barradas presents an overview of the circumstances and previous experiences of a number of Portuguese pupils. Following this, issues concerning the National Curriculum, academic and social support, careers advice, parental involvement, and Portuguese classes are considered. Overall, Olga Barradas argues that through adequate training, time, staff allocation and resources, we can get closer to providing Portuguese pupils or individuals of any ethnic minority background with a better chance in life, both academically and socially.

#### **2.1 Portuguese students: the present situation**

Although there has been a relatively sizeable community of Portuguese people living in London since the 1960s, these are referred to in almost no English publications before the 1980s. In 1982, in an article on the Portuguese community, the magazine 'City Limits' (Del Quiaro, 1982) highlighted the hard life of the Portuguese migrants and their difficult living conditions. It identified that the two main areas where Portuguese speakers reside are North Kensington (Ladbroke Grove/Portobello) and Lambeth (Stockwell). In 1996, Stockwell Road was described in a local publication as 'as close to Portugal as a Travelcard can get you' (Minns, 1996).

Despite Portuguese being the 14th (out of 40) most spoken language by schoolchildren in the London area (Baker & Mohieldeen, 2000), only in Lambeth,

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where it is the second most spoken language (after Yoruba) are the statistics pertaining to language group published. The academic needs of Portuguese students have, therefore, not been addressed or documented in official reports. This has been due to the lack of differentiation of the white minorities in the group statistically labelled as 'white'.

In addition to academic attainment, as measured by Standard Attainment Tests and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams, an important aspect that deserves further investigation is that of school exclusion and 'drop-outs' of Portuguese students. At the time of writing, there were no official data on these topics for Portuguese students as a separate group. The information published only indicates the number of unauthorised pupil absences and permanent exclusions for the borough as a whole at the primary and secondary levels of schooling.

## **2.2 Schools and numbers of students**

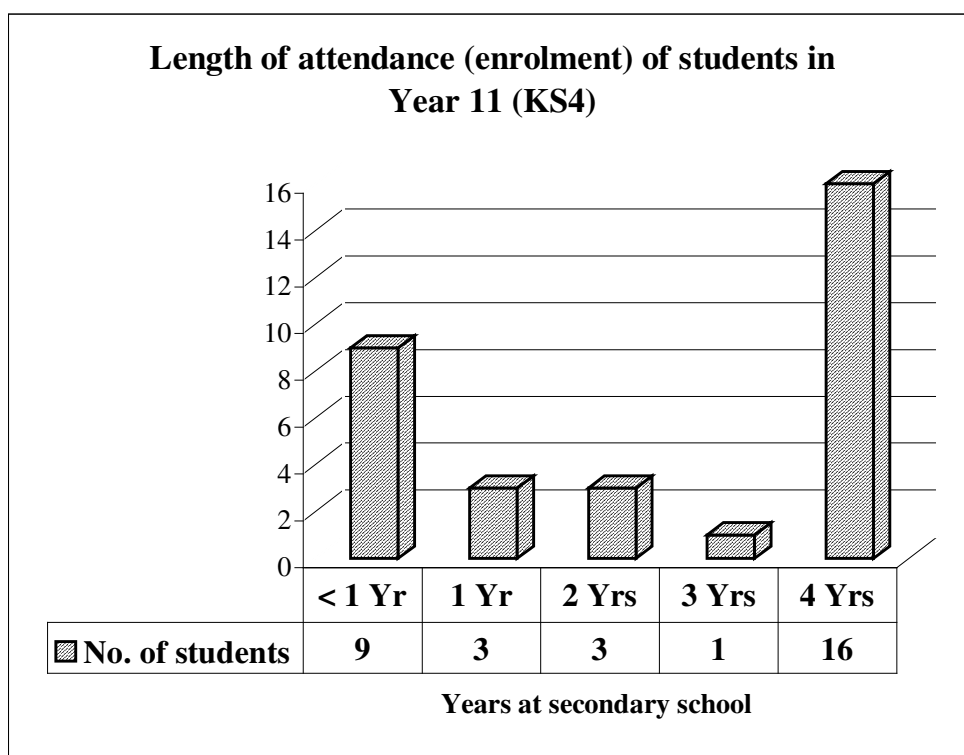
In the school year of 1998/99, as part of the data collection for a research study comparing the end of key stage results of Portuguese students attending mother-tongue classes with those students who did not attend (Barradas, 2000), a sample of 32 Portuguese students, of Year 11 group age, was identified. This constituted all the Portuguese pupils of that age, attending the four secondary schools in the borough of Lambeth that had agreed to take part in the study. The data collected included demographic data and revealed that the overwhelming majority of the students had been born outside the UK with only 2 students born in this country. Half of the students now in year 11 had joined the education system in this country when they were already in secondary school (Figure 1).

