

SCHOOLING IN LITTLE PORTUGAL:  
THE PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCE

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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University of Toronto

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Master of Arts 2011  
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**Abstract**

This thesis examines the problem of low educational attainment rates of Portuguese-Canadian students in the areas of “Little Portugal” and West Toronto. Interviews were conducted with former students, teachers, administrators, and community leaders who have all experienced or are linked to the public education system in those areas of Toronto. The question, “why has there been a low educational attainment rate among Portuguese-Canadian students in Toronto?” was asked of the interviewees. The first three chapters provide background information regarding the struggles of the Portuguese in their homeland as well as Portuguese immigrants in Toronto in order to contextualize the information garnered through the interviews. The final two chapters present the thoughts of the interviewees, regarding the subject matter, which were collected during the study.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis would not be possible if it were not for those who played key roles throughout my academic journey. To my thesis supervisor, Dr. Harold Troper: Thank you for the constant encouragement, assistance, and allowing me to tap into your fountain of knowledge. I am very blessed to have had the opportunity to learn from you. To Dr. David Levine: Thank you as well for the opportunity, encouragement, and advice on how to approach this topic. Your dedication is sincerely appreciated.

I would like to thank Kevin and all those who gave up their time for such an important issue. Thank you for your assistance, honesty, and the opportunity to hear your experiences.

I would like to thank my parents, Angelo and Josie Libertucci, for constantly encouraging me to never give up, and for giving me the opportunity, created by their hard work and sacrifice, to succeed. My father always wanted me to write, especially on immigrants and their struggles. Here it is, Pappa.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my Fiancee, Vito Totino. Vito, you are my rock and my light. You keep me grounded and encourage me to go beyond. I cannot thank you enough.

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## **Chapter 1** **History of Schooling in Portugal**

Public schooling in Toronto underscore the core values of the Canadian mainstream. These core values, which run like blood through the veins of the school system, in check loyalty to country, obedience to authority, and conformity to middle-class values. However, there are many ethnic groups which are alien to this value package. How do they fare in Toronto schools? One group, the Portuguese, are burdened with the unfortunate reputation for disinterest in their children's education and, as a result, demonstrate a low educational attainment rate in the secondary school system in Toronto. As late as 2008, the drop-out rate for students of Portuguese heritage was approximately forty-three percent.<sup>1</sup> This is the highest drop-out rate among all ethnic groups in Toronto. One could speculate as to any one of many reasons that might explain this statistic. But rather than speculate, it is important to ask: why, in fact, do Portuguese Canadians have a low educational attainment rate in Toronto secondary schools? This thesis will explore this question by delving into the history of Portugal and exploring the experiences of some of those who immigrated, settled, and were schooled in Toronto. Three groups were interviewed for this study: former Portuguese-Canadian students of public schooling in Toronto, teachers with experience in teaching Portuguese-Canadians in Toronto's "Little Portugal", and Portuguese-Canadian community leaders who have been dealing with the issue in question. While no claim is made that those interviewed are representative of all those in their category, each of those interviewed had hands-on experience of Portuguese in Toronto schools. As such, each offers personal insight into the issues involved.

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<sup>1</sup>Louise Brown. "Keeping Immigrant Kids In School". *The Toronto Star*, April 2, 2008.  
[www.thestar.com/News/GTA/article/408971](http://www.thestar.com/News/GTA/article/408971)

Over the decades many Portuguese immigrants made the long journey to Canada in search of a fresh start and a better quality of life. The majority of those Portuguese who made the journey did so between the late 1950s and mid 1970s. The majority of Portuguese who came to Toronto were from the Azores (a group of islands off of the mainland of Portugal) as well as northern regions of mainland Portugal, specifically Aveiro and Minho as related<sup>2</sup>. This raises a few relevant questions. Is there anything in the nineteenth and twentieth century experience of Azoreans and those northern areas of mainland Portugal that helped to shape immigrant values, beliefs, and ideas regarding schooling Portuguese immigrant children in Toronto schools? What was the pre-immigrant Portuguese and Azorean experience with education and schooling and how did it impact the Toronto education of their children? In order to answer these questions, one must first provide a context within which to frame the life of the Portuguese in Portugal and in the Azores so as to gain understanding of the reasons for the low Portuguese educational attainment rate here in Toronto. The truth is that political ideals, government policy regarding schooling, economics, and religion all contributed to shaping Azorean and mainland experience of schooling and the formation of educational values. This paper will describe and analyze these factors in conjunction with discussion of their implication for the schooling of Portuguese children in Toronto. However, before beginning this analysis, let us first examine a brief history of Portugal and the Azores so that the reader can place him/herself in this historical time frame.

The Azores were first inhabited during the medieval period, prior to the beginnings of settlement in the Azores by the Portuguese, when King Henry of Portugal introduced livestock to the Islands. Raising livestock, fishing, whaling, and other forms of primary economic activity,

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<sup>2</sup> David Higgs. *The Portuguese in Canada*. Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1982, 3.

primarily agriculture, remains the major sources of employment on the islands today.<sup>3</sup> Due to the gradual population increases and the acquisition of more and more land by the wealthy, an increase in land rental costs became the norm for the landless masses.<sup>4</sup> The government also contributed to the burden of the landless by failing to encourage modernization in agriculture and other types of technology. As a result, the landless had little or no opportunity to improve their lot.

The people who settled in the Azores during the 1800's came from mainland Portugal. Some were nobles who wanted to improve their status by acquiring land and wealth. Most were those who desired to leave impoverished areas of north-eastern Portugal in the hope of a new and better life on one of the nine islands in the Atlantic off the Portuguese coast. Azorean society, governed first by an absolute monarchy and later by a constitutional monarchy, was long a feudal society where nobles, the Church, and other aristocrats owned land which was worked by peasants. This economic way of life continued in the Azores well beyond the turn of the twentieth century, through the First Republic in 1911, the *Estado Novo* in 1926, and was still in place when the Salazar regime came to power in 1932.<sup>5</sup>

The Salazar Regime was a fascist dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> Salazar's government was based on God, nation, and family.<sup>7</sup> Society's norms were made to reflect the government's values in work, family, religion, and schooling. The way in which the dictatorship enforced its rule was through

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<sup>3</sup> Francis W. Chapin. *Tides of Migration: A Study of Migration Decision-Making and Social Progress in Sao Miguel, Azores*. New York: AMS Press Inc, 36.

<sup>4</sup> Deolinda Maria Adao, Susana Goulart Costa & Rosa Neves Simas. *Azores: Nine Islands, One History*. Berkeley: Institute of Government Studies Press, 2008, 280.

