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

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## Chapter 4

### From crying to controlling: how Portuguese girls adapted to their secondary school in England

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#### Summary

In this chapter Guida de Abreu, Teresa Silva and Hannah Lambert examine some critical issues concerning the adaptation of Portuguese students to schools in England. The analysis draws on interviews conducted with students and parents. These were part of a case study in a single sex (girls) secondary school in the South of England. This case study was carried out as part of the second stage of the project, “Portuguese Children in British Schools: England and the Channel Islands”. Having established in the first stage of the project that there were problems regarding the school achievement of the group, the case study approach was chosen as an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of possible factors underlying their learning difficulties. As a focus of analysis, we chose to discuss various aspects of the impact of language on the students' adaptation to school and life in England.

#### 4.1 Introduction

*“Senti-me frustrada, senti-me péssima, cheguei a casa e comecei a chorar. Senti-me mesmo mal mas consegui habituar-me” (Teca)*

*“I felt frustrated, I felt very bad. I arrived home and started crying. I really felt very bad, but then I managed to get used to it.”(Teca)*

This was the way Teca, a 15 year-old girl from Madeira Island, described her feelings when she started school in England. She moved here, in July 2000, about one year before being interviewed. Her parents emigrated to England in May 2000 and initially Teca came on holiday to visit them. However, she liked the country and decided she wanted to stay. Teca, one of the Portuguese students in a case study school, took part in our research. Her own interview, together with those of her father and teachers highlighted, the obstacles that she found herself contending with in her first year in an English secondary school.

This chapter examines some critical issues concerning the adaptation of Portuguese migrant students, such as Teca, to schools in England. The analysis focuses on interviews conducted with students and parents. These were part of a case study in Teca's school, a single sex (girls) secondary school in the South of England. This case study was carried out as part of the second stage of the project, "Portuguese Children in British Schools: England and the Channel Islands". Having established in the first stage of the project that there were problems regarding the school achievement of the group (Abreu, Silva, & Lambert, 2001b), the case study approach was chosen as an attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of possible reasons underlying their learning. The actual number of Portuguese students in the school was quite small in comparison to the total number of students on roll. The school, however, represented an interesting case study for a variety of reasons:

- It was located in the South Coast of England in an area that in recent years has experienced a marked increase in the number of Portuguese migrants. They come mostly from Madeira Island and move to the area to work in the hotel and catering industry;
- It was a school with a recognised good record of achievement in national tests in England, as indicated in a recent Ofsted report;
- Portuguese students were an isolated minority in this predominantly white British school, and one that challenged mainstream practices as most of them arrived unable to speak or understand the English language.

The overall achievement of this school and its ethnic composition, predominantly white British, sharply contrasted with some of the inner London schools in which we also worked during this project. In London recent migrants have tended to settle in highly multicultural areas. This rendered the ethnic composition of these schools much more diverse. It was also evident that the overall achievement of these schools in London was more varied. They include schools whose average performance was below national figures.

## **4.2 Research strategy and participants**

In this project we targeted different groups of students taking into account their level of schooling. Students' achievement in formal school tests was also considered. We asked schools to include in the sample when possible, students who were achieving according to the targets for their age and students who were achieving below that.

Students, who had completed Key Stage 1 exams, were targeted in primary schools (year 3). In secondary schools, the aim was to include students who had completed Key stage 2 and Key Stage 3. At post-secondary level students who had completed their GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations, and were studying their AS and A Levels were also targeted. These criteria were applied flexibly, depending on the population of Portuguese students in specific schools and the agreement of the schools to collaborate in the project. Overall, all these levels were represented in the sample of data collected. At the time of writing this paper, case studies had been completed in five schools: three primary schools, one secondary school and one sixth form college. A total of 26 pupils were interviewed, covering an age range from 7 year-olds to 19 year-olds. Students' experiences and views were triangulated with interviews with their parents and their Portuguese and English teachers.

Though interviewing was the main method utilised, classroom observations were also conducted. Two researchers carried out the fieldwork. Teresa Silva, a Portuguese teacher, interviewed the parents and the students, generally in the Portuguese language. Hannah Lambert, a British researcher, carried out most of the interviews with teachers and headteachers. In addition, she conducted second interviews with a sample of students. Hannah worked in the English language. This particular arrangement represented the perspectives we were trying to bridge in the project. Teresa, an insider and speaker of the Portuguese language and culture, represented the perspective of the country of origin of the students. Hannah, on the other hand, born and educated in Britain, had a perspective based on her first hand experience of the host country as a child, adolescent and adult.