My own experience and that of other Portuguese teachers indicated that there were a large number of Portuguese students who were not achieving as much in English school as was expected. There were also a few, some of them good students that did not continue to study and left school as soon as possible. Although this problem did not seem to be restricted to just one area of London, it was, nevertheless, based on

anecdotal information without figures that could verify it. Whether the Portuguese children were either long-term truants or abandoning the education system was unknown, as hitherto, no studies were available on this problem.

Information obtained from the four Lambeth secondary schools taking part in the study indicated that a total of fifty-two Portuguese speaking students had enrolled and should have been attending Year 11.

*Figure 1*



Nevertheless, twenty-two students had been taken off-roll in that current school year or in the previous one. Of those, only two could be positively identified as attending another school, one was attending a Training Scheme and one had been formally excluded. This left eighteen students unaccounted for.

As we can see from Figure 3<sup>2</sup>, below, the schools varied not only in the number of Portuguese students they had enrolled in Year 11, but also in the proportion of students who had been taken off-roll. In school D, nearly two-thirds of the year 11 Portuguese students had been taken off-roll.

<sup>2</sup> All names (of schools as well as of students) used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Figure 2

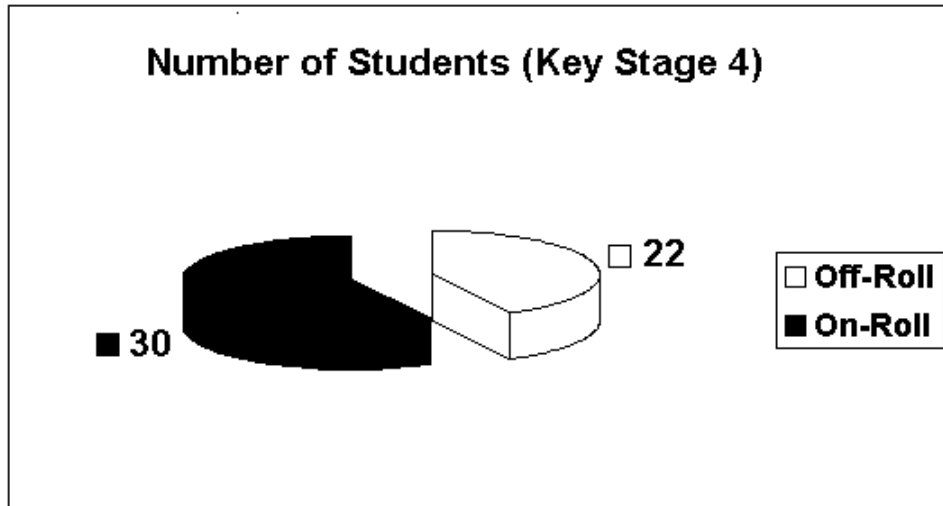
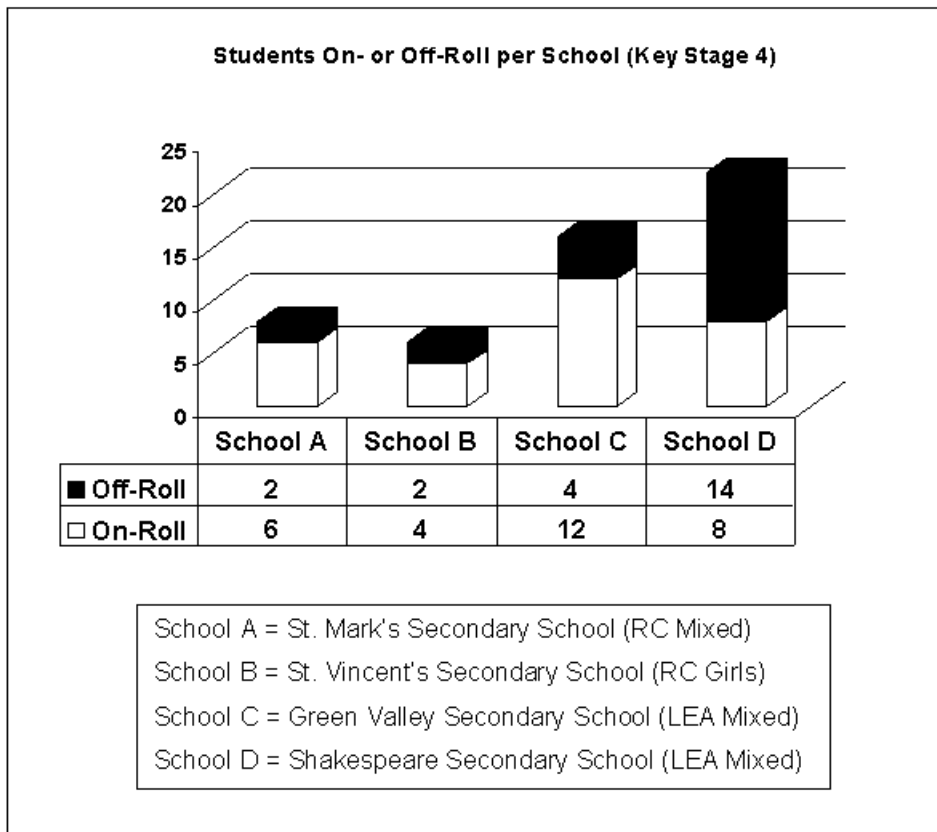


