



University of Luton
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 8

Don Quixote and the windmills of social class and ethnic origin: community attempts to improve the situation of Portuguese-Canadian students in Ontario schools

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Summary

In this chapter Ilda Januario gives an overview of the current situation of Portuguese-Canadian students in Ontario schools and the efforts of community activists to improve their academic achievement. Her presentation is based in particular on the volunteer work conducted by the Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education with the Ministry of Education and the public and Catholic schools in the areas of greatest concentration of Portuguese immigrants set against the backdrop of political change in Ontario.

The work of the Coalition, in addition to scrutinizing school board and Ministry of Education statistics, has revolved around issues such as assessment and placement of low-achieving in Special Education programmes, the role of Portuguese as an International Language in the primary curriculum, parental involvement in the school system, teacher, parent and school board social worker expectations, development of “best practices” in target area schools, among other issues. The Coalition’s work has led to the inception of a widespread community-based tutoring programme as a “last ditch” effort to try to improve the academic achievement of Portuguese-Canadian pupils.

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I drew from my experiences as research officer in education, a parent in the Ontarian public school system and a community activist in education issues in the Portuguese-Canadian community of Toronto. As the latter, I consider myself part of the second wave of Portuguese “Don Quixotes” who have taken on the daunting task of attacking the windmills of social class and ethnic origin in the schools of Toronto with a high concentration of Portuguese-Canadian pupils. Don Quixotes because they stand up to the system armed only with vision of what an equitable school system should be, a determination to fight for children and parents who feel

disadvantaged in that school system, and who give some of their “free” time to volunteer for the cause. But, unlike Don Quixote’s windmills, social class and ethnic and /or racial disadvantage in the school system, as in society at large, are only too real enemies. And there is a third windmill lurking behind these two - gender. But this windmill turns differently, as a great many of the players in this struggle are women – be it as teachers and school principals, or as volunteers themselves in schools and school boards and homework helpers for their children.

In the struggle for equity in the school system, the most subtle “windmills” to fight are indeed social class and ethnic origin, particularly the former which, unlike gender, race and even ethnic origin, is hardly acknowledged by the school system. Indeed, we are dealing with a system still geared towards middle-class parents and children who speak English at home, in a city which is, by all accounts, one of the most multicultural in the world – the city of Toronto. Invariably ethnic origin only compounds the much more crucial aspect of parents’ social class position.

8.2 The Portuguese-Canadian Community in Toronto – a brief description

When I moved to Toronto in 1982, I had little experience in a Canadian school system except as a student in the 10th and 11th Grades in an English language high-school in Montreal with a high percentage of Italian-Canadian youth. My professional background was in community work with immigrants, in the non-profit sector, and I had started to work as a research assistant in the first formal research project about immigrant women in Montreal.

In Toronto, before starting my career in 1985 at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (today the main site of the faculty of education of the University of Toronto), I worked briefly in the Portuguese-Canadian community and realised that it had basically the same social composition as the one in Montreal but with much larger numbers and without the linguistic “mediation” of French.

As in Montreal, Toronto’s Portuguese community in the areas of greatest

concentration of the so-called “inner-city” is overwhelmingly Azorean and blue-collar. Portuguese middle-class and professionals tend to live outside of these areas and send their children to more middle-class or to more socially diversified schools. As with other older immigrant communities, the Portuguese have been moving out of this traditional area and moving to the suburbs. Other groups such as the Chinese and other immigrants from developing countries have been moving into this central area of town where housing was cheap, public transportation plentiful and where there was a neighbourly atmosphere.

A specific note about the Azorean community should be added at this point. As immigrants with a much longer tradition of immigration to North America, they came from an area of the Portuguese nation that was always relegated to the margins geographically, economically and educationally. In addition to the sad stories told by Azorean parents regarding their own education prospects in the islands (for example, in their time, having to move to the city in São Miguel island to attend secondary school), there is a lower linguistic retention rate in the homes of low-educated Azoreans, the large majority of Toronto’s Portuguese community.