In this chapter, we report on findings that emerged from the interviews with six students and three parents of the secondary school<sup>i</sup>. Our decision to focus on a particular school is for methodological reasons. At this stage this focus will enable in-depth analysis of a small sample of students, who live in a particular area and attend the same school. Later, we will be carrying out similar analyses in the other case study schools exploring similarities and differences between them. All the interviews analysed were conducted in the Portuguese language and took place in the students' school<sup>ii</sup>, except for one of the parents who chose to be interviewed at home. The

students' place of origin was Madeira Island (though one of them was born and lived in Venezuela till she was three years old). Their parents were also from the Island and emigrated to England for economic reasons (to work). All the girls started their formal schooling in Madeira and moved to England in the last years of primary school (year 5 or year 6) or during secondary school. They were between 9 and 14 years of age on arrival in the UK. Thus, their total stay in England varied from less than one year to a maximum of six years.

**Table 4.1 - Characteristics of students**

	<b>Age at Interview</b>	<b>Age at Arrival in the UK</b>	<b>School year</b>
Gorete	13	09	09
Joana	14	11	10
Teca	15	14	10
Nadia	15	11	11 (GCSE)
Carmo	15	09	11 (GCSE)
Lia	15	14	11 (GCSE)

A semi-structured format of interviewing was followed (Ginsburg, 1997). Open schedules were designed based upon insights from the first stage of the project and on the theoretical stance adopted. On the basis of evidence from our previous research on learning and culture (Abreu, 2002; Abreu, Cline, & Shamsi, 2002), we took a stance where learning was viewed as involving both cognitive processes and identity development (Abreu, Cline, & Radia-Bond, 2001a). Moreover, emerging findings from the first stage suggested an interaction between these two processes. Language fluency, for instance, cannot be viewed merely in terms of cognitive development. When the students described their experiences, it involved identity issues, such as not feeling accepted in the new school because of the language barrier (see Chapter 1, this volume). In light of this, a set of key themes was selected to guide the interview. The questions were formulated in order to stimulate talk about concrete experiences (episodic interviews, see Flick, 1998), and hence possibly reveal both cognitive and identity issues. Basic themes explored with the children and parents are detailed in the following table. Most of these were also explored with teachers as illustrated in Chapter 5 in this volume.

**Table 4.2 Themes explored in the interviews with students and their parents**

Themes explored in interviews	Students	Parent
Biographic data	X	X
Migration experience	x	x
Experiences in the English school	X	
Parents' involvement with school education	x	x
Parents' memories about their school education		x
Languages uses and fluency	x	x
Expectations about the future	x	x
Identity as migrant and attitudes towards school	x	x
Maintenance of Portuguese language and culture	x	x
Family relationships and students' social development	x	x

As a focus of analysis for this chapter, we chose to discuss various aspects of the impact of language on the students' adaptation to school in England. Linguistic competence has often been singled out as the major factor affecting the performance of migrant students, who have English as an additional language (EAL). In general, the students' competence on arrival is determined through performance in standardised tests. To promote acquisition of the English language, the schools in England and the Channel Islands have for many years provided various forms of support. The main focus of these interventions has involved the mediating role of language in cognitive functions. For instance, students require a basic command of the English language in order to access the curriculum, to understand instructions from their teachers and to benefit from classroom explanations, etc. Linguistic competence, however, has implications far beyond cognition. It impacts on the person's sense of self and identity. This mediating role of language in the construction of identity has received less attention in educational programmes. But, as we will illustrate, this dimension may be one that holds the key for more successful approaches to the education of Portuguese migrant children.

Next we explore these links between language and identity considering three areas of adaptation to life in England: (i) language barriers and support on arrival; (ii) parents' English language skills and home-school relationships; (iii) becoming a bilingual and bicultural person.

### 4.3 Language on arrival

#### *Language barriers on arrival as experienced by the students and their parents*

Both the students and their parents talked quite emotionally about the impact of not being able to speak English in their initial adaptation to life and schooling in England. Some children recalled crying at home was a way of relieving the enormous frustration of not being able to communicate at school.

If I cried? (she smiles...) My mother sometimes went to work very early in the morning. She used to leave things prepared for me to go to school. This ... happened in the beginning. It was very hard, but now (she smiles again) it is better. (Joana)

*Se eu chorava? (ri-se ...). A minha mãe às vezes ia trabalhar de manhã muito cedo e depois ela deixava tudo pronto para eu ir para a escola. Era ... nos primeiros tempos foi muito difícil mas agora (ri-se) está melhor. (Joana)*

Joana's mother confirmed that she was aware of her daughter's stress and emotional reactions, explaining:

In the first weeks after she arrived, she used to go to school in the morning, and I used to leave earlier to work. I used to leave everything organised for her to go... she was in bed. I mean, she, with the nerves she had, just thinking that she needed to go to school, she would "try" vomiting and it was always like that. I used to go to work very worried ... I think it was her "nerves" (...) they spoke to her and she could not understand. But, afterwards she got used to it and she learnt quickly. She then started to like going to school. But the first weeks were a little bit difficult. (Joana's mother)

*Quando ela chegou aqui, nas primeiras semanas ... ela ia para a escola, de manhã, e eu vinha trabalhar. Deixava tudo prontinho para ela ir...estava na cama. Quer dizer, ela, com aqueles nervos que ela tinha, só a pensar que ia para a escola, começava a puxar por vomitar e era sempre assim. Quando me ia embora para o trabalho, preocupava-me bastante .... eu penso que aquilo eram os nervos! (...) falavam com ela e ela não sabia nada. Mas depois ela foi-se habituando e aprendeu aquilo rápido. Ela já gostava de ir à escola. Mas as primeiras semanas foi um pouco difícil. (Joana's mother)*

Joana's mother is currently living in England because of her family circumstances. Her husband died when Joana was still quite young and after some years of seasonal work in the Jersey Island she decided that it would be better to settle in the South

Coast where her older daughter and grand-child were already living. Thus, it may be that this mother's personal experience gave her some insights into the process of adaptation, which helped her to see the initial period as painful but transitory. In fact, after only four years in the country, Joana was described by her form tutor as a "role model" to other Portuguese students.

The impact of language skills on the students' adaptation to life in Britain, however, goes beyond the school gates. It severely impacts on the parents' own sense of identity and on the family circumstances. Not being able to speak and understand English creates a situation of dependency. This was poignantly illustrated in Teca's father's interview. He felt that not being able to communicate in English was even worse than being in a prison. He told Teresa:

"... look, here, if one gets ill, I do not know how to speak. Here...without *senhora* Maria, my neighbour, we cannot go to the doctor, because we do not know how to speak. Neither the doctors can speak with us, nor we with them. So, I have a life that is not acceptable for me ...(Teresa: *As if you were in prison?*) Worse, worse than that because if I were in prison someone could come and talk...."  
(Teca's father)

... olhe, aqui a gente adoce, eu não sei falar, aqui (...) sem a *senhora* Maria, a vizinha, a gente não pode ir ao médico porque não se sabe falar. Nem os médicos sabem falar para a gente, nem a gente sabe falar para os médicos. E prontos, estou...uma vida que para mim não dá. (Teresa: *É como se estivesse na prisão?*) Pior, pior porque se estivesse na prisão...se estivesse na prisão vinham falar...(Teca's father)

Next we will examine students' views on the language support they received to help them to adapt to their school, and then approach the impact of their parents' language skills on home school relationships.

### ***Language support in initial adaptation to school***

When students' accounts of their adaptation to school were examined three key sources of support were evident. One source was their peer group. Another source was the support of a Portuguese speaking teacher, and finally students also praised the support they were receiving from their English teachers. The importance of one source or the other varied between the six students interviewed, and this seemed to be linked to specific circumstances at time of arrival. Thus, for instance, Gorete stressed the support from a Portuguese peer group and her brothers.

When I arrived at school, I had some Portuguese friends and if I did not understand, they used to call them and they would tell me what I had to do. Then I got more used to them and I learnt English very quickly. (...) Very quickly, because of my brothers at home ... I learnt a bit of English at home. They would sit a little with me and I would write with them ...

*Eu cheguei à escola, tinha umas amigas portuguesas, se eu não compreendesse, elas iam chamar elas e elas diziam o que era para eu fazer. Depois eu fui-me acostumando com eles e depois aprendi num estante o inglês. (...) Num estantinho porque os meus irmãos, já em casa já ... aprendi um pedacinho de inglês ali. Eles já se sentavam um pedacinho comigo e ia escrevendo com eles ...*

Joana recounted a very different experience. She was the only Portuguese student in the school and, in her view, this exposed her to native speakers and contributed to her learning.

I was the only Portuguese in the school. (*Teresa: And, how did you learn the language?*) By dealing with the English children. This helped a lot because for me, honestly, I think it is good (...) the contact with native people, because in this way, there is a tendency to get the language more quickly (...). because, if at that stage I had someone Portuguese with me, may be now I would not know as much as I do.

*Eu era a única portuguesa da escola. (Teresa: E depois como é que aprendeste a língua?) Lidando com os meninos ingleses. Ajuda muito porque, eu, para mim, sinceramente, acho que é bom (...) lidar com as pessoas naturais daqui porque assim tem a tendência de apanhar a língua mais rápido porque, se eu tivesse, na altura, uma pessoa portuguesa comigo, eu talvez não tivesse tanto para o que sei agora.*

It is important to note that Joana in the initial stage was supported once a week by a Portuguese teacher and twice a week by teachers of English as additional language. She only mentioned this type of support when questioned. It was apparent that, for her, interaction with peers constituted the pivotal experience. Lia, who had only arrived in the last year, stressed the support she was receiving from an English teacher.

