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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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May, 2003

Chapter 6

“How can we teach Portuguese language and culture to Portuguese children who are ashamed of being Portuguese?”: A perspective from France

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Editor’s Summary:

This chapter is an adaptation of the presentation given by Maria Isabel Barreno at the ‘Portuguese Children in UK and Channel Islands Schools: Working Conference’. It explores the situation of Portuguese pupils in France who, like those located in other areas of the world discussed in other chapters, have been found to be underachieving within education. Maria Isabel Barreno discusses the reasons for this that she has identified. She highlights the destructive effects of assumptions and taken-for-granted inaccurate understandings that other countries have of Portugal and suggests that, crucially, this results in these individuals feeling ashamed to be Portuguese and thus reluctant to attend Portuguese classes, rather than proud of their culture and bilingualism. Throughout Maria Isabel Barreno focuses on the possible solutions to these problems that she maintains need to be adopted.

In this presentation I will give an overview of the context of my research and work with Portuguese children and of the situation of these pupils in France. Some of the difficulties that have been described by other presenters at this conference exist also in France. Portuguese children are experiencing difficulties at school. There are children who have no materials at all to aid their learning. Furthermore, the number of Portuguese students going to University is low. Overall, it appears to be the case that each community is experiencing particular problems and needs very much to find specific solutions for those problems but my paramount aim has been to explore the different causes of these difficulties evident within the so-called Portuguese community in France. Of course these problems are common to all migrants. When I say to "all", I don't believe that all people who migrate from one country to another inevitably experience all of these problems.

I recollect in the sixties conducting some research in Portugal with people who migrate from poor rural areas in Portugal to Lisbon and many of the problems they spoke about were similar to those described by other presenters in this conference. On interviewing these individuals, it became apparent that they had experienced and were going through a number of difficulties as they tried to adapt to an urban environment and way of living. Their concepts concerning all manner of things differed very much from my own. Therefore, prior to conducting this research, I had thought that as a Portuguese citizen, I was talking the same tongue as these individuals but realised that this is not the case as even within the same country, we are living in different cultures and using different dialogues. Hence, we always have a struggle to communicate. Of course there are problems that are common to all migrant groups. It could be argued that focusing on these common problems may help to find social and psychological solutions but not necessarily educational solutions. For the latter, another kind of analysis is needed.

Also, it is important to bear in mind that the migrations we are talking about are not on a national scale but rather they are local migrations as people move from one town or village to another town or village which is in another country but to a place where they have relatives and neighbours. And of course there are immense differences between the characteristics of the families that we must consider. Therefore, hidden behind the overall conception of Portuguese migration is a highly complicated situation. So the level at which you analyse material relating to the situation of the underachievement of Portuguese pupils in France is profound. I feel it is important not to generalise too much about the situation as complexities can be overlooked through attempting to find common factors that originate the problems.

I will now move on to talk a little about a system that we have in place for the purposes of teaching the Portuguese language in France. There are more or less 150 teachers who teach the Portuguese language and teach about Portuguese culture. Spain, Italy, Yugoslavia and the Federal Republic and the countries of North Africa, Tunisia, Morocco and Cyprus all have a different relationship with France. It is important to bear in mind that each individual country has an image and perspective of itself and of other countries. The way in which citizens of Spain and France see each other has immense implications. Overall, between the countries that belong to the

European union, Portugal is the least known in France. Spain and Italy are more visible. The others differ to a certain extent in that they have a means of relating to France and to public opinion in France. A crucial characteristic of Portugal therefore is its individuality and its almost solitary standing or position.

Initially, when the Portuguese classes for children attending primary school were established, they were aimed at Portuguese migrants who were planning to return to Portugal. So the objective was to enable children to make a transition from French (or overseas) to Portuguese schooling without any linguistic problems. However, many of these Portuguese people did in fact stay in France. Many of these Portuguese families migrated in the 1960s and the middle of the 1970s and thus despite their intentions to leave, have remained living in France. Nevertheless, the Portuguese classes are still based on programmes aimed at teaching children who plan to return to Portugal. Additionally, primary and secondary schools in France offer the teaching of a wide range of languages. In theory, pupils can learn eleven languages. Yet an inadequate number of schools provide pupils with the opportunity to learn Portuguese. Only English is taught in every school. Other languages are not taught in every school and Portuguese is possibly the least taught. Therefore, finding a school where one can learn Portuguese is far from easy. It is worth also noting however that even when the opportunity is there, their teachers and the local educational authority advise many Portuguese background pupils to learn another language rather than Portuguese. This issue, I feel, is in need of further investigation.