Figure 3

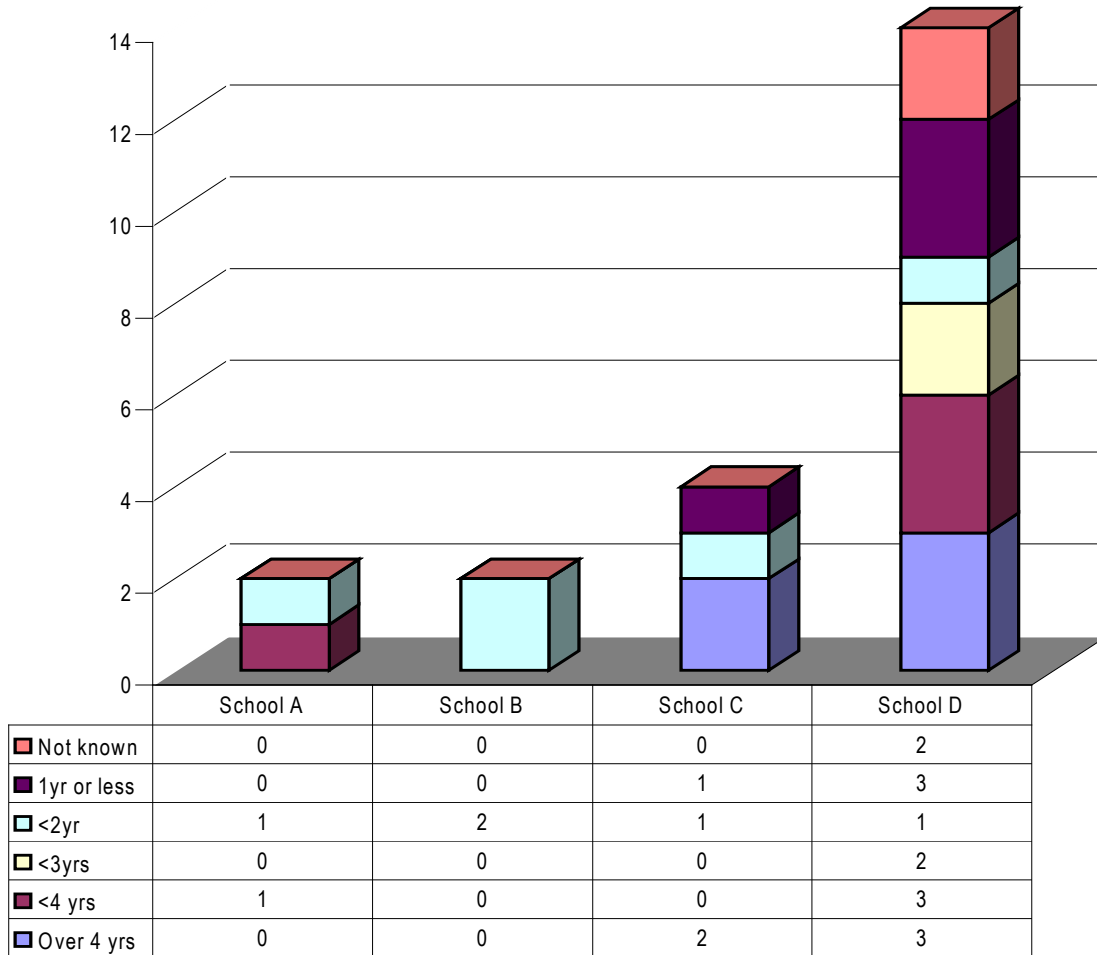


This variation appears again if we look at the length of attendance of the students that had been taken off-roll (Figure 4 below). Although all students taken off-roll had been born outside the UK, their length of school attendance varied according to their arrival in this country and only five students had been in the UK for over 4 years. We can see

that in school D, among the students taken off-roll, there seems to be a pattern of constant new arrivals to the school.

Figure 4

**Students taken off-roll (KS4) - Arrival to UK**



**Number of Students**

School A = St. Mark's Secondary School (RC Mixed)  
 School B = St. Vincents' Secondary School (RC Girls)  
 School C = Green Valley Secondary School (LEA Mixed)  
 School D = Shakespeare Secondary School (LEA Mixed)

It is neither clear what becomes of these youngsters who are taken off-roll nor how many are truanting or for how long they truant before abandoning school completely. Some may eventually rejoin formal education and attend classes elsewhere. However, such information has not been possible to obtain as schools cannot give students' personal details to allow researchers to make direct contact with those no longer attending school.

Two students, whom I had managed to obtain addresses for, were successfully contacted and offered to guide me to the homes of other students who had left school and lived in council estates in Stockwell and Brixton, two areas of London economically disadvantaged and socially deprived. Altogether, a group of eight students were interviewed. The interviews took place at different locations: in the students' homes, in their place of training, in a café and in the street. With the exception of Cristina, who had been born in the UK, all preferred to be interviewed in Portuguese. Three of their stories have been summarised below. They represent the insurmountable difficulties faced by Portuguese youngsters. It is hoped that, by presenting them, the reader will share in their expectations and disappointments.