<sup>5</sup> James H Guill. *A History of the Azores Islands*. Vol. 5, California: Golden Shield Publications, 1993, 266-267.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Emilia Catela. *Educational Reform Under Political Transition: A Study of Change in Portuguese Education in the 1970s*. Stockholm: Institute of International Education, 1990, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Aurea Adao & Maria Jose Remedios. "The Educational Narrativity in the First Period of Oliveira Salazar's Government: Women's Voices in the National Assembly (1935-1945)". *History of Education*. 34, no. 5. (2005), 555.

cohesive control and tight limits on the press, on speech, and on association.<sup>8</sup> With regard to the Azores, any attempts at local fiscal autonomy were quashed by this government, as Lisbon closely controlled the economy as well as any and all industrial growth and development.

The educational system in Portugal was shaped over time by a variety of influences. The Freemason monarchy, a monarchy based on French Enlightenment thought, Humanism, and the separation of Church and State in the late 1800's, abolished all schools affiliated with the Jesuits. But nothing was built in the Jesuits' place. Since the Jesuits organized and taught in most of the schools prior to this move, many Portuguese were left with little to no access to schools and illiteracy grew rampantly. In fact, under Freemason rule "the Azores suffered the highest illiteracy rate of all of Portugal".<sup>9</sup> This is a trend that would unfortunately continue.

The First Republic, a Catholic based regime that took control in the early twentieth century, did not wholeheartedly support education either. Although they endorsed a role for the state in the schooling of the Portuguese, public education continued to be vastly underfunded. This situation continued with only minor improvements during with the Salazar regime and the *Estado Novo*. Since the 1930s, it was only required that Portuguese complete the third year of schooling. By 1968, compulsory schooling was increased to the fourth year. Regardless of this improvement, illiteracy rates, which were already staggering prior to the *Estado Novo*, continued at over 30 percent, the highest in all of Europe.<sup>10</sup> This illiteracy is widely regarded as a direct result of the lack of funding as well as the poor organizational structure of the school system.

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<sup>8</sup> Adao, D., 253

<sup>9</sup> Guill, 623

<sup>10</sup> Grace M. Anderson & David Higgs. *A Future to Inherit: Portuguese Communities in Canada*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976, 141.



Portugal's school system under Salazar was rooted in Freemason thought of the 1800s and inspired by France's school system organization.<sup>11</sup> Schooling was only publicly funded to the end of the fourth year. What is more, schools encouraged a high failure rate. This resulted in many students, including those who hoped to go beyond the fourth level, being much older than the appropriate age in each level of schooling. This only caused humiliation and stunted the educational growth of the students.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of the lack of public funding dedicated to the school system, a two tiered school system emerged. The schools that were government funded were called *liceu*. Those schools run by the Catholic Church and separate from the public school were called *colegio* or college.<sup>13</sup> There were no government funded secondary schools. This posed a problem for many students with limited resources who wished to continue on with their education since economically deprived parents would have to fund their children's schooling. Thus, funding a child's education beyond the fourth level was often seen as in conflict with the family economy; a huge investment for a dubious return. Most with limited means thought it far more prudent to have all available hands working to enhance the family's financial security. Students were forced to put aside any education aspirations they might have in order to help the family unit sustain itself and, for most, schooling took a backseat to working. For the sake of family survival it was regarded more important for children to work with the family and add the family's economic base than to continue with their schooling. School was thus regarded by many as an economic burden rather than an investment.

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<sup>11</sup> Catela. *Educational Reform Under Political Transition*., 21

<sup>12</sup> Norman Newcombe. *Europe at School: A Study of Primary and Secondary Schools in France, West Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Spain*. London: Methuen & Co., 1977, 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> Francis M Rogers. *Atlantic Islanders of the Azores and Madeiras*. Massachusetts: Christopher Publishing House, 1979, 347.

The Salazar regime did little to improve the living standards of the masses. Among other things, the regime continued to oppress its people by denying them quality schooling. “The first revision of the constitution of 1933 took place in February 1935, but there were no proposals to bring about changes in the field of education”<sup>14</sup>. Why was it that the government did not feel that funding a public education system passed the fourth year was necessary? Why did they embrace a truncated school system that served up a diet of limited learning for the many and quality education for the elite? The state’s goals of public schooling were:

a) To provide a ‘sober but solid education, useful and unpretentious, which fosters the virtues that for centuries have safeguarded the social interests of the Portuguese nation’, dominated by feelings for the family and the Nation; b) to contribute to the ‘progressive and thorough development of [mental] faculties’ and to the acquisition of the knowledge indispensable to employment or in further education; c) to make the majority of people useful to society; and d) to guide ‘the minds’ in such a way as to make individuals aware of the general interests of Portugal, their region, their municipality or their parish.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than education for change, Salazar offered the people education grounded in and justifying the ideals and goals of his regime. In the regime’s version, defence of God, nation, and family did not require fully funding the schools. In Portugal most teachers working in the public system were not educated or trained in any form of normal school or teacher’s college. In fact, many teachers were simply former business people or others returned from the labour force. It was not until the early 1970s, when the government began thinking of implementing publicly funded secondary schools, that training a core of professional educators was given serious thought.<sup>16</sup> According to Article 11 of the Portuguese Constitution of 1933, the family is “the source of preservation and development of the race, as the primary basis for education, social discipline and harmony, and as the foundation of all political order, through its association and

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<sup>14</sup> A. Adao, *The Educational Narrativity*, 552

<sup>15</sup> A. Adao, *The Educational Narrativity*, 554

<sup>16</sup> Catela, *Educational Reform Under Political Transition.*, 23-24.

representation in the parish or the municipality”. Therefore, in the eyes of the state, it was primarily the responsibility of the family, not the state, to educate children. This point is further emphasized by Maria Guardiola, a principal of an all girls grammar school during the Salazar regime. Guardiola regarded the family as, “the primary formative unit, the very basis for education”. The values of the state were reflected in an absence of concern for the populace. Instead, the state concerned itself with preserving the status quo and religious authority amongst the people.<sup>17</sup>

Industrial growth, such as it was, remained a constant struggle in the Azores archipelago as well as parts of continental Portugal prior to the ousting of Salazar in 1975. Certainly there was limited investment made in this sector. The Salazar government hindered all attempts at ensuring that a successful industrial market in the Azores could gain strength. Banks did not even dare to enter until the mid twentieth century because of fear by local rulers, that banks would spark economic change. With little or no industrial base, the Islands had to rely on mainland Portugal and other European markets for imports and continue to do so to some extent today. “On the mainland the population was denser in the fertile, small-holding north than in the southern province of the Alentejo with its large estates, low agricultural yields and dispersed population. But like the islands the mainland had not undergone the wholesale urbanization which is usually considered the hall-mark of a modern economy.”<sup>18</sup> Commercial artisans who plied their trade prior to the *Estado Novo* disappeared almost entirely after it was instated. Therefore, the only manufacturing industry that remained in the Azores consisted of handmade

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<sup>17</sup> A. Adao, *The Educational Narrativity*, 555-6.