(*Teresa: How was it when you arrived?*) It was a little bit difficult to learn English, but I ... had a good teacher... She taught me a lot. (...) It is a teacher... who supports those who are...how do you say? Those who do not know (...) learning support ...

(*Teresa: Então quando cá chegaste, como é que foi?*) Foi um pedacinho muito deles para aprender inglês mas eu (...)foi um bom professor. Ensinou-me bastante. (...) É um professor... aqueles que são...como é que se diz? Que não sabem (...) learning support ...

At a first glance, one may conclude that when the language barrier is overcome, the Portuguese students will start doing well at school, and this hypothesis is supported in some case studies, such as that of Joana. However, when we delve below the surface, there are other types of barriers, which are not easily dealt with solely at the level of the school system, but rather require particular types of home school relationships. Next we will examine the experiences and views of the three parents interviewed on three particular aspects; (i) choice of school, (ii) contact with the school and (iii) information about their children's education.

#### 4.4 Parents' English Language and home-school relationships

##### *Choice of School?*

Though it is common practice in England for parents to visit the school or more than one school before their children enrol, this does not seem to apply to the present sample. Choice of school was based on advice received from family friends and from an ex-Portuguese teacher in the area. When asked who decided to enrol Joana in this particular secondary school, her mother replied:

It was the Portuguese teacher who used to be here that decided. He told me, when she was still in the other school and he advised me (...). He told me to enrol her here because this is a very good school.

*Quem decidiu foi lá o senhor professor de português que estava aqui antes. Ele é que me disse, quando ela estava na outra escola e ele aconselhou-me (...). Ele disse que era uma escola muito boa, que eu a inscrevesse aqui.*

Peers also may play a part in this process as illustrated in the following extract from Teca's interview:

*(Teresa: Why did you come to this school?)* I came to this school... I have been in another school before, but I did not like it there. So, I asked a colleague of mine, who was in this school if she could find me a place. When she came here, she told them about it and they called me to come here and we liked it. *(Teresa: And do you like this school?)* Yes.

*(Teresa: Porque vieste para esta escola?)* Vim para esta escola...Eu estive numa antes mas só que não gostava da escola e depois pedi a uma colega que estava aqui se me arranjava. Depois ela veio aqui, falou e então mandaram-me para eu vir aqui e gostámos. *(Teresa: E desta gostas?)* Sim.

The difficulties that the parents have in participating in the choice of school for their children may have very serious consequences. Teca's father provided a dramatic account of his daughter's experience of the school that she initially attended on arrival in the UK. He explained that it was a mixed gender school, with plenty of drugs, bad food, and in a difficult location. He saw his daughter feeling targeted, being teased by her English peers for not knowing the language. When his Portuguese neighbour learnt of this situation, she tried to help. Teca became ill and very nervous. Our impression was that Teca was lucky to manage to change from a school she did not like to another one where she is happier. (In London, we have come across parents and students who did not like their school, but felt trapped, having been unable to get a place in a school of their choice). It appears that due to their limited language skills, Portuguese parents who are recent migrants, are in a situation of inequality with regard to their right to choose a school for their children. It is our understanding that support at this level was only provided through informal networks (e.g. local friends, or a contact such as the ex-Portuguese teacher).

### ***Parents contact with the school***

Another aspect of the home-school relationships explored, concerned parents' contact with their children's school. Do parents visit the school? Two of the three parents interviewed had never been to the school to find out how their children were doing. Unless a translator was available and present, they were unable to communicate. Gorete's mother confessed to Teresa that the day of the interview for the project was the first time she had visited the school.

Yes, it is true today is the first time I came. I've never been to the school. On Thursdays there is a young man who translates when there are things related to her school and he...when there is something...they always phone me, and sometimes, he tells me ...He is the young man who came with me today.

*Sim, esta, de verdade, é a 1ª vez que eu venho hoje. Nunca vim aqui à escola. À 5ª feira há um rapaz que traduz quando é preciso coisas para a escola e ele...quando é uma coisa...eles telefonam sempre para mim e, às vezes, ele diz-me, (...) Esse rapaz agora é que veio comigo.*

It is interesting to note, however, that she remarked that at the time she was in Madeira, she used to attend all her daughter's school meetings. In her words:

I knew that the truth is that I am not coming to school because I don't understand. Like in Madeira, I used to go to the meetings and I never missed what they planned. I always used to go because it was Portuguese and I understood. You know that, with English teachers, one already... If I come, it will not be worth it because I do not understand what she says.