### **2.3 Who are these youngsters?**

#### **Raul**

Raul's name was still on the class roll even though he had stopped going to school some months before. Raul arrived in this country from Madeira three years ago, in November 1997, at the age of thirteen. He is the youngest of 11 siblings. He lives with his single sister, Irene, a married brother, sister-in-law and nieces, in a council flat. The father of Raul lives with one of the married children and the mother with another.

In the summer term of 1997/98, a few months after Raul entered the school, a group led by a Portuguese Madeiran boy started bullying him. This continued after the summer holidays. In October 1998, Raul stopped going to school altogether. A month later, a letter was received at home stating that Raul had been taken off-roll. Irene and Raul explained to the school what was happening and he was re-admitted. However, the bullying continued and, days later, the Police found Raul on the street during

school hours. Irene demanded that the parents of the bully were called to the school and a meeting with them and the headteacher be set up immediately. According to Irene, the parents of this other boy had never been contacted for bullying Raul. He went back to school but found it too difficult to follow the lessons and lost interest. He said he could not take it any more. *“I don’t even want to think about it”*. Regarding his plans for the future, Raul said:

*“[...] When I’m sixteen, I’ll start working. [...] Doing offices in the morning. [...] The same thing the others do. [...] How do I explain the work I want? The type of work I want I can’t have. That’s why I go to the jobs the others - are doing when they came here. [...] My type of work that I would like to have was to be a policeman. But it’s not possible to do the course. [...] You need tests and studying. [...] For any work, like that, not being-, I mean, work for computer or- something like that. Everything must need tests. Therefore, to be a policeman you must need tests as well. [...] [Until I’m 16 years old, I’ll] stay at home and look after my nieces. [...] When I’m 16 years old and I have my insurance number I’m going to work. [...] That’s cleaning- offices and other jobs.*