<sup>18</sup> Higgs. *The Portuguese in Canada*, 4.

and homemade products.<sup>19</sup>

The family acting as an economic unit was the best way for landless Azoreans and the farmers of northern Portugal to scratch out any kind of living.<sup>20</sup> However, as a result of poor access to technology and investment capital, it was difficult for most families to break out of poverty. Many families were left with a bleak outlook and the daunting task of working rented land in order to support even a low standard of living using archaic modes of farming. Their struggle was made more difficult by a lack of conveniences that would have made etching out an existence less laborious. This continued into the Salazar regime. Until the Revolution in 1975, the vast majority of landless and uneducated Azoreans saw little hope for change.<sup>21</sup>

Until the Revolution schooling was not only unattainable for most Azoreans, it was regarded an unnecessary luxury. During the 1960s schooling remained very class based with very rigid hierarchical glass ceilings. By grades 5 and 6, which were at the lower levels of the privately funded secondary school, most students still in schools were being streamed into the class-based station they would occupy in society: those who were going to pursue academics and those who were to pursue a technical occupation. Technical schooling was subdivided into commercial and industrial. No diplomas were given, only certificates of completion for professional schooling. Since the family often needed the child labour, many families in the rural areas of Portugal, especially in the Azores, continued to feel it was more beneficial for their children to work the fields rather than to receive a certificate of completion; and so the cycle of minimal education continued.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ilda Januario & Manuela Marujo. "Voices of Portuguese Immigrant Women". In *The Portuguese in Canada: From the Sea to the City*. By Carlos Teixeira & Victor M.P. Da Rosa, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000, 101.

<sup>20</sup> D. Adao, *Azores*., 280.

<sup>21</sup> D. Adao, *Azores*., 321.

<sup>22</sup> Catela, *Education Reform Under Political Transition*, 83&21.

By the twentieth century poverty, especially among those in the rural parts of the Islands, sparked immigration to other countries, including Canada beginning in the 1950s.<sup>23</sup> “The waves of Azorean immigration which occurred, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, were a clear indication that economic and political developments of the previous decades had not been adequate to satisfy the desires of a significant part of the population”<sup>24</sup>. For those who left, the future remained uncertain. However, for many the uncertainty of immigration was a much better option than the certain fate set out for them if they stayed in the Azores.

The immigration push-factors for areas in mainland Portugal were similar. “The working conditions in Portugal, the lack of employment in certain sectors, the reduced levels of instruction and education, the lack of professional and horizontal mobility and finally the low wages paid to the majority of the workers”<sup>25</sup> all contributed to a willingness of northern mainland Portuguese to leave their agricultural peasant life for Canada.

In the end, the key reason why so many Portuguese left is because the government offered them little that promised change. What must be made clear is that Salazar had no interest in developing a modern free-market state with its promise of improvement in the community’s economic position. Instead, he offered the opposite; a stagnate society that benefited the ruling elite. Moreover, universal and comprehensive schooling which encouraged independence of thought and action was to be avoided. If many of the landless saw schooling as a waste of time, time children could use more productively to increase the family’s earned income, the ruling elite saw mass education and the liberal values it might encourage as threatening to their power and control.

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<sup>23</sup> Domingos Marques & Joao Medeiros. *Portuguese Immigrants: 25 Years in Canada*. Toronto: Marquis Printers and Publishers Inc., 1980, 17.

<sup>24</sup> D. Adao, *Azores*, 318.

<sup>25</sup> Marques, *Portuguese Immigrants*., 18.

Thus, for many, rulers and ruled, schooling ran counter agendas. Therefore, in conjunction with the fact that there was very poor access to education in an under-funded and poorly supported public school system, the decision to avoid school in favour of working to support the family became an easy one for many in more rural areas to make. As a result, very few rural Portuguese were educated beyond the fourth year level. This meant that there were very few who were schooled and who could help to break the cycle of poverty through education. Thus, poverty and a laborious existence would remain and generations after generations of young Azoreans and rural mainland Portuguese, seeing advantage in schooling, would join their families' meagre attempt to etch out a life.

This was and is in sharp contrast to most of the rest of Europe. By the late 1960s and early 1970s Western Europe was caught up technological and educational change. The European Economic Union was forming and globalization, the communications revolution and technological change reshaped markets. Portugal, especially the Azores, which was increasingly over populated and mired in poverty, was left behind. The economy demanded innovative thinking. This, in turn, required a more educated workforce. Portugal, realizing the damage that generations of educational neglect had caused, answered the beckoning call of the global/regional economy and finally began to reform and modernize its educational system.<sup>26</sup>

Portugal came under new leadership in 1969. Salazar was replaced by Marcelo Caetano. Although the government still held to a fascist ideology, Caetano's government recognized that policies needed to be altered, but this initiative took a back seat to more pressing concerns. "At the time he came to power, the government's strength was already threatened by the colonial wars and an inability to solve the question of decolonization."<sup>27</sup> Not only did Portugal have to

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<sup>26</sup> *Education in OECD Developing Countries: Trends and Perspectives*. France: OECD, 1974, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Catela, *Education Reform Under Political Transition*, 15.

deal with its industrial and educational shortcomings, but the country also had to deal with thirteen years of continuous colonial war. Portugal's African territories had long been a massive source of natural resources. Without a strong industrial base, Portugal used its colonial wealth to pay for imports thereby further weakening the economy. When Portugal's African holdings began a struggle for national liberation, the costs of colonial wars beggared Portugal still further. This led to a democratic coup in 1974 organized by dissident elements of the Portuguese military.<sup>28</sup> The resulting decolonization, democratization, and a more open economy focused attention on schooling. Portugal realized that it needed skilled workers with knowledge of innovative technology and modes of thought. In 1971 Portugal moved toward public funding for the secondary panel. The idea, which was fully implemented by the time of the revolution in 1974, was that the state had to heavily invest in secondary schooling. The plan was to quickly move to a modern school system, in line with the rest of western Europe, that would enhance the economic development of the country.