Who are the children who attend Portuguese classes? Portuguese is not the mother tongue language of most of the children attending these classes. There are also children of other ethnic backgrounds (for example, French children). Therefore, there is a wide range of understanding and competency levels among these children. Also, as the parents of the Portuguese children migrated to France in the sixties and seventies, these children are mostly of a third generation. Even if Portuguese is not their mother tongue, however, most of them want to at least be able to speak this language. Some feel that Portuguese *should* be their mother tongue.

I will now explain a little further why I hesitate to describe this group of people as a 'Portuguese community'. When emmigration to France was at its peak, around

1,250,000 Portuguese people were registered in the Portuguese consulate in France. Nowadays the number has gone down to about 600,000 Portuguese people. There are around 9,000 children in our Portuguese classes. Therefore, the Portuguese community that I refer to constitutes less than a half of those who originally migrated to France. Considering that it would normally be the case that this population would have doubled by now, we have to realise that we are unaware of a vast number of Portuguese people who inhabit France. In effect, these particular individuals became French; something that people don't think about when they think about the Portuguese community. We can be aware of this when we notice that Portuguese names appear in French television, film, newspapers and so on.

There appears to be no middle way. Either people are completely assimilated into French society or they remain very visible because they experience problems. Moreover, I would suggest that it is always the problematic cases that we are aware of – not the others. I describe them as problematic because these are the children who do not receive good assessment results and do not go to University. They are also those who struggle to maintain their bilingualism, biculturalism or binationality. Yet, in order to assume this biculturalism, they remain defensive and are determined not to accept French society. They refuse to be integrated and can be perceived as those who do not progress. They shut themselves off from French society, insisting that their children remain Portuguese. However, it appears too often be the case that the Portugal that they knew on migrating to France is very different from the Portugal that they would find if they were to return to their town or village now. They believe that the Portugal they left in the sixties or even in the seventies is still the Portugal that exists. They try to ensure that their memories of Portugal are passed onto their children and so of course if their children or grandchildren want to change and perhaps become more integrated into French society, this is highly problematic.

When I arrived in France, I realised that a very unrealistic perspective of Portugal prevailed. For example, even French people with the best intentions on organising a Portuguese Consul event, chose to display black and white photographs of rural villages in Portugal that were taken in the fifties. A favourite photograph that they felt represented Portuguese culture was of course of an old Portuguese lady dressed in black. Moreover, no indication was given of the date at which these photographs had

been taken. This choice of pictures therefore is an example of practices that act to perpetuate the unrealistic perspectives evidently held in France of Portuguese culture. We most certainly need to consider why today in France there is still an image of Portugal that was established during the dictatorship. For instance, if I were to organise a photograph contest with the theme being contemporary Portugal, we could contrast the old black and white photographs of Portugal from the fifties with those taken of Lisbon today.

The only other image of Portuguese people predominantly held in France is that of immigrants; all Portuguese people are servants and cleaning women. On receiving these individuals therefore, France is viewed as being richer, more powerful, composed of better-educated people. I have the impression that French people believe that Portuguese people lack cultural and linguistic competency as within the country from which they came, they were not well provided for and under funded. Considering this, when I put myself in the position of a Portuguese child in France, I imagine that I would not know much about my family or relations back in Portugal and if I was confronted with the perspectives of Portuguese people that are held by the French and I had no other means of feeling positive about my identity, I think that I too would be deeply saddened and possibly depressed by this. It is frequently acknowledged by those of us researching within this field that many of these children in France have low self-esteem. In fact before coming here a friend of mine who is Portuguese was telling me that he had met a Portuguese cleaning woman in the street whom he knew and stopped to speak to her (naturally) in Portuguese. The woman instantly said to him, “in public, don’t talk to me in Portuguese.” Her reluctance to be heard speaking her own language indicated how ashamed she felt of her Portuguese identity. Again, she could by all means be depicted as an individual with particularly low self-esteem due to the way other people and she herself perceived Portuguese people. So I tried to analyse the causes and symptoms of this situation as my ultimate aim is of course to improve the situation even if I can do so only in a small way. I very much believe that the mutual images that people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds have of each other plays an important role in these situations. Moreover, a crucial cause of the situation is that these prevalent views and images are viewed as the absolute truth and are taken-for-granted. This is why I chose to title this presentation, ‘how can we teach Portuguese to

children who are ashamed of being Portuguese?'. I feel it is vital that people recognise and acknowledge the situation for Portuguese children in France.

Portuguese people believe that problems exist only in Portugal, and that in rich democratic countries everything is perfect. This is part of our national image. Therefore, when Portuguese people migrated to France, England, Germany we believed their children would benefit of perfect schools that have perfect teachers. And when it is noticed that these children are underachieving, blame is placed on the fact that these children have poor rural backgrounds, and we believe the solution is for Portugal to implement better provisions such as more Portuguese teachers. Considering this, it is firstly not just a question of the quantity of teachers available and secondly, it is not just a question of one straightforward solution. The solution is very much the communication that takes place between the two nations. We should have been investigating the situation concerning the underachievement and low self-esteem of Portuguese pupils in France a long time ago. The many regional languages and the political pressure implemented to attain and retain a unique language led to many pedagogic views in France that considered bilingualism dangerous for child development and the academic achievement of children. Hence, many teachers advise foreign parents not to teach their children their language of origin. Some even advise parents to speak French at home. However, many Portuguese parents have a very poor standard of French. Thus, many of the difficulties evident at school appear to be due to bilingualism.

I believe that the image of Portugal has to change. We can of course take action to make changes to our own society but it is far harder to implement the necessary changes in other countries. However, the least we can do is ensure that we ourselves make every effort to address the situation. We need very much to focus on the communication that takes place between cultures and especially with reference to historical knowledge. History is not an objective science but constructed within particular sociological and cultural contexts. Hence, communication between the Portuguese and French cultures is vital as the children are taught about their history within Portuguese classes but the history of Portugal is simply not taught within mainstream education in France. A focus upon Portugal is not included within their teachings of European history. If we want citizens of different ethnic backgrounds to

be able to live together, children need to develop an understanding of each other and a knowledge of each other's histories. The perspectives that these groups have of each other need to be more realistic.

Crucially, we need to address the problem that pupils tend to view Portuguese classes as a form of punishment and do not perceive their bilingualism as something that they should feel proud of. I believe that more effort needs to be made to integrate the Portuguese classes into the French education system. Unfortunately, the Head of Education in France wants Portuguese pupils to be taken out of classes and taught outside mainstream French education. If Portuguese pupils are however integrated into the French Education System from primary school onwards, their bilingualism will naturally develop. Also learning Portuguese with pupils of other nationalities would benefit them enormously and expand the perspectives of all those involved. After all, how can Portuguese pupils be expected to feel proud of their language if no one else wants to learn Portuguese? It is important to seriously consider these potential solutions. On the other hand, a great deal of collaboration with other Governments is needed in order to establish an adequate level of communication.

Editor's Conclusion:

This presentation explored the numerous problems experienced by Portuguese pupils attending schools in France. The unrealistic and inaccurate perceptions that people of other nations have of Portuguese people and culture can be claimed to be highly detrimental as crucially this leads to the shame that Portuguese pupils feel regarding their cultural identity and bilingualism. Therefore, in order to address the situation, it is imperative that better communication is maintained between Portugal and France and other countries. Teachers working within mainstream education in France need to openly encourage the attendance of any pupils (of all ethnic backgrounds as well as Portuguese) to Portuguese classes and express positive attitudes towards bilingualism at home and school. Overall, a vital positive solution for the present situation is the maintenance of better collaboration between teachers leading the Portuguese classes and mainstream teachers in France.