Raul, 15yr11m

### **Valter**

Valter came to live in the UK in 1994. He is one of 9 siblings. He came to join his parents and the rest of his family, having lived with his godmother in Madeira for a year. The whole family, mother, father and 9 children, lived for two years in a place that comprised 3 rooms. He described it as 2 bedrooms and a kitchen. In 1996, they moved to a council flat.

Valter attended up to year 4 in Madeira - the last year of primary school. By itself, this would indicate that Valter had had academic difficulties. Given his age, he should have been attending year 5 in Madeira. In London, he entered year 8 in the secondary school. Here, Valter had what he called ‘extra-English’ lessons. However, when the family moved home to the council flat, he was absent from school for about 3 weeks. When he returned to school, he did not have any more ‘extra-English’. He did not ask why. He felt let down by the school. He saw no point in staying at school to take tests

he was not being prepared for. His older brother, before him, had truanted the whole of year 11 and Valter abandoned school at about Easter time, just before his Year 11 exams.

Regarding his plans for the future, Valter, who was already working as a scullion every Sunday, says:

*“I always wanted to be a fireman. (...) But, in Madeira, I would have liked to be that- of building- houses. Build houses and paint them. That’s all that I wanted. But I think I’ll be a waiter. There’s no more what I wanted to do.”*

Valter, 15y 10m

Valter cannot see himself going to college and continuing his education. However, he says he would like to attend evening classes if that would allow him to become a fireman or a waiter. Nevertheless, he believes he can work as a waiter as soon as he turns 16 yrs old and he can see no financial advantage later in life from attending further education.

### **Isabel**

Isabel came to live in London with her family when she was 7 years old. She completed most of her primary school years here. At age 11, she entered the same secondary school that her sister (2 years her senior) was already attending. It was the school nearest to their home. Her first impressions of the school were quite positive. She felt that the teachers made an effort to help the students by staying in the classroom at lunchtime.

Isabel truanted during year 10 because her peers pressured her to do so. She would miss occasional days, one or two at a time, and then return to school. Eventually, her Head of Year talked to her and she decided to stop truanting. Isabel said:

*“[...] my work, because of the GCSEs, began to get all behind because I had been missing [classes]. And then when I stopped missing [classes] and went back to the lessons, what was harder was having to go back [...] and start again. And then having to start the year again.”*

Isabel felt let down by the school. She felt that someone from the school should have talked to her much earlier to stop her truanting. Further, she had difficulty filling in the college enrolment form. As this took place during the period of GCSE examinations, she did not have contact with her teachers and ended up missing the enrolment period for the college. She could have applied the following year but:

*“The course I wanted to study, Business Administration, for me, the GCSEs that I had, the colleges would not accept me and here [Training Scheme] I would not need any GCSE.”*

Isabel, 18 years old

Isabel learnt about the Training Scheme through her sister, who had also attended it.

## **2.4 Issues to consider in relation to the above scenarios**

### ***School curriculum with regard to students who are recent arrivals to the country (or who arrived between the ages of 5 and 16)***

It is difficult for the students who come from Portugal during their secondary education to adapt to a new school system, a new curriculum, and a different way of teaching. For some of those students, this change of system may often mean a discrepancy of more than one year between the year group they were attending in Portugal and here in the UK. Of the seven students interviewed who had been born abroad, none had been assessed on entry to the school in order to identify possible difficulties that might arise or areas of knowledge that could be built upon and, therefore, to ease the transition between the systems of education. With the exception of English as an Additional Language, they were very much left to their own survival strategies. There was no link between their development as supported by EAL and the various areas of the curriculum. This meant that either they were able to follow what was going on in classes or they would be put in groups that did not necessarily correspond to their abilities.