By 1975 Portugal was an experiment in democratic socialist thought. It was widely acknowledged that education policy change was the key if Portugal was to be competitive with the rest of Europe. The education policy changed dramatically in 1975. Education became enshrined as a public right.

This means that the educational system should not be directly subordinated to the demands of economic development, for it is man himself that is at stake in the beginning and the end of the system. Yet it has been considered that to ignore this relationship totally would lead to frustration, so that the concept of educational structures should take into account not only that capacity and propensity of each individual but should also enable him to acquire concrete qualifications to fit him for a professional task that will be socially dignifying and useful.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Catela, *Education Reform Under Political Transition*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Catela, *Education Reform Under Political Transition*, 61.

Portugal looked towards the school systems of North America as a model of democratic schooling, where every child, regardless of class or background, would have access to education at all levels and every child would be schooled in an atmosphere of equality and social justice. Government now accepted the notion that the publicly funded school system was essential to the positive political transformation of the nation. It was at this point that life for the Portuguese began to change. The lives of the next generation promised to be very different from that of their parents. Suddenly even higher education became a real possibility and the cycle of illiteracy, in which so many were previously trapped, began to slip away.<sup>30</sup>

But most those who came to Canada from the Azores arrived before the Portuguese educational revolution. These Portuguese were products of Salazar's Portugal. By understanding something of rural life in Portugal during the Salazar years, especially with reference to the often negative value placed on schooling, one begins to understand the mentality of Azoreans and mainland Portuguese who have immigrated to Canada from the 1950s to the early 1970s. The value of sustaining the family economy rather than embracing schooling was widely regarded as a virtue among Azoreans living in the Archipelago and for Portuguese living in densely populated agricultural areas of the north. The Portuguese brought this notion of "family first" to the New World, including Toronto. To this day, the Portuguese in Toronto balance their family priorities against those of a school system's demand of compulsory schooling through secondary school graduation, an option which was not available or deemed desirable by many.

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<sup>30</sup> Catela, *Education Reform Under Political Transition*, 65.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Portuguese Settlement in Toronto:**

#### **An Immigrant's Story**

In 1971 Canada officially declared itself a multicultural society and in doing so the federal government promised to act in concert and with democratic pluralist values. On October 8 of that year, Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau rose in Parliament to officially announce Canada's intentions to pursue policies that would promote multiculturalism.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy this morning to be able to reveal to the House that the government has accepted all those recommendations of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism which are contained in Volume IV of its reports directed to federal departments and agencies. Hon. Members will recall that the subject of this volume is "the contribution by other ethnic groups to the cultural enrichment of Canada and the measures that should be taken to safeguard that contribution."...It was the view of the Royal Commission, shared by the government and, I am sure, by all Canadians, that there cannot be one cultural policy for Canadians of British and French origin, another for the original peoples and yet a third for all others...The Royal Commission was guided by the belief that adherence to one's ethnic group is influenced not so much by one's origin or mother tongue as by one's sense of belonging to the group, and by what the Commission calls the group's "collective will to exist". The government shares this belief.<sup>1</sup>

From this point on, the federal government no longer officially viewed Canada as a bi-cultural nation, but rather a multicultural quilt with different ethnic threads reflecting all the cultures in Canadian society. Each thread tells the story of life in Canada from the perspective of a different ethnic group. This chapter will describe one such ethnic groups' story as well reflect on as issues that grow out of a more pluralist immigration for Canada. More specifically it will examine the history of Portuguese immigrants to

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Elliot Trudeau. "House of Commons Debate: Federal Multicultural Policy". Ottawa. October 8, 1971, 135.

Canada, especially after the 1950s when Portuguese began settling in large numbers in them still predominantly Anglo-Protestant Toronto. This chapter will also include an examination of Canadian immigration policies which existed during the post-World War II period. In addition, it will highlight the reasons underlying Portuguese migration to Toronto, identify the neighbourhoods where the Portuguese community settled, describe the formative period of the Portuguese community in Toronto, and discuss the struggles which a Portuguese immigrant working-class family may have faced in negotiating the divide between family dynamics and public schooling. Before examining these issues, it is imperative that one understand the historical context within which Canadian immigration expanded after World War II and Portuguese immigrants carved out a place in a growing Canada.

After World War II Canada entered a period of economic boom. Domestic and foreign markets for Canadian raw materials and manufactured goods were growing. There was also a huge demand for new housing and growth in the domestic infrastructure. The rate of job growth far outstripped the ability of the domestic labour market to meet demand. As a result, the country needed imported workers to meet the shortfall in skilled and manual labour. For that reason, Canada began to open its doors to new immigrants. As Alan De Sousa notes, “Shortly after the war, in 1947, Prime Minister Mackenzie King announced an expansionist immigration policy to meet the needs of labour shortage in industry and to make Canadian industry stronger and more competitive.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, the country’s rapid population growth during this period was in large part a product of the nation’s intake of labour, specifically in the areas of construction,

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<sup>2</sup> Alan De Sousa. *The Formative years: Toronto’s Portuguese Community (1953-1967)*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 1986, 13.

forestry, farming, and manufacturing. As Canada sought workers from across Europe to fill its labour needs, by the late 1950's one of the countries that Canada began to favour in terms of labour recruitment was Portugal.

As mentioned above, Canada needed immigrant labourers and was interested in recruiting Portuguese workers who would fill positions that many Canadian-born workers could not or would not fill. Luckily for Canada, this coincided with a moment when a great number of Portuguese, frustrated with their situations at home, wanted to leave their homeland. This was a direct result of a poverty of opportunity in Portugal under Salazar harsh fascist dictatorship. Of course, regional inequalities in regards to socio-economic status and opportunity existed in Portugal well even before Salazar. However, these inequalities were exacerbated under Salazar. Consequently, the economic and political push factors which contributed to immigration for the Portuguese people became stronger. "The working conditions in Portugal, the lack of employment in certain sectors, the reduced levels of instruction and education, the lack of professional and horizontal mobility and family, [as well as] the low wages paid to the majority of the workers"<sup>3</sup> were all contributing factors which led people to make the difficult decision to leave Portugal.