This low retention rate is at odds with the strong patriotism felt for the motherland. It is a well known fact that unlike low-educated mainlanders, Azoreans tend to emigrate for good and tend not to be particularly interested in sending their children to Portuguese school. As first generation adults they tend not to participate in the Portuguese community beyond their church or club’s activities. There is also some discomfort and disassociation between Azoreans and “continentals”, with a dominance of the latter in top community positions, a sad state of affairs. This situation is hardly ever discussed openly, has historical roots, and makes the Portuguese-Canadian community much less homogeneous and much more fragile (from an ethnic point of view) than meets the eye. In addition there are Brazilian, Angolans and other proud lusophones who lead largely separate community lives and seem to have no special regard for Lusophonia as a common rallying concept. (There is no formal research that I am aware of behind some of these statements, but there is a common understanding about them).

Many Azorean parents, like their counterparts with rural roots from the mainland,

tend to value higher education less than middle-class parents. In fact, the community as a whole is highly divided on the topic of parental expectations for their children's education and career prospects. Mostly, however, Portuguese parents want their children to have a better job than themselves – many of whom work in construction, cleaning offices or private homes or in industry. The problem is that by “better” is usually meant white-collar -- something that can be attained with a high-school qualification like receptionist or at the most, a three-year college education, like technician, or hair-dresser for the girls; for the boys, something that is perhaps less clean but that brings in more money, like being a mechanic. Consequently, the number of Portuguese-Canadian youth in university is still abysmally low and will probably increase very slowly as tuition fees and other university expenses keep rising. According to the 1996 census statistics, Portuguese were the ethno-racial group with the fewest university graduates and one of the highest high-school drop-outs (Ornstein, 2000). It is probably the case that many parents would be willing to help their children through university if they were doing well academically and if they could avoid going into debt to do so.

8.3 Don Quixote rises: The Toronto Portuguese Parents' Association

In 1985 I started to work at OISE in a three-year project entitled “Language and Learning: Effecting Change through Collaborative Research in Multilingual Schools” run by Gordon Wells as part of a team of 4 research officers. For three years, we followed children from varied ethnic backgrounds (Anglo-Canadian, Chinese, Greek and Portuguese) in their classrooms in different schools of the public school system. We interviewed their teachers and parents (Huynh, Januario, Lian Yand Lam & Shechter, 1998). Because I was working only in the “ivory tower”, this remarkable opportunity given to me to learn first hand the workings of Toronto schools, was unfortunately not backed up by any knowledge of, and involvement in, the great struggles undertaken by parents, namely the creation of parent associations in the mid-70's to early 80's, “the golden age in parent organizing”. And in this, Portuguese parents were pioneers. I promised myself I would never let this happen again...

The issue of academic underachievement

Little did I know that at about that time, the early 1980's, Portuguese parents had formed an association in the public school system, called the *Toronto Portuguese Parents Association*. The TPPA was becoming extremely vocal and active on two main issues: the academic underachievement of their children who they found, were being streamed into vocational schools and “left for dead” in terms of a university education; and the issue of the integration of what were then called Heritage Languages into the school system, preferably during the normal school day.

The TPPA even produced a seminal document in English and Portuguese called *Streaming in our schools: what it means and what can be done about it* (circa 1982). They discovered, in their dealings with the school system, that the schools were not uniform in the education they were dispensing to children and “streamed” them in a number of ways. Schools in the inner-city areas were usually not staffed by the best teachers and principals, who preferred to work and were placed in the more affluent neighbourhoods with children of professional parents, i.e., parents of the same or higher social standing than themselves. They found that an A or 80% mark at an inner-city school for example, was only really worth a 60% in a north-end school of Toronto, where children had been talked to and read to in English since they were babies. And when the Association executive and members confronted teachers and school principals with the necessity for early prevention and remediation for low academic standing, they were either ignored or told that the children in question needed tests to confirm suspected psychological or physical impairments to learning. In many cases, all the children needed was more and early help in the classroom and higher expectations for academic outcomes from their teachers.