For these students, the difference between what they expected from the school and what the system would give them, coupled with low teacher expectation, often came

across as a view of the teachers failing to teach them:

*“It was get in and start. Nothing else. I had to adapt on my own. They didn’t- didn’t do any test.”*

Roberto

*Roberto- [...] in Maths it was very easy things.*

*Olga- Did you try to tell the teacher that you could do more than that?*

*Roberto- Yes, and he would only give that to the students [...]*

*Olga- Did you try and ask to go to those [higher] groups?*

*Roberto- They didn’t let me go because you had to speak more English. Your English had to be stronger to go to those groups.”*

*“I was the best [student] in there [EAL class] and the teacher never asked me to read, why should I go there? [...] I only wanted to go to that school to learn to speak English. But then I stayed at home and I learnt at home. That school is for asses.”*

Valter

*“[...] the teaching isn’t very good. [...] The teachers- didn’t teach much. Especially, the Science teacher.”*

Rui

*“The [Maths] teacher always sent me to the computer, never gave me any work to do. He sent me to the computer but it was to play games. [...] When I got there and started to answer all the questions that the teacher asked, then the teacher said: You know more or less the work we are going to study these three months, so everyday, when you get here you go to the computer. That’s what the teacher said.”*

Raul

*“The work was easy for me to do [...]. [The exams] I think they were very different. Half of them were different from what we did in the lessons.”*

Isabel

***Academic support and re-integration***

Support for students who have tranted or missed school, regarding their re-integration was an aspect that needed improving. It would appear that the school expected the students to take the initiative to ask for help. However, this is a point narrowly linked with self-esteem and only one student (Cristina) had felt confident enough to ask for help, but even for her it was not easy:

*“They said if I did carry on [missing school] they’d have to- take me off the school- the exam {sadly}. It is very hard to get into that school and if you-re just- if you can’t be bothered to go in, then, they can’t be bothered to teach you, so just tell you to leave. In the end, I did start to go in, but then, homework... {sadly}”*

Cristina

*“I could also have had better grades if it hadn’t been that story of staying 6 months out of school. I missed a lot of subject work. Then when I started again at school, on top of it all, it was a different subject work from that [previous] school. It was even more difficult to do the work in this [new] school.”*

Roberto

*“[...] When I get to year 10, they didn’t help me, because they said it was non-stop. It was year 10 and we were all pushing for the GCSEs in year 11 and the teachers said that, whoever wanted help could go there and ask, those who didn’t need it... could stay there or not.”*

Isabel

***Socio-economic factors, self-esteem and pastoral support***

It is clear from what was described above that socio-economic difficulties were at play here. These cannot be disassociated from the way a student faces their school life. Socio-economic difficulties are linked to changes of address and of school. They can disrupt academic progress and often lead to lack of achievement and low self-esteem. There is also a danger that students may look for prestige amongst their peers through the wrong type of activities or bad behaviour.

The school's pastoral support, by caring for the social and emotional needs of the students, could and should be a way of avoiding loss of motivation and disaffection. However, in the case of these students, the schools' pastoral support appears to have been, if anything, insufficient.

Eduardo: [...] *in the class, nobody messes with me, [...] I'm the greatest one around there. [...]*

Mother: *They more than afraid of you...!*

*"In Madeira, I wasn't going to miss school, because in Madeira I liked the school. I was the eldest in there. In Madeira, it was good."*

Valter

*"They [the school], to those that speak English [...], they try to solve to the problems and those that can't speak [English], which was my case, thank God it is not anymore, they don't do anything. Leave it there. And when I went to that school, I couldn't speak any English, nothing, nothing, nothing. I only knew those things you learn there in Portugal."*

Roberto

*"The teachers should have got together and talked to me, to find out what was going on and help me not to truant."*

Isabel

Olga: *Was there anyone at school to whom you could go and talk to and say you were having difficulty with those subjects?*

Valter: *There was the Portuguese teacher but I didn't want to talk to her.*

Olga: *Why not?*

Valter: *She could say something - that's - I should learn on my own. So I never went.*

*"The teachers are better in that college [Training Scheme]. Better than at school. [...] They don't send us out. Like, if a person is not [behaving] well in the classroom, they send us out. To call them [teachers at the Training Scheme] you don't need to say Miss or anything. They told us to call them their own names."* Francisco

***Final qualifications (GCSEs), schools' advice on careers and other forms of qualification***

Only two students, Cristina and Roberto, in his second school, remembered having talked to someone at school regarding career prospects. Nevertheless, others like Rui and Isabel sought advice outside the school. With regard to GCSE qualifications, the students felt that the exams were either not relevant for them or that they were unfair given that they had had limited access to the curriculum, both in terms of time and in terms of support with the work. For some, the exams represented a hurdle that they could not even face.