*A realidade é que eu sei que não tenho vindo porque, a gente não entende. Como na Madeira, eu ia à reuniões e eu não faltava ao que eles me marcavam. Eu ia sempre porque é português e eu entendia. Já sabe que, com ingleses, a gente já...E se eu venho, não serve de nada ir ver porque eu não entendo o que ela está a dizer.*

Telma's father also did not have direct contact with the school. This was mediated by a Portuguese neighbour, who stayed during the interview and did not even give him a chance to answer this particular question. He explained that she alone acted as a mediator between himself and the school. Joana's mother had been to the school but not very often. When asked the reasons why she did not visit the school, she replied:

Because I think that if she was not well behaved, they would send me a letter, but they never .....

*Porque eu penso que, se ela não se portasse bem, eles mandavam uma carta mas eles nunca...*

Therefore, it is apparent that these Portuguese parents had very little direct contact with the school. This information was further confirmed by all the six girls interviewed. When asked whether their parents came to the school, five of the girls simply answered, 'no'. A crucial, but not the only reason for this, was their experience of language barriers. For instance, Joana mentioned the difficulties that her mother had met on attempting to find her way to the school. Lia talked about her anxiety in exposing her mother to a situation of shame for not being able to speak English. Gorete expressed the view that one's parents go to school when one misbehaves. It seems clear to us that the accounts of Lia and Gorete are based on cultural representations. The first is a deficit representation of the migrant person, who had not achieved bilingual fluency. The second is a representation of the relationship between the parent and the school that in fact has been popular in the past (at least as far as concerns schooling in Madeira Island).

No (smiles)... One, she is not able to speak English well and two, (...) the last time she came here to see Mr J (the

*Não (ri-se). Uma, ela não sabe falar muito inglês e duas, (...) .quando ela veio a última vez falar com o Mr J, ela*

Portuguese teacher), she got lost. She did not find the school and got lost. She walked for two and a half hours. (Joana)

*perdeu-se. Não encontrou a escola e ela perdeu-se. Andou duas horas e meia a andar a pé. (Joana)*

No (...) Because afterwards they would make fun in the school of her not knowing how to speak. (Lia)

*Não. (...) Porque depois fazem vergonha na escola quando ela não sabe falar. (Lia)*

They do not come very often because ...I never do anything wrong at school. But today they are coming ... only my mother. (Teresa: *But I heard your mother did not know the way to the school*). I was going to teach her, but now my friend is coming with her. (Gorete)

*Não vêm muitas vezes porque eu nunca faço nada de mal na escola (ri-se) Mas vêm hoje....só a minha mãe. (Teresa: Mas eu ouvi dizer que a tua mãe não sabia o caminho para a escola). Eu ia ensinar mas, agora, o meu amigo vai vir. (Gorete)*

In addition to the question “Do your parents come to the school?” the students were asked if they would like their parents to visit their school more often. Joana and Carmo, who perceived themselves as good students, felt that there was no need for more contact. As Carmo explained:

The school reports are sent home and so they see the grades (...) (Teresa: *At your age, do your parents not come to school any more?*). Some do. But... my parents have never been worried with ... they are concerned, they are concerned but they know ... they know I am a good student. (...) (Teresa: *Do you think the fact that they do not speak English is a barrier that...*) No, because in my first year, my mother came and I used to translate but ...no, that is not the reason.

*Vêm os reports para casa, depois vêm as notas (...) (Teresa: Na tua idade os pais já não vêm muito à escola) Vêm, alguns. Mas...os meus pais nunca foram de se preocupar com...preocupam-se, preocupam-se mas sabem...eles sabem que eu sou boa aluna.(...) (Teresa: Achas que o problema de não saberem inglês também é uma barreira que os...) Não porque no 1º ano, a minha mãe veio e eu é que traduzia mas...não é por causa disso.*

Carmo sees herself as the language mediator in the relationships between school and her parents and as she remarked she does not think that her parents’ lack of English language was the main reason for them not visiting the school more often. All the other five girls felt that their parents’ struggles in attempting to communicate were an actual barrier. However, they tended to see this lack of contact between their families and school as natural. Only Telma suggested she felt sad that her parents were not able to the visit school more often. She was experiencing difficulties in adjusting to

school and was frequently absent from her classes. Telma believed that her mother had genuine reasons to ask her to miss school, such as going to the doctor or going to work. But, her teachers did not view these as genuine. The school contacted her father through an interpreter by telephone to discuss her absence. Hence, it appears that the communication barriers between her family and the school did not help to clarify the conflicts that she had to contend with. She was not trusted at school and at home, her father was putting pressure on her to return to Madeira against her will. She perceived her parents' lack of English as the source of the family problems including her own difficulties.