So the TPPA executive, probably less than 20 active members strong in its heyday, grew bold, defiant and even confrontational. In the early days, they could count on the presence of 100, 150 or 200 parents in their general or emergency meetings. And they influenced the formation of other parents' associations in the school board's area, as parents from other nationalities and races (in particular, Italian, Greek, Chinese and Black parents), were finding that their children too were being streamed into vocational schools or into the general and basic levels of the “regular” neighbourhood schools.

This system of levels – basic, general and advanced – into which students are slotted or “streamed” early on at the secondary level was and still is quite insidious. It was incomprehensible to parents who had been more used to a centralised and uniform kind of curriculum in Portugal up until “quinto ano do Liceu” or age 15/16 (unless they had gone to “Escola comercial ou industrial”, commercial or trade school, at age 10 or 11). And, unbeknownst to them, only the advanced or academic level could assure students an entry into university. Currently, only the general and advanced streams exist de facto. The abolition of the basic level in regular secondary schools and the destreaming of Grade 9 only came into effect in the early 1990’s with the New Democratic Party or NDP government -- Canada’s equivalent to the British Labour Party – at the request of parent groups such as the TPPA (1985). And, as the TPPA found out and denounced, although streaming officially starts now in Grade 10, at age 15, it actually starts unofficially much earlier at the primary level due to the type of school the child attends; in French immersion class/school for the stronger students; or in special education for the weaker students within the school; within classes by the inclusion and exclusion of students in ability groups.

The battle for destreaming Grade 9 won, there followed an attempt to also destream Grade 10, still under the NDP. But this attempt quickly fizzled out due to strong resistance from the teachers’ unions even before the election of a right wing provincial government with the Conservatives at the helm in 1995. Destreaming means working with heterogeneous classes, hence a more difficult class for a teacher to teach and to manage. On the other hand, despite major cuts, the Conservatives have been instrumental in putting in place a common curriculum with set outcomes for every Grade, standard testing, and in centralising the education system in Ontario -- a more convivial scenario to Portuguese parents.

But in the early 1980’s, the TPPA executive could also depend on the assistance of the Toronto public school board’s department of School-Community Relations and its staff, a couple of whom were Portuguese and extremely committed in their efforts. In addition, the work of Irish-born OISE Prof. Jim Cummins was getting to be known in the communities and in the schools (Cummins, 1981). His main thesis, now well known, is that children from homes whose mother tongue is not English, acquire

spoken fluency in English within a couple of years of schooling; but to be proficient in reading and writing, especially to acquire so-called academic English, they need five to seven years of schooling. In that time, many of these children run the risk of being wrongly assessed as Learning Disabled and placed in Special Education classes year after year -- a fact that might ruin their prospects for further education and encourage them to drop out of school at the earliest possible age of 16.

The struggle for the integration of a third language in the schools - the home language

The other great issue that these parents' associations fought from the mid-70's was the inclusion of the teaching of the home language in the local school as opposed to having it taught exclusively in private schools. The rationale for this inclusion was that the home language was important enough to be part of the whole curriculum and that by having the home language and culture taught in school, children would be less reluctant to learn it. Also, the inconvenience of having to go to private school outside regular school hours would be abolished or reduced. For Black children, these heritage classes would be given in English about black culture -- not only as a way of promoting self-esteem and academic achievement but also of fighting racism -- as it was hoped that white children would also attend. For those parents who would want neither of these options for their children during school time, a "concurrent program" was created to occupy them in the arts, crafts and (later) computers.

The provincial Ministry of Education never funded more than the language programmes and the local school board had to assume the costs of running the Black Heritage and the other concurrent programmes. For that reason, the Toronto Catholic school board did not develop a Black culture and concurrent programmes and provided instead home work assistance for children not taking International Languages during the school day, a much cheaper option.

By 1983 the fight was on to integrate these programmes in the school day as opposed to offering classes after school or on Saturdays. The integration of these classes was fought on an individual school basis and led to great tensions and acrimony not only between immigrant, Black parents and staff but also between these parents and white Anglo-Canadian parents who were usually, and still are, the most active in the

Parent-Teacher Associations (now School Councils). The integration of “Heritage Languages and Black Culture programs” did not take place province-wide, only in the public school board in the City of Toronto, the Toronto Board of Education (TBE), now the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the then Metro Separate School Board (MSSB), now the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB).