*"There was the test and they didn't teach anything of the test. And I [wasn't going to] only stay there because of the test, so I got out. What am I doing there?"*

Valter

*"I think they [GCSE exams] were very different. Half of them were different from what we did in the classes."*

Isabel

*"If it hadn't been so difficult, I'd have been doing my exams."*

Raul

*"The only reason I got into that college was because it was my school's fixed one."*

Cristina

***Parental involvement: Empowering the parents through access to information***

Although there are guidelines for schools taking pupils off-roll, these involve writing home to parents who, in the case of ethnic minority children, may not speak English and depend on their truanting child to read those letters. Parents were often faced with awkward situations in their everyday life and depend on their children to solve them. This meant that they could not demand to obtain information they were entitled to or, as in the case of Roberto and Eduardo's parents, take the little help that was being offered.

It is common for parents to work at odd hours, for example, leaving home very early in the morning, when they can have no control over whether their youngster chooses to go to school or merely pretends to go. Some parents attended or tried to attend parent evenings at the English school. Their working life did not always allow it. For others, the language barrier was too high.

Furthermore, going to school outside the dates set for those meetings seemed to be synonymous with ‘trouble at school’. For the parents, going to the school, to talk with the teachers, was a move that had to be initiated by the school itself. Nevertheless, the parents expected the school to keep them informed of any problems. Not going to every parent’s evening did not mean they were not interested in their child’s education. When this failed, they, understandably, lost faith in the system.

Olga: *Did your mum ever go to your school?*

Rui: *She didn’t have to. I wasn’t, like, unruly. So, I don’t think she needed to. [...] She always asked “Did you do your homework?” and I say “yes”.*

Olga: *What about her asking the school?*

Rui: *I don’t think she had a lot of time. `Cause she’s always working and when she got home from work she was tired. [...] She used to work, it was from 8 in the morning until 9 [in the evening].*

*“There [Madeira] he had my Mum and my Dad always- checking the hour you go, the hour you arrived. Always they would go to school to see if he was absent or not. [...] My Mum and Dad don’t speak English. [Here] They couldn’t go to the school. We could only know as the letters arrived.”*

Irene (Raul’s sister)

Olga: *Your parents there [in Madeira] did they use to go to school to talk to the teachers?*

Valter: *Of course.*

Olga: *And here, did they ever go?*

Valter: *They don’t go because they can’t speak English [...]*

Olga: *You mean, you missed school for three months and the school didn’t call your parents, didn’t write home?*

Valter: *And if they would write, I would tear it up. [...] If they were to write, I would get it and tear it up. But I didn't get any. [...] One day, the Police caught me. [...] They took me to school. Then if my parents didn't come or phoned, I would be expelled. So I got my brother to call them [the school]."*

*"They [my parents] used to say that the school was a clique {uns compadres}, that the teachers would never help anyone."*

Isabel

*"My father said, 'If I could speak English, the teacher would hear from me'."*

Valter

### ***Education as a way of social promotion***

Education was viewed by all parents as a route to social promotion, as a way for their children to escape the type of jobs that they, parents, had to endure. For the children, however, this was not as clear. Whilst some would consider doing some course or further education later on, others would not even face the prospect of going back to school.