### ***Parents' information about the school***

As previously illustrated, it was apparent that the parents received very little information directly from the school. In fact, parents such as Telma's father were more frequently contacted because their child was "causing trouble" (breaking school rules). Parents did however show concern and attempted to obtain some information through their major source - their own child. In analysing parents' accounts of how they got this information, one acquires a view of an inversion of power. The child was solely in control of what her parents would or would not know about her school education. In answer to the question, "Do you ask your daughter what she does in school?", Joana's mother replied:

Sometimes she tells me. Sometimes she tells me what she did. Sometimes she does not tell. Sometimes I do not even ask (she smiles).

*Às vezes ela diz-me. Ela às vezes diz o que fez. Às vezes não diz. Às vezes nem sequer pergunto. (ri-se).*

Gorete's mother's answer to this same question, is suggestive as to why the girls might see no reason to talk to their parents about their schooling:

I do ask what she is doing at school. (She answers) "...mum, you would not understand if I told you" (smiles). "Mum you do not understand English. What am I going to tell you mum about what I do in school?!" (smiles). And, I ask: "But, I don't only want to know about what you do within the school. I would like to know whether you are doing good things".

*Eu pergunto o que ela faz na escola. "Ora, a mãe não entende o que é que eu vou-lhe dizer!". (ri-se) "A mãe não entende inglês, o que é que eu vou dizer à mãe que eu faço na escola?!" (ri-se). E eu pergunto: "Mas não é só dentro da escola e eu quero saber se tu fazes coisa de bem."*

It is apparent in the above extracts that the two mothers were aware that their daughters only shared the information they wished to share and used their mothers' limited command of the English language as an excuse. On the other hand, the conversations also suggested that the mothers felt resigned to the situation. Why was that? Why were they allowing their children to have this level of control at a relatively young age? We argue that to understand this particular question, it is necessary to leave the school gates and focus upon how the families adapted to local society.

#### 4.5 Becoming a bilingual and bicultural person

##### *Supporting their families' adaptation to England: the student as the language mediator*

Talking to the students and their parents, we learnt that the Portuguese community in the area was well networked. When they described the migration process, most referred to having a relative or a friend already working or living in the area, who influenced their decision. This was well illustrated by Gorete, whose mother, father and nine brothers and sisters are all living in England. She stressed that they did not arrive in the UK all at the same time, but "bit by bit".

*(Teresa: You have lots of brothers and sisters!)* (Gorete smiles). We are ten in total (smiles) *(Teresa: Ten? How many of you live here?)* All.... Everybody. It is because we came bit by bit. But, some are already married. Only four of us are single. *(Teresa: At the moment who do you live with?)* I live with my mother, my father and my brother.

*(Teresa: Tu tens é muitos irmãos! Ri-se. Ao todo faz dez (ri-se). (Teresa: Dez? E quantos vivem cá?) Todos....Toda a gente. É porque veio pouco a pouco. Mas uns já estão casados. Só tenho uns quatro solteiros. (Teresa: Neste momento vives com quem?) Eu vivo com a minha mãe e o meu pai e o meu irmão.*

The informal community networks were claimed to be essential to the family's survival. Within these networks, language mediators facilitated communication with employers, banks, schools, housing and health services. This role which initially may have been adopted by a relative or acquaintance, not necessarily living in the household, was eventually replaced by the household member who was most fluent in English - that is, usually the school child. As soon as the parents perceived their child as a competent speaker of English and able to negotiate local practices, they required

the child to act as their mediator. Not only were they encouraged to adopt this role for their parents, but also for their friends or extended family. The following extract from Gorete's mother's interview illustrates how she saw her child growing competent in this particular role and how important this was in sustaining the independence of the household. It liberates the family from the dependency on outside members, who sometimes are not available due to their own living and working circumstances.

*(Teresa: When your daughter has to go to the doctor, do you need to take someone else because she does not manage yet...)* No. Now she is managing to go, because she is already going with people who asked her. When she goes...Even up there, where I live, (...) She asks: "Gorete, would you come with me there?", because she is also Portuguese and she arrived here at the same time as I did. But, she also does not manage very well.(...) But when I have a doctor appointment or when I have to do something ... a paper that is needed ... Paper work in English I do not manage. One needs a person ... translating so that I can answer. But she is already coming. She goes to the bank, she goes to a shop, she goes to that coffee shop and she manages. When I do banking, she comes and helps me. When I need money, she goes in (bank branch) and we tell her: "I want to use the automatic machine!". She knows how to do it. She goes to the doctor with people. (...) She goes because she is managing. And it is this that I actually also like because I also ...People can't always come with us when we need them to. If we have someone...And I have a son, who when is free and we need his help, he will come.