Although the integrated language and culture programmes eventually won the hearts and minds of many progressive Anglo-Canadian parents and primary school staff, they were never fully accepted in some integrated or extended day schools, by the school board at large or by the primary teachers’ union. Not only did these programmes extend the school day for half an hour the teachers’ union saw it as a curricular imposition and a threat to their autonomy (Dehli, Kari & Januario, 1994). It was seen as a “cultural heritage” issue, to remain in the family and ethnic community domains. In fact, more than 20 years later, the fight is still on to keep these programmes, now called International Languages (and Black Culture), and to improve their overall quality because they are forever in survival mode.

Parallel to this struggle, both Toronto school boards have seen the wisdom of using the home language in literacy programmes which involve both children and parents. This was particularly successful, albeit in different waysⁱ, because, as Jim Cummins had found, the skills acquired in one language can easily be transferred into another language. In the most successful integrated schools, International Language instructors (who are not certified teachers) are respected members of staff who play a number of useful roles in the school. In most schools, however, they are at best ignored and “relegated to the margins” of the curriculum and of school life, as Marujo (1999) so aptly put it in her doctoral thesis, since most schools where these programmes are offered are still not integrated (only 17 sites in the public board, out of 184, and 49 sites in the Catholic board out of 93 offering the programmes). Also, the integrated programmes are the most expensive to run due to the salaries and benefits of instructors and are largely responsible for the deficit incurred.

I started my involvement in the school system by trying to organise an after-school Portuguese programme in my daughter’s school. It was a long, frustrating, laborious process which did not meet with the unconditional approval of the principal, and after

three years I gave up and put my daughter in a private Portuguese school, one of the 22 such schools in Toronto. In her public school, which was very ethnically diversified, I knew from the beginning I would never have a sufficient number of parents interested in Portuguese to have the ideal -- a class integrated into the school day. But I learned a great deal in the process. As a result, I was able to forcibly argue the case, along with many other deputants, in favour of keeping International Languages integrated in the school day for the minority of schools in my school board that offer such programmes.

It might be noted here that although parental involvement in the school system is officially sanctioned by the Ministry of Education and encouraged by the system, in practice, the acceptance of parental involvement in issues other than fund-raising, varies widely from school to school. My experience of organising the Portuguese language class in my daughter's primary school gave me an idea of how difficult it might be for parents to involve themselves meaningfully in their school or school board, especially if they are not middle-class and do not speak English well, and this in spite of the free provision of interpreters.

The status of French as a second language – the other official language

A word about the teaching and status of French as a second language. As a Montrealer for half of my life in Canada, I now have the privilege of working in French in Toronto and I care deeply about the status of French in Canada. As such, I have put my daughter in French Immersion schools, that is, schools in the English language school system that offer classes where the children spend all day or half a day in French (depending on the grade) starting with the second and last year of kindergarten at age 5. Other than French Immersion, English schools offer Core or Extended French starting in Grade 4. Core French is taught for 20-40 daily segments until the end of Grade 9, when it becomes an optional subject. Although French language teachers are regular certified teachers, unlike International Language instructors, a new thesis suggests they also suffer from marginalisation in the school and in the curriculum not unlike the instructors (Richards, 2001). They also face the problems of low morale and high teacher attrition rates. The low level of interest in the learning of any language in North America, perhaps with the exception of Spanish, is pervasive. Children, like most Canadian unilingual adults, attach little importance to the learning

of languages and to the fact that Canada is officially a bilingual country (which in practice it is not).

In English-speaking Canada, the only people who tend to see the economic and social benefits of bilingualism are middle class parents like myself who send their children to French Immersion, with the result that effectively, these classes have made schools who offer it socially stratified, or streamed. As one parent so aptly put it: “It is not that I like French; it is more that I know that there are no children with disabilities in my child’s French immersion class!”. She was of course referring to the mandatory inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular classroom, a topic altogether outside the purview of this paper... North Americans like to see their societies as having no class structure, unlike the “old world”, but as you can see, the effect of class can be just as pervasive on both sides of the Atlantic.