*"The most that can happen now is to find him a private college and put him in a private college. Otherwise, his school year has finished. Of course, a boy with three years of English isn't going to be brilliant, isn't it? As he isn't brilliant, he doesn't have many chances of entering whatever it may be. He did some time ago, some-aptitude tests that only gave him, he would only find a job as – street cleaner, or what was it? Gardener. It was gardener, street cleaner and don't know what else. I said, 'Look, thank you very much for the English system. You should try much harder for him to try his best and try to learn as much English as possible so that you would really give him- a better future'."*

Roberto's father

*"I am here because of them. I like them to study a little bit of English, because, tomorrow, you, with a little course, you'll get your position {empregozinho}. Not like their father, who's been here for 10 years washing dishes."*

Francisco and Eduardo's father

*“She [my Mum] used to say ‘you don’t go into college, what you’re gonna do with your life? You’re not gonna get anywhere without any qualifications, anything’. [...] She’s proud of me now, ‘cause when I got kicked out, she was like ‘Ah, what you’re gonna do now? You’re gonna be a cleaner.’”*

Cristina

*“My mum wants me to go to college [...] So that when I grow up I have a job not- like my [brothers], to have a more better job. [...] But I don’t want to any more.”*

Valter

*My objectives, first is to finish college. To finish college. Then, find a job, a good job, a job that takes me somewhere. [...] What is a job with a future? It’s a good job, like, how can I put it? In an office. As long as it’s not cleaning, like, toilets.”*

Rui

*“No. I’ve studied too much up to now.”*

Isabel

### ***Portuguese classes***

All the students interviewed had, at some point in their school career, attended Portuguese classes. With the exception of Cristina, all students had attended a school where Portuguese classes were part of the mainstream curriculum. However, there appeared to be no link between the Portuguese classes and supporting the students in their school life or a link between the Mother tongue classes and the rest of the school life. Only one student, Roberto, reports being helped academically in other subjects by the Portuguese teacher, but this help was informal and temporary. More importantly, only one of these students had taken a GCSE Portuguese examination.

*“Miss [Portuguese teacher] helped me a lot, but then she moved to that catholic school, [...] to teach Portuguese in the afternoons. [...] She was a good teacher. [...] She used to help me do the things of the other subjects, to try and teach me things, try and tell me- what I had to do.”*

Roberto

*“Let’s say it was as if I had - as if - when I stopped Portuguese in the school there in Portugal, as if I was continuing after two years.”*

Roberto

*“Knowing Portuguese helped me get a GCSE in Spanish.”*

Cristina

*“Once I left, then my Mum tried to get me back into it [Portuguese classes]. [...] I knew that they [my friends] were in higher classes and I didn’t want to get put down. I knew I would be with younger children.”*

Cristina

Olga: *Do you think, if you had been a little bit more brave, maybe, to talk to her [Portuguese teacher], do you think she could have helped you in any way? Talk to the other teachers?*

Valter: *I don’t know, but also, she can’t do that. She’s only the Portuguese teacher.*

## **2.5 Reflecting on the findings**

The issues described above are, by themselves, capable of affecting the school career of the students characterised. However, it is important to remember that they interact and create a multifaceted problem. They cannot be separated. Each student’s career path must not be viewed as the result of a single cause, but as the interaction of multiple issues. This interaction, often simultaneous, can lead into a spiral of lack of motivation, disaffection and despair.

Publications from the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (1999a, 1999b) put forward guidance on dealing with pupils who do not respond to action to combat disaffection. However, this refers mainly to pupils who actively voice their disaffection through bad behaviour and classroom disruption. Pupils who also underachieve but quietly 'slip away and disappear' are less likely to receive attention from the authorities, especially if they are close to the end of compulsory education.

Furthermore, pastoral support at school must take into account pupils' emotional and social needs in order to help avoid situations of complete disinterest from school.

The aim of matching curricular provision to pupil's needs as a means of encouraging good attendance, highlighted by OFSTED in 1995, appears far from being achieved. Not all students who appear to have a communicative command of English, the so-called 'low-key' bilinguals (Harris, 2001), will be at ease in more complex academic situations. This is an area that schools, in the case of these students, should have paid attention to. There is a definite need to link EAL staff with mainstream staff through work planning and preparation in order to allow students access to a meaningful curriculum. In schools where there are mother tongue teachers these can be an invaluable resource. In the cases described above, advice and support from mother tongue teachers was left untapped. Their help should have been sought regarding, at least, initial assessment and establishing links with the family.

There is a need for a new vision regarding these students' education. The challenge is for all partners: parents, mainstream, EAL and mother tongue teachers to work together to provide the best possible education for the students. It will involve training, time, resources, staff allocation, but only then will it be possible for all students from different social, economic, ethnic and language backgrounds to have full access to education and to equal participation in society.

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