*(Teresa: Quando é para ir ao médico, tem que a levar alguém porque ela ainda não se consegue...)* Não. Ela agora já vai conseguindo ir porque ela já tem ido com pessoas que lhe têm pedido. Quando ela vai...Até lá em cima, onde vivo, (...) Ela diz: "Gorete, tu vais ir comigo além?" porque ela também é portuguesa e chegou aqui na mesma altura que eu vim. Mas também não desenrasca muito (...) Mas quando eu tenho um médico ou fazer uma coisa ... .um papel que seja preciso.... Fazer um papel em inglês, eu não dou conta de faze-lo. Temos de ter uma pessoa ... traduzindo para eu dar resposta. Mas ela já vai. Ela vai ao banco, ela a um shop, ela vai aquele café onde ela desenrasca. Quando eu vou fazer um banco, ela vai lá ver-me e desenrasca. Se eu precisar de dinheiro, de que eu não possa tirar a minha cash, ela vai dentro e a gente diz a ela:"Vai à caixa e tira" que ela sabe. Ela vai ao médico com as pessoas. (...) Ela vai porque ela já vai desenrascando. E é mesmo isso que eu também estou gostando porque eu também...Nem sempre as pessoas podem ir com a gente quando é preciso. Se a gente temos uma pessoa...E eu tenho um filho que, quando está nas horas vagas, se for preciso vai!

To examine the impact that this role as a language mediator for the family, has on the Portuguese students' personal identity development, we will draw from Nadia, due to her awareness that the role she was assuming in relation to her family contributed to making her different. On one hand, it made her feel important. On the other hand it stressed the difference between the position of herself in a Portuguese family and

what she perceived to be the position of most girls of her age in an English family. She viewed her role as being opposite to that of her English peers and described it through claiming that for a medical appointment "Their parents go with them" and "I go with my parents".

*(Teresa: How do you feel as a helper?)*  
I feel important! I feel useful because I can speak the languages and so on but ... it is also very embarrassing for me because no one, of my age does that with their parents. That is ... I mean, Carmo does. All the Portuguese do that but the English don't. (...) It is to the contrary. Very often when they go to the doctor, their parents go with them, but I have to go with my parents. It is different ...

*(Teresa: Como te sentes por ir ajudar?)* Portanto, eu sinto-me importante! Sinto-me útil porque sei falar as línguas e tal mas...é um bocado chato eu estar ali porque ninguém, da minha idade, faz isso aos pais. E assim...Quer dizer, a Carmo faz. As portuguesas fazem todas assim mas..., as inglesas não....É ao contrário que elas muitas vezes vão ao médico e os pais vão com elas e eu tenho que ir com os meus pais. É diferente...

The Portuguese children who cry and nearly go into a state of nervous breakdown on arrival are the same children, who after some months take control of vital necessities for the survival of their families. Their English proficiency may not be sufficient to achieve high grades at school, but it is perceived as sufficient to help their nuclear and extended families. They help their parents, older sisters, aunts, uncles. So it seems that one of the major changes they experience is in the person they become. The relationship of being a child dependent on the parents is reversed to one where the parent becomes dependent on the child. This is illustrated in the following extract, as Joana's mother said:

Everything is down to her ... everything, everything, everything. Even my daughter, the older one, when they go to the doctor, to the hospital...(...)...Everything, everything because she also does not know English. She knows some words, but she cannot keep a conversation, she is not able to go to the doctor. (...) She (Joanna) does everything, everything, everything. Dealing with paper work, any letter that arrives... she does everything!

*Ai é ela...tudo, tudo, tudo. Até a minha filha, a outra mais velha, quando iam ao doutor, quando iam ao hospital...(...) Tudo, tudo porque ela também não sabe inglês. Sabe alguma palavra mas não sabe fazer uma conversa, não sabe ir ao médico. (...) tudo ela, tudo, tudo, tudo. Papeis para preencher, qualquer carta que venha é tudo ela...Faz tudo!*

Thus, these girls live between two worlds, which are not free of conflict. One is the world of the schools that expects them to behave as teenagers of particular age groups, whose main working responsibility is studying and who show a certain degree of dependence on their parents. Another is the world of their homes that expects them to play a substantial part in sustaining their family's lives, assuming adult roles, that sometimes may take priority over schooling, such as when there is a need to go to the doctor. At home they are not dependant, but the ones who control the relationships between their families and English institutions. Considering this, it is not surprising that they do not feel that their parents should have more contact with their school.