8.4 Don Quixote recruits Sancho Panza: The Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education is formed

The Executive of the TPPA, of which I became a part in 1994, was hoping that the issue of International Languages would sort itself out eventually so that parents could dedicate their voluntary time to the much more encompassing and pressing issue of academic underachievement in the Portuguese community. But this was not to happen. In fact, the TPPA went into decline as the founding parents moved through the system and became cynical about the ability of the school system to deal with its concerns. The SCR department had been dismantled much earlier in 1986 ostensibly because of budget cuts, but in fact also for political reasons because it had become too progressive for the rest of the school board (Dehli & Januario, 1994). The School Community Advisors still exist and work with the Coalition but are accountable to area superintendents and principals.

Also, not only did the original group of parents grow discouraged or simply move on as their children moved up the grades, but a second generation of parents, born or having arrived as children in Canada, felt more at ease in English and preferred to become involved, if at all, in their local school Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).

This was often preferable to involvement in a Portuguese parents' association where Portuguese was the language of communication and was identified with the community rather than a particular school. However, something else also became clear. Most of the "second-generation" parents in these schools, although fluent in English and knowledgeable of the system which they attended, remained by and large lower middle-class and were faced with the same outcomes of academic underachievement and low parental involvement in the schools.

To involve parents, one strategy was to rotate our Association meetings in schools with a good number of Portuguese parents, bring them in, find out their problems in a particular school and try to help them solve them with the administrators. Attendance at these meetings was in general low at the elementary level, for the reasons described above. I also found it increasingly hard to work with an Executive that was half composed of disgruntled old-timers, who could not resign themselves to the low attendance and level of interest exhibited by Portuguese parents in elementary schools to attend TPPA meetings. The level of interest and attendance at our meetings was higher in the secondary schools but not enough to keep most of the Executive motivated and united in purpose; and the recruitment of new Portuguese-speaking Executive members was becoming increasingly difficult.

It was at around this time, early in 1995, that a series of articles appeared in the Toronto Star newspaper about the low achievement of Portuguese and Black students in the school system. These articles were based on the statistics of the public school board, *The Every Secondary Student Survey* published periodically and showing performance by ethnic group that consistently shows Portuguese and Black Grade 9 students (14 year olds) to be at the bottom of the academic heap. The most recent published in 1997 (Cheng, Maisy & Maria Yau , 1997), still shows this trend albeit with some improvement for all groups as compared to the 1991 survey (Brown, Cheng, Yau & Ziegler, 1992)ⁱⁱ. In brief, these surveys show that students of Portuguese-background are underrepresented in advanced secondary programmes and that more of them drop out of school; that these students do less homework and are less active in after-school activities in favour of part-time employment; that their parents had lower levels of formal education; and that they and their parents had lower academic expectations than the average for other students and parents in the

public school board.

The TPPA called on all the other Portuguese-Canadian groups and associations, most of them volunteers, that had demonstrated an interest in education issues – the Portuguese Interagency Network (PIN), the National Congress, the Portuguese university student associations, and individuals – to rally around this issue and form the *Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education*, the “Coalition”, to demand better academic outcomes for pupils and to stop blaming parents exclusively for the lack of success of their children. On this basis, in 1995 we requested a meeting with the then NDP Minister of Education, David Cooke, and at that meeting we asked that the two main school boards in Toronto, the Public and the Catholic, work with the Coalition to exchange knowledge and strategies on how to improve the statistics of Portuguese students’ achievement. Six years later, we are still meeting with the school boards. Other Portuguese groups have joined us such as the Federation of Portuguese-Canadian Business and Professionals (FPCBP), Pais & Filhos (a coalition of parents in Catholic schools), Abrigo, a local family services association.

But it was not easy to gain the confidence of the school boards. We had a hard time getting access to the academic achievement statistics of the Catholic School Board, which had a less strong tradition of organised parental involvement. When it came to requesting averages regarding Portuguese students in Special Education, both boards were extremely reluctant to share these facts and figures with the Coalition. In the end, we obtained these statistics which showed that in 1996-1997, 3 to 4 times more Portuguese children were assessed as Learning Disabled (LD) than the average for the boards in question, and 10 to 20 times fewer Portuguese children were assessed as Gifted (the other pertinent special student category being Behavioural, i.e. behaviour problems, did not show a difference)ⁱⁱⁱ. A prolonged discussion ensued on the reasons for these embarrassingly high numbers, because it stood to reason that Portuguese children should not in reality have higher rates of learning disabilities or lower rates of giftedness than the general population. Could it be, as Cummins (1984) had predicted, that more of these students were being assessed as LD because of their low academic proficiency in English? Recommendations were made to this effect, so that the evaluating staff in both boards might avoid this pitfall in the future. But what became clear was that the school boards were recommending that students with low

proficiency in English be placed in special education services. Most commonly they are placed in “Learning Centres” (where they get one-to-one or small group instruction for part of the day), because there were no other funds or programmes to deal with these students. Although the Ministry of Education provides boards with a small English as a Second Language (ESL) fund to help students who had been in Canada three years or less, most Portuguese students, being born in Canada and raised by grand-parents or Portuguese-speaking babysitters, could be not be considered ESL. The exceptions are Brazilian or Angolan pupils recently arrived in Canada, as part of the more recent wave of immigration from developing countries.

Under the aegis of the work of the Advisory Committee to the Portuguese-Canadian Coalition, as the group mandated by the Minister became known, several topics have been discussed, developed and implemented over the years. The main ones were:

- The *Balanced Literacy Project* in the Catholic School Board. This project was implemented in over 10 primary schools involving the use of Portuguese and English to encourage the early acquisition of literacy (kindergarten to Grade 3). It met with great success. Moreover, this project is being replicated in other languages and may eventually extend to the 22 languages offered.
- The *Best Practices Project* involving 4 schools in the public board that benefited from a 5-year project developed in consultation with the Coalition. The project was structured to monitor closely the achievement of children in numeracy and literacy and better deploy human resources in those schools in order to support school staff and in implementing this pilot project with accountability to the board and the community. NDP trustees in the public school board were instrumental in supporting the formation of the Coalition and its demands for early intervention and accountability through this project.

In both cases, the success of these projects was documented by the school boards’ research departments. Relative to the low budget required for the undertaking of these projects, which invest in *early prevention*, the outcomes have been very good. The *Best Practices Project* will not be replicated in other public schools due to public school board restructuring as a result of the election and re-election of the Mike Harris

conservative government since late 1995. The public school board has been most deeply affected by amalgamation and cuts to its budget. Up until 1997, the Toronto public board was one of six in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and these six boards were forced to amalgamate into one. This created chaos for a number of years due to the merging of policies and administrative staff.

8.5 The windmills multiply -- The impact of school system reform on the Coalition

The government's priority was to save money in public sector by cutting the education budget (along with health and social services budgets) and taking control of school boards. This led to a centralisation of power, with the transference of the taxing power from the boards to the government. Substantial budgets cuts involved school board amalgamation (from 1997) and eventual school closures, still in effect. Then came other "accountability" measures such as the institutionalisation of standard testing and a common curriculum. Equity and antiracism issues, particularly important in Toronto, were and still are completely relegated to the "back burner". As Gillmor (2001) puts it, "It is a market model, the survival of the fittest (...) It weeds out the weak and the sick, offers little for the gifted, ignores the musically inclined, punishes the athlete, the smug Torontonians" (p. 91-92).

A general climate of discouragement and discontent spread throughout Ontario, affecting the morale and motivation for all concerned – teachers, administrators, school board staff and activist groups like ours. Among the parent associations formed on the basis of ethnic/racial origin, such as ours, the fight to preserve the International Languages programme, as part of the severely cut Adult Education budget "envelope", became centre stage again, to our chagrin. But the programme is still with us, as it became too hot a potato for the school boards to cut up any further and swallow, so to speak. Still, the budgetary cuts now mean that the number of extended day sites has been reduced, the languages taught in each of the integrated schools has been cut even further, concurrent programmes or tutoring help have been eliminated, forcing all children to take a language the parents may not want, putting parent against parent in the fight to preserve their language in each integrated school.

One language instructor may be forced to teach children from as many as 6 Grades in one class. There is a grave danger that parents in school councils -- almost always middle-class and Anglo-Canadian -- will exert pressure for their school to do away with third language instruction during the school day.

In terms of academic achievement, the school reforms, through the implementation of the province-wide student testing in Grades 3, 6 and 10, helped lift the veil of secrecy on which schools in which areas were not doing well, because the results are published school-by-school in the main newspapers. In some of the inner-city schools, as many as one third of pupils' mother tongue is other than English; or if the home language is "other" and English, the percentage of pupils who come from such homes can go up to 80%. Many of the pupils receive special education services (in some cases to up to a quarter of the school's population). These students may be exempted from completing the tests. Although the Coalition applauded the common curriculum and the testing, it deplored, in a letter to the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), the Ministry of Education office in charge of testing, two main problems with this approach:

- It is unfair to publicise the test results for schools where students exempted from writing the tests are entered as zeros in the score computations, thereby lowering the averages for such schools.
- This is especially unfair, in view of the fact that these schools will not be receiving any extra resources to help them reduce the number of underachieving students.

A subsequent meeting of the Advisory Group of the Coalition with an EQAO representative, confirmed what is widely known about the academic reform -- that it might be strong on accountability but weak and vague on a plan of action to seriously improve academic outcomes for the weaker students (Gillmor, 2001). "The missing link is money. If anything, support, in the form of resources and teacher training, has been chopped" (Shofield, 2001). As a result, our meeting accomplished little. Added to this is the fact that the reporting requirements put pressure on teachers to designate students who fall below the mean for the class as "exceptional", i.e., as having a learning disability. The prevention and remediation of learning difficulties, as

opposed to disabilities, fall by the wayside in this grand scheme of the market-oriented model (Grossman & Jordan, 1998, p. 31).

The difference between the Coalition and the TPPA, which has ceased to exist, is significant. Whereas the TPPA sought to work with parents, the individual schools and one school board, the Coalition works with both school boards, Portuguese-Canadian institutions and the Ministry of Education as a lobbying and advocacy group, informing the community through the Portuguese language media. We have met with two Ministers of Education. But after 6 years of this kind of work and the refusal of the current Minister of Education to meet with the Coalition, whom government considers to be an “interest group”, it is apparent that more needs to be done at the grassroots level -- some project that can take us from the boardroom back to the individual schools. Also, the dangers of relying totally on volunteer labour over the years have become apparent. As Onésimo Teotónio de Almeida (2000) so aptly put it, the Portuguese community does not tend to have a long staying power when it comes to fighting for issues:

One of the characteristics of modern societies is that individuals join associations according to their specific interests. The interests of such groups are fostered by collective action. (...) Unfortunately, this is a weakness of ours if we compare our efforts to those of other cultural groups. We seem to be able to join efforts in causes that strongly shake our emotions (...) When our emotional side gets activated we experience intense moments of togetherness.

Yet if the event lasts too long, we are not able to keep our emotions aroused. When the unifying purpose is gone, the crowd breaks up into smaller and smaller groups which then work at counter-purposes to one another. Therefore, when a project requires persistent work over a long span of time and results are not immediately visible; or when the cause itself does not continue to inspire such strong emotions such as in supporting a local political candidate or *working to improve the educational level of a particular group*; or when the final objectives are seen as ethereal, then the Portuguese fail to gather enough interest to carry out the task – that is if it gets started at all. (p.118)

I believe that our community is not unique in this and I believe Onésimo is comparing

us to the more successful or longer established ethnic communities in the North American context, such as the Jewish community. We at the Coalition have had our high and low points but at least no groups work at counter purposes to one another in education...That is progress!

8.6 Don Quixote and Sancho Panza attempt to unlock the windmills' doors – the birth of the Tutoring/Mentoring Project

The idea was born to apply to the Ontario Trillium Foundation for a 3 year grant to run a community-based tutoring /mentoring project in those schools with a high concentration of Portuguese students and low general academic standing. This idea was based on the work of the Outreach programs of the University of Toronto Portuguese Association (UTPA) and of the York University Portuguese Association (UTPA). These students decided some years ago that they would try to serve as role models and tutors for Portuguese pupils and their parents by tutoring in schools and by giving talks in clubs and associations, to encourage parents to further the education of their children at the post-secondary level. This work had been done entirely on a volunteer basis. By applying for a community-based tutoring/mentoring programme, the work of the university students would be formalised and expanded.

A number of community partners, including the school boards, got together to plan the project, and the Coalition applied for the funds. The funds were granted in 2001, a project co-ordinator and assistant were hired, 4 schools (2 Public, 2 Catholic) were selected for the first year and a bank of volunteer tutors is being built at the time of writing. Training is being provided to volunteer tutors who started working in schools in the fall of this year. The project is overseen by a Steering Committee composed of the partners.

Whilst we are well aware that the scope of this project is a priori limited, because it is based on the work of volunteer tutors and a limited number of schools (12 in total), we hope that by documenting the results of tutoring with the school boards, we will be able to attack the problem where it hurts the most from the social class perspective.

Tutors will be doing some of the work that our working-class parents usually are not able to do. By acting as an academic link between school and home, we hope to convince school boards and eventually the Ministry of Education to invest in more remedial and preventative measures rather than a “disability approach”. This most readily available approach is far more costly in the long run in terms of lack of academic success and sheer human misery. Dom Quixote and Sancho Panza will show them!

8.7 Conclusion

In addition to this practical, “hands-on” tutoring/mentoring project, the Coalition will continue to play its advocacy role in these difficult times. At the time of writing, the Coalition was also able to secure a free weekly air spot on Portuguese-language radio with creator and animator Manuela Marujo, Spokesperson for the Coalition, thus increasing its visibility and presence in the community and providing more much needed popular education. There is a need for Coalition members to become more knowledgeable and active in issues other than International Languages and academic achievement, such as French language education and teaching, school, day-care and swimming pool closures and other school board budget issues. We will do as much we are able to considering our almost entire reliance on volunteer labour.

Although the school boards provide some support and assistance to the work of the Coalition - particularly the public school board through its policy of maintaining liaison with community groups like the Coalition - the bulk of the involvement and effort must come from parents in the school system and this for reasons of accountability and credibility. Of necessity, the Coalition must include parents who have the time, the knowledge and the capacity to organise and act as well as those whose children are lagging behind and are at risk of school failure.

It is often the case the issues stay and parents move on. But there will always be a need for Don Quixotes and Sancho Panzas raising their voices of discontent and hands of dissent to make the systemic wind mills less impregnable. We owe it to our community and to ourselves as parents and educators.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the following people for assisting me with this paper:

Marta Brum, School-Community Relations Advisor for the Toronto Public School Board and board assistant to the Coalition. Marta was a reader of this paper and I thank her for some of her well thought-out critical comments.

Adelino da Silva, Co-ordinator for Community Relations for the Toronto Catholic District School Board. Adelino provided me with an update of facts and figures regarding his school board.

Ted Richmond, Director for the Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS), for providing me with maps and the Ornstein report.

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Notes

ⁱ While the TCDSB developed a more phonics-based literacy program for kindergarten and the lower primary grades in both English and the home language, the TDSB developed "homework bags" for primary students with popular stories translated in 7 languages and suggested activities for grand-parents and children.

ⁱⁱ The results of this survey led to the document *The Education of Portuguese-Canadian Students* written and submitted by the TPPA to the public school board in 1995. In it, the Executive decried among other things, the assumed low parental expectations versus the low expectations of school personnel and the disengagement of parents when their children reach 16 years of age because of school board practices. It also requested an evaluation of community schools and a better selection of teachers and principals in these schools. This document led to the inception of the *Best Practices Project* mentioned later in this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ "In Ontario, the education system increasingly guides students with disabilities into economically differentiated groups on the basis of differences in one of the 13 categories of disability as defined by the Ministry. *Learning disability is defined by the exclusion of possible other causes of learning difficulty such as linguistic and cultural difference*". Grossman & Jordan (1998), p. 32. The student must be evaluated by a psychologist to determine such a disability, a step that many Portuguese parents are not comfortable with.