Although there was a growing number of those eager to leave Portugal for a better life, the Portuguese government initially did not share their enthusiasm for emigration. The government did not condone emigration to anywhere except Portuguese colonies as well as the former colony Brazil. "The restrictive emigration procedure measures were a reflection of a political and economic philosophy by the Salazar regime. They wished to

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<sup>3</sup> Domingos Marques & Joao Medeiros. *Portugese Immigrants : 25 Years in Canada*. Toronto : Marquis Printers and Publishers Inc., 1980, 16-17.

contain emigration or redirect it preferably to Portugal's own colonies."<sup>4</sup> Due to these government policies, a large number of Portuguese migrants were directed to Portuguese colonies in Africa as well as Brazil.

In the early 1960s, Portuguese emigration policy became less rigid even as immigration fever grew. Many young Portuguese men wanted to leave Portugal so as to avoid compulsory military service in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea, where there were nationalist struggles for independence from the Portuguese Empire had erupted.<sup>5</sup> What is more, the Salazar government's policies and iron rule continued to exacerbate economic disparities. But, where to go?

Following negotiations between the Canadian and Portuguese governments, Canada was finally granted permission by the Salazar regime to recruit a large number of Portuguese immigrant labourers.<sup>6</sup> As a result, large groups of Portuguese, mostly men, immigrated to Canada during 1953 and 1954. In *With Hardened Hands*, Domingos Marques and Manuela Marujo describe how the arrival of these early Portuguese immigrants.

The 1953 contingent of 179 immigrants arrived in these groups; 69 on May 13, aboard the *Saturnia*; 7 men on May 23, aboard the *Vulcania* and 103 on June 2, aboard the *Nea Hellas*. The 1954 contingent of 950 men also arrived in three groups: 330 aboard *N.S Homeland* on March 28; 449 in the same liner one month later; and the remaining 171 on the *Nea Hellas* on May 2, 1954.<sup>7</sup>

These men landed either in Halifax harbour or at the Quebec City port. They were then taken by train to pre-arranged and often rural destinations where they would work and

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<sup>4</sup> De Sousa, *The Formative years*., 17.

<sup>5</sup> Marques , *Portugese Immigrants* :, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Marques, Domingos & Manuela Marujo. *With Hardened Hands A Pictorial History of Portuguese Immigration to Canada in the 1950s*. Toronto: New Leaf Publications, 1993, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Marques. *With Hardened Hands*, 21.

live. If they had been asked, the major urban cities of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver probably would have been the preferred destinations of these Portuguese. However that is not where the Canadian labour officials directed them. Instead, these men were transported to waiting jobs to the vineyards of southern Ontario, the agricultural lands in Quebec, on the railways in eastern Ontario, and the Niagara fruit belt as well as other farm districts in Southern Ontario.<sup>8</sup>

Life for these men was often difficult and lonely. Many of these men either lived in solitude as agricultural labourers on farms or laboured as part of work gangs on the railways. Removed from family, they longed for the comfort and support of loved ones. The story of one Portuguese labourer is documented in *With Hardened Hands*. His name is Manuel Francisco Pedro Neves and in a letter home he poetically recorded his feelings of what an immigrant life meant to him.

*Have you ever asked yourself what is an emigrant? Perhaps this is a foreign concept to you. Even I, who have now become one, I don't fully understand it. But I can tell you that any emigrant, master of bravery who one day left his homeland to better himself and to provide for his family, he never really prepared himself for all the sacrifices, this tormented life in solitude, shedding tears every time he is alone. So many times he falls asleep with the image of his wife and children so dearly loved in his memory. So many times he dreams being with them only to wake up sad to reality. But a powerful desire to win, a ray of hope always remains with him. And, if one day he finds himself in the company of his family, with the few hard earned dollars he saved, he will forget on that marvellous day all the sacrifices, and his heart will jump with joy, because he won the battle, he conquered the dream of a better life.*<sup>9</sup>

Rural life often meant living in isolation not just from family but from others who spoke Portuguese. Many dreamed of a better life in urban areas like Toronto where they could be reunited with family and where they could find community. While many sent part of their wages back to family in Portugal, they also began to lay money aside so they could

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<sup>8</sup> Marques. *With Hardened Hands*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Marques. *With Hardened Hands*, 86.

bring family to join them in Canada. As Carlos Teixeira and Victor Da Rosa explain, “The first Portuguese immigrants to Canada arrived alone in the early 1950s and later sent for their wives, children and sometimes their extended families. Once in Canada, their main goal had been to reconstitute their families in their new country.”<sup>10</sup> As soon as they were legally able to do so, many sponsored their families through the immigration process in order to bring them to Canada faster.<sup>11</sup>

From the middle sixties, when the economic situation in Canada began to improve, there was a flow of Portuguese immigrants into the greater urban centres. This coincided with the arrival of many of their wives and families, so it was at this time period that the Portuguese presence in Canada became more stable.<sup>12</sup>

Not everyone was pleased by Canada’s liberal family reunification immigration regulations. In fact, when asked about Canada’s generous welcome of immigrant family, one Member of Parliament was quoted as saying: “if you put pants on a penguin, it could be admitted to this country.”<sup>13</sup> In response to concern about the arrival of family members who would not otherwise qualify for Canadian admission, the Canadian government sought to raise barriers to family reunification. The *White Paper on Canadian Immigration Policy* called for tightening of family sponsorship regulations. Protests from pro-immigration advocates, including churches, prevented a severe tightening of regulations. Portuguese women continued to join their men in Canada. And more and more the new Portuguese arrivals gravitated to urban centres like Toronto

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<sup>10</sup> Teixeira, Carlos & Victor Da Rosa. *The Portuguese in Canada: From Sea to the City*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000, 183.

<sup>11</sup> Noivo, Edite. *Inside Ethnic Families: Three Generations of Portuguese Canadians*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Giles, Wenona. *Portuguese women in Toronto: Gender, Immigration, and Nationalism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, Grace M., *Networks of Contact: The Portuguese and Toronto*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1974, 43.

where jobs were said to be plentiful and a growing Portuguese community took root.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, “by the end of the 1950s the pioneers were, for the most part, moving towards the cities, especially the largest centres-Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.”<sup>15</sup>

One area which was heavily populated by Portuguese immigrants, and was previously home to other new Canadians, was the Kensington Market district in Toronto. The reason why the Portuguese immigrants settled in and around the Kensington Market area was primarily because housing costs were low and public transportation made it easy to get to jobs.<sup>16</sup> Previously, some Portuguese immigrants had settled in the Alexandra Park neighbourhood, but with the urban demolition of that area, Kensington Market became the neighbourhood of Portuguese choice.<sup>17</sup> While Kensington Market may have been the focal point of Portuguese settlement, as more and more Portuguese arrived in Toronto its boundaries gradually expanded into adjacent areas as far westward along College Street to Dovercourt and north to Bloor Street West. The area of “Little Portugal” eventually expanded to border St. Clair to the north, King to the south, Lansdowne and the Canadian National Railway lines to the west, and Spadina to the east.<sup>18</sup> Today the Portuguese community has also come to include much of the once prominently Italian area of St. Clair Avenue.<sup>19</sup>

The Portuguese neighbourhood of Toronto is where Kevin Almeida’s and Rui’s Portuguese immigrant parents settled. In the 1960s and 1970s the fathers’ of these first Canadian-born generation of Portuguese deliberately chose to settle in an area which was

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<sup>14</sup>Giles, *Portuguese women in Toronto*: 27 & 29.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson *A Future to Inherit*., 42.

<sup>16</sup> Teixeira, *The Portuguese in Canada*., 22.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson *A Future to Inherit*., 69; Teixeira, *The Portuguese in Canada*., 8.

<sup>18</sup> Carlos Teixeira, “The Suburbanization of Portuguese Communities in Toronto and Montreal: From Isolation to Residential Integration?”. *Canadian Issues* 18 (1996), 187.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson *A Future to Inherit*, 166; Teixeira, “The Suburbanization of Portuguese”, 185.

predominately Portuguese. “When my dad married”, Kevin explained, “he lived on Crawford Street with my grandma and with my grandpa. They lived on Crawford Street and my whole family set up shop in the Crawford area. We currently live at Bloor and Lansdowne.”<sup>20</sup> Many of their neighbours were recent Portuguese immigrants and their Canadian-born children. “According to the first census returns in 1962 there were ten thousand Portuguese registered in St. Mary’s Church on the corner of Adelaide and Bathurst Streets.”<sup>21</sup> As they made more money, Portuguese families might move to larger or better quarters, but most after still within the boundaries of the Portuguese residential neighbourhood. Rui noted, “My parents first lived on Dufferin and Dundas. That’s the major intersection. They rented for eight months and then they bought a house on Dufferin and Bloor. That’s where they live now”<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, Mark Terceira’s family preferred to live side by side with other Portuguese immigrants: “My father’s family first lived at Queen and Dufferin and my mom’s at Bloor and Ossington”.<sup>23</sup> They were not alone. “By 1974 it the Toronto’s Little Portugal was one of the greatest nuclei of Portuguese immigrants anywhere in the world.”<sup>24</sup>

Rui tells the story of his father’s first encounter with the Portuguese neighbourhood, the job opportunities it held and the social networks which were created. “He worked at a mechanic shop first and then his Portuguese friends said to him, ‘what are you doing? Come work in construction’.”<sup>25</sup> With the support of his friends, he did so. Work brought dignity but it also brought more money with which he bought

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida, March 3, 2009, Toronto.

<sup>21</sup> Marques, *With Hardened Hands*, 136.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Rui, March 28, 2009, Toronto.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mark Terceira, March 4, 2010, Toronto.

<sup>24</sup> Marques, *Portuguese Immigrants*, 139.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, Rui.



property.

And what was, and still is, very important to members of the Portuguese community is the ability to purchase their own homes. “The majority of Portuguese immigrants still view home ownership as a secure economic investment today.”<sup>26</sup> Being able to purchase one’s own homes provides a sense of concrete achievement and security. Thus, by settling where they did the Portuguese have created a living space where they reside together in a cohesive community and one of primarily family owned homes.

The neighbourhood is a place where they feel comfortable, where they can live a Canadian life in a ‘Portuguese way’, among those who share culture, way of life, and language. Portugal Village and its environs are a re-creation of their homeland – an area where they can keep some of their culture traditions alive in the New World.<sup>27</sup>

The old world notion that ownership of land was essential to success and security found new life in Canada. By living in the same neighbourhood, Portuguese immigrants created a Portuguese ethnic enclave. Mohammad Qadeer and Sandeep Kumar define an ethnic enclave in an article entitled, “Ethnic Enclaves and Social Cohesion”.

“Residential enclave is ...where a particular ethnic group numerically dominates, and has spawned responding religious, cultural, commercial and linguistic services and institutions. An enclave is a culturally and economically distinct area.”<sup>28</sup> This well describes the Portuguese ethnic enclave in Toronto. “Little Portugal” and its surrounding neighbourhoods contain places of worship, schools, organizations, and businesses that reflect Portuguese ethnicity and culture.

...the first Portuguese Canadian Club was formed and was lodged just across the road in front of the Portuguese restaurant...Portuguese

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<sup>26</sup> Teixeira, “The suburbanization of”, 185.

<sup>27</sup> Teixeira “The suburbanization of”, 215.

<sup>28</sup> Qadeer, Mohammad and Kumar Sandeep, “Ethnic Enclaves and Social Cohesion”, *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 15 (2006), 2.

festivals were organized and a soccer team was formed. A little later the Lisbon bakery made its appearance. It was the first bakery to make real Portuguese bread in Canada. Next came the first store with Portuguese foods for sale, and after that the first Portuguese travel agency.<sup>29</sup>

The social cohesiveness of the community is evident through the establishment of all these key community institutions.

Social cohesiveness in this Portuguese ethnic enclave is also strengthened by the commonality of the Portuguese language. Intergenerational language continuity is highly valued. Within the family unit, the children are often expected to speak to the parents in Portuguese. Kevin Almeida recounts his father's reasoning for this. "My dad here [in Toronto] speaks Portuguese to promote the culture."<sup>30</sup> Rui also noted the value his parents placed on Portuguese heritage and the importance of the Portuguese language. "No, my parents don't speak English...I only speak to my parents in Portuguese."<sup>31</sup> The priority given mother tongue continuity is discussed in, "Ethnic Enclaves and Social Cohesion." According to the author, language and cohabitation is seen as imperative to maintaining Portuguese culture in Canada.

Elderly and homebound women find companionship among those who speak their language and have many common interests and values. It facilitates the socialization of children in their heritage culture. Politically and socially minority communities feel strength in numbers. Place of worship can be established close by.<sup>32</sup>

The continued use of the first language, values and culture contribute to the Portuguese community's sense of unity and underscores the importance accorded Portuguese ethnic survival on Toronto.

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<sup>29</sup> Marques, *Portuguese Immigrants*, 136.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Rui

<sup>32</sup> Qadeer, 13.

Some might argue that, the cultural priority accorded one's first language impedes one's learning of the English language. Certainly, lack of knowledge of the English language has been a barrier to acculturation into the mainstream for many immigrants living in Canada. The Portuguese are no exception. "The chief problems of the new immigrants arose from the difficulty of finding jobs and from their lack of English."<sup>33</sup> But, do Portuguese immigrants, while valuing Portuguese language continuity, suffer for lack of English fluency? Less than one might imagine. In order to overcome job barriers, Portuguese immigrants chose to live in a community which caters to their ethnic culture and where Portuguese is commonly spoken. The pressure to acculturate is then minimized. For example, a Portuguese owned restaurant, such as Sousa's Restaurant in Kensington Market served as something of a social magnet. Here people commonly communicate in their mother tongue, promoting not just in-group bonding but also distance from English-speaking Toronto.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Portuguese clubs, churches, festivals, and stores all contribute to the solidity of the Portuguese community and the clear use of the Portuguese language.

Important to a cohesive ethnic enclave are the institutions and organizations present within the community. They reflect and reinforce the values of that particular ethnic group. One of the most important life institutions to most Portuguese, and one which is absolutely essential to the Portuguese community in Toronto, is the cohesive family unit. In fact the cohesive and multigenerational Portuguese family represents the very foundation upon which the Portuguese community stands. The family also

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<sup>33</sup> Marques, *Portuguese Immigrants*, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Marques, *Portuguese Immigrants*, 136.

functions as an economic unit. For Luso-Canadians his family functioned as an organic social and economic unit out of their home-base on Crawford Street. If the family was a hand, each family member was a finger. “Mom lived on Crawford Street. [My] dad [lived] on Dufferin and Queen. Then, when he got married, he lived on Crawford with grandpa grandma. My whole family set up shop on Crawford Street.”<sup>35</sup> Everyone contributed to the economic whole. “Mom came [to Canada] when she was 16. She worked here at a factory. She’s the second oldest sibling. My grandfather had all girls. The two oldest had to contribute and the youngest went to school”.<sup>36</sup> In order to get by, the wives also needed to contribute to the family economy as well. Rui’s childhood memories are of his mother working outside the home. “Mom worked at a textile factory which was predominately Portuguese speaking. After that she did house cleaning for 10-15 years, and within the last 10 years she’s been a nanny.”<sup>37</sup>

Fernando Nunes, in his article entitled, “Portuguese-Canadian Women: Problems and Prospects”, describes the priority the family unit gave to owning property and the scrimping the family accepted to reach that goal. “The family’s desire to acquire a house [a tangible symbol of security and success in their new country] meant that many Portuguese women had to enter the work force after immigration...They work as household help, office cleaners, dressmakers, nurse’s aides and nurses.”<sup>38</sup> This was often a heavy burden on the family settling in a new city. Because of the dual roles which these women shouldered, economic contributors and domestic homemakers, the wife’s ability

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Rui.

<sup>38</sup> Nunes, Fernando. “Portuguese-Canadian Women: Problems and Prospects”. *Polyphony* 7, no. 1. (Spring/Summer 1985), 61.

to care for her children in the way she might want to, or be expected to according to expectations dictated by her Portuguese culture, might be sacrificed.

The greatest hardship of life in Canada for some Portuguese women is in watching the way in which their demanding living pattern and their new country hinder their children's development. A woman's activities in the work force mean that she cannot devote as much time as before to the children. During the school year, their time will be taken up in the classroom, but during the holidays, or in the event that she has to work at a second job, they will either sit at home, unsupervised (as most Portuguese mothers are reluctant to use baby-sitters from outside their family), or roam the streets.<sup>39</sup>

This was true of John's family from Lisbon. "My mom worked late so I was left alone. I didn't do my homework; there was no one around to check."<sup>40</sup> Sergio's mother didn't work in Portugal but in Toronto. She had no economic choice. "My mom worked evenings until 6:00pm so she couldn't help me with my homework. My dad tried but with math only."<sup>41</sup> Children may have paid a price, but the money-earning role of women in the Portuguese household helped secure the family's economic future and made wives more equal partners in the household than may have been true in Portugal.

If some Portuguese children suffered for lack of close motherly guidance, schools did attempt to bridge the gap between Canadian society and Portuguese ethnicity by offering heritage language classes within the public schools. Certainly the client market was there. The Toronto School Board and the Separate School Board both have schools with a high Portuguese ethnic clientele. According to a census published in 1978 "...in nine public schools the Portuguese students form the second largest component and the third largest in another twelve schools. Most of these schools are in West Toronto. There are also 7, with at least 186 children of Portuguese parents registered in the

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<sup>39</sup> Giles, 65.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with John. October 30, 2009, Toronto.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Sergio Leite, September 29, 2009, Toronto.

Catholic schools in Toronto.”<sup>42</sup> The fact that the Portuguese were residentially clustered in west Toronto created a Portuguese student pool for heritage language classes in both publicly funded boards in line with the Ontario Ministry of Education policy regarding heritage language learning.

Ontario’s Heritage Languages Program was legislated in 1977, providing full funding for heritage language instruction outside the regular five-hour school day for up to 2 ½ hours response to a request from a community group. Ontario offers heritage language instruction in a vast array of minority languages, of which Portuguese is one of the most prominent.<sup>43</sup>

Former Canadian-born Portuguese students interviewed for this study still vividly recall their heritage language classes. Rui and Kevin were born, raised, and still live in the Toronto Portuguese ethnic enclave. Both went to St. Helen Catholic School located on College Street. There they attended Portuguese heritage language classes.<sup>44</sup> Although the public schools offered Portuguese heritage language classes, the Almeida and the Terceira families also sought out additional schooling in the Portuguese language and culture believing language maintenance important for the proper socialization of their children.<sup>45</sup> These extra-curricular programs were often organized and run by the local Portuguese parish or Portuguese cultural organizations – all at low cost to parents. Kevin recalls:

I also went to Portuguese school. I went to Portuguese school every day. There, I learned the language, Portuguese culture and history. In Portuguese school I learned math and history and grammar all in Portuguese. I started in grade 4 to 8. It was about learning the language and traditions.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Marques, *With Hardened Hands*, 143.

<sup>43</sup> Teixeira *The Suburbanization of*, 130.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida; Interview with Rui.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Mark Terceira.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida.

These community-based programs were and are designed to teach the student not just the Portuguese language but other subjects such as math and Portuguese history. The curriculum is structured to parallel the Ontario school program with regard to grade or levels and evaluation. Mark recalls his experience with the Portuguese after-school heritage language program: “I studied in the evenings from 4:30 to 6:30. I started in grade 1 and got to grade 3 in Portuguese school. It was on Caledonia and St. Clair. My parents wanted to keep the language. We learned grammar and reading.”<sup>47</sup> The availability of community-run centres that taught Portuguese language, history, and culture was regarded by many families as an additional and invaluable benefit to children in Little Portugal. “Strengthening public education, increasing employment equity, fostering open society and promoting political participation are the processes that promote social cohesion.”<sup>48</sup> Language, culture and, above all, a cohesive multigenerational family remain critical building blocks of community among Portuguese in Toronto.

Emigrating from one’s home country to an unfamiliar land can be difficult and disorienting process; it offers hope but certainly no guarantees of a better life than that which one left behind. As noted in this chapter, for many of the early arrivals from Portugal, the insecurity of leaving one’s family back home and the trials of being alone in the new land proved a great hardship. Yet, the hope of creating a better world than that left behind was something that drove the Portuguese, including those who eventually resettled in Toronto. Here they were the core group who founded a closely knit unit and, into the second generation, a residentially and culturally cohesive community.

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Mark Terceira.

<sup>48</sup> Qadeer, 15.

### **Chapter 3**

## **The School System As A Tool Of Assimilation: The Conflict Between Canadian And Portuguese Cultural Values**

Although Canadian values are important for defining Canadian identity, immigrants have always, and continue to, come to this country with their own values. Canada is a country in which growth is dependent on the immigration of peoples from other countries. Aside from Aboriginal Canadians, everyone's ancestors originated from elsewhere in the world. For example, according to the 2006 Canadian census, since immigration to Canada from Portugal was first encouraged in 1953, the Portuguese community in Toronto grew to almost 200,000 people.<sup>1</sup> While taking into account the history of Canada, a colonized land which later became an independent state, and the break-down of the British Empire, one would be empathetic to Canada's plight of struggling to find its identity. Due to Canada's British and French cultural foundation and official bilingualism, as well as the ever increasing immigration of peoples from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, and later areas in Asia and the Caribbean as well, the nation found it increasingly difficult, yet necessary, to define itself. That need was eventually met, at least in part, through components of the *Multiculturalism Policy* of 1971.<sup>2</sup>

While Canadians may still debate issues of national identity, there was always one public institution in Canada which served as gate keeper for Canadian identity on its regional variations. That institution is the public school system. Provincially mandated and funded schools continue to infuse values education into the common curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www40.statscan.gc.ca/cbin/fl/ctprintflag.cgi>

<sup>2</sup> Trudeau 1971



While there are local and regional expressions of identity in Canada, within Quebec for example, there are also today core values that all provincial governments affirm including the rule of law and respect for the individual as articulated in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Canadian state, its provinces and territories, continue to encourage values acculturation and it uses school systems to instil a sense of belonging among “new Canadians” who often come to this country with values of their own which are at odds with those publicly espoused in Canada.

After World War II, many of these immigrants came from peasant societies, particularly those from Southern Europe such as Portugal. They continue to embrace a strong set of values that revolve around family cohesion and the family functioning as an economic unit. Individual initiative and fulfillment are less valued, thus creating a potential for conflict between the values of familial institutions and the state’s affirmation of individualism and individual achievement. As a result, immigrants, such as those with Portuguese backgrounds, often resist the imposition of values they see as imposed on their children in the classroom.

The examination of the history and effects of this struggle is what is at the centre of this study. More specifically, this chapter will identify and illuminate the notion of Canadian values as a classroom deliverable and contrast them with immigrant values taken from peasant societies like that those in Portugal. It will also describe and discuss the tensions that percolate between the values promoted by the Canadian school systems and those values held by Portuguese immigrant families. However, before delving any deeper into the examination and analysis it is imperative to first offer a perspective on the Canadian identity.

Canadian identity, or at least in English-speaking Canada, is rooted in Protestant, Anglo-Saxon values. Assuming these values can be difficult for the immigrant who does not speak English, is not Protestant and is not well integrated into Canadian society. One of these values is that education is imperative to socio-economic improvement. In the early 1900's, with non-English speaking immigrants arriving in Toronto, schools attempted to reach these immigrants with a message of "commonness -- embedded in a collective language, social pattern, religious doctrine, and imperial membership."<sup>3</sup> If these mostly non-Protestant immigrants to Orange Toronto would eventually become citizens of Canada, Toronto schools sought to ensure it was a, "British-Canadian citizenship: imperial patriotism, Protestantism, the English language, and cleanliness."<sup>4</sup> For James Woodsworth, a Methodist minister and leading social gospel leader, schools needed to take the lead role in assimilating immigrant children.

The Canadianizing [assimilation] of these children will never be done by their home surroundings. They are far more closely bound to their own association than the child of the rural settler, whose isolation upon a farm of 160 acres seems to have the paradoxical effect of throwing him into closer relations with this Canadian neighbour than occur between the foreigner of the city and his British neighbour three streets away. It is right here that the public school steps in, and is the only agency that can be called upon in the whole machinery of civilization to perform the duty of moulding the second generation of the foreign-born into Canadian citizens, capable and willing to build a homogenous nation under the British flag.<sup>5</sup>

Teaching citizenship to new immigrants through state institutions was a priority and it remained so after World War II as the rise in demand for labourers to help build badly needed infrastructure became a government priority.

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<sup>3</sup> Luigi Pennachio, "Toronto's Public Schools and the Assimilation of Foreign Students, 1900-1920". *Journal of Educational Thought* 20, no. 1. (April, 1986): 39.

<sup>4</sup> Pennachio, 39.

<sup>5</sup> Pennachio, 39.

As Canada changed, so too did the value package that immigrant children received. As English speaking Canada gradually gave up its British self-image, it more and more saw itself as a multicultural society. Immigration policy has changed from prioritizing British and Scandinavian immigration ahead of eastern and southern Europeans next, and lastly migrants from Asia, the Caribbean, Africa, and South America.<sup>6</sup> Although the *Multiculturalism Policy* of 1971 was not interpreted as Prime Minister Trudeau might have intended, it did assist in shaping what Canada presently is. A multicultural Canada is a country in which civic behaviour norms and, “the modes of social interaction are respectful, even supportive of ethno-cultural and ethno-racial pluralism.”<sup>7</sup> As a result the Canadian government established multicultural programs, at the behest of many Canadians who were neither of British nor French origin, so that pluralism would be “a legitimate and enduring expression of Canadian uniqueness, fully compatible with democratic values and the rights of the individual in society.”<sup>8</sup>

However, if English-speaking Canada proclaimed for multiculturalism, it also became more and more urban and it increasingly embraced values of