### ***Being different, being Portuguese in an English school***

At this point, one might have been tempted to conclude that these girls were trying to hide their Portuguese identity when at school. We heard from them that they did not feel the need for their parents to have more contact with their school. However, this would have been a very misleading conclusion! It is possible that they live between two worlds, rendering them very different from their English peers and thus making them more aware of these differences and exposing them to conflicts. Nadia claimed that being different for her meant being Portuguese. This for her was a source of pride and a cultural identity that she was not ashamed to be associated with. Although, at the same time, being different was perceived as the source of difficulties in being accepted or properly integrated into the English peer group at school. As she said:

I like being different because I am not ashamed of being Portuguese. And, I like this because I feel lucky to be able to speak three or four languages. I like being this way but...however, sometimes I also, ... If I were more like them, they would not point us out as being different. And, we are different! (*Teresa: Do you think that all the Portuguese students in the school feel the same as you do?*). Nearly all except... may be one. Except Maria because when she came to this school, she joined a group...(.) who wants us to join their group and Maria let herself be carried away by them just to belong to a cool gang. None of the other Portuguese were influenced (she

*Gosto de ser diferente porque não tenho vergonha de ser portuguesa e gosto porque considero-me com sorte de eu saber falar três, quatro línguas. Eu gosto de ser assim mas...também, às vezes, ...Se eu fosse igual a elas, elas não apontavam à gente por sermos diferentes. E nós somos diferentes! (Teresa: E achas que todas as alunas portuguesas aqui na escola sentem a mesma coisa que tu sentes?) Quase todas menos...talvez uma delas. Menos a Maria porque a Maria, quando entrou para esta escola, meteu-se num grupo em...(.) que elas querem a gente para juntar ao grupinho delas e a Maria deixou-se levar por elas só por causa de ser parte de uma cool gang. Nenhuma das outras portuguesas deixou-se levar*

laughs) but she did.

*(ri-se) e ela deixou-se.*

So, as was highlighted in Nadia's comment, maintaining that their Portuguese cultural identity created conflict in their relationships with colleagues at school. Nadia explained that when conflicts become exacerbated, they might be told to "Go to your country!". They also knew that when they chose to speak in Portuguese in their peer group at school, it sometimes caused unease among their English colleagues. Carmo explained that in her view, this might reveal a lack of empathy for or comprehension of their bilingualism; the English girls were unable to try to step into the Portuguese peers' shoes.

Yes, but if they went to Portugal and if they had English friends, it would be obvious that they would speak their own language.

*Sim mas se elas fossem a Portugal e tivessem colegas inglesas, claro que elas iam falar a língua delas.*

It is also important to point out that although they mentioned more instances of being verbally abused due to the English students disapproving of them speaking in Portuguese, they did not describe themselves as angels! They used language to control the information they chose to share with or rather not to convey to their English friends. As Lia remarked:

Sometimes when we are speaking about things that we do not want them to know about, we speak in Portuguese.

*Às vezes coisas que a gente não quer que elas saibam que a gente está a falar. Por isso fala-se português.*

Thus, they use their first language as a means to sustain their differences.

#### **4.6 Some concluding remarks**

We were pleased to be able to recount the story of the six girls showing how their initial crying was transformed into gaining control of their environment both at home and at school. It is interesting that language was a tool in that process. At home they gained this control by developing their competence in the English language, which

enabled them to sustain the lives of their families. At school they used their first language to assert their differences and their belonging to the Portuguese group of peers.

This case study provided some insights into the mediating role of language in identity development of Portuguese migrant children. In addition, it provided a clear indication of issues that need to be addressed by the institutions involved in the education of Portuguese children in Britain. Namely:

- a) A strategy to help children to cope with emotional and near breakdown experiences on arrival. Though we restricted ourselves to experiences related to language, we also have evidence from the analysis of children's writings that the separations between their families in Portugal and in England are another source of conflict and anxiety. These have also been reported in recent work in the USA (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2001).
- b) A strategy to return some power to parents needs to be put on the agenda, including support in choice and contact with schools. Ours is not the first piece of research in Britain that shows discrepancies between the way parents are represented within the school system and their own behaviour and beliefs (Hughes, Wikeley, & Nash, 1993).
- c) A strategy to address students' Bilingualism and Biculturalism and its potential for pride and also conflict at school. In particular, strategies that will help all students develop better cultural competencies are crucially needed.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> A total of seven students were interviewed in the secondary school. One was excluded from this analysis because of her very distinct background. Though she was Portuguese and lived in Portugal until the age of eleven, her mother is English. Her upbringing was bilingual in contrast to the other six girls, who had Portuguese as their first language.

<sup>ii</sup> A second interview in the English language was conducted with each student. These data are not included in this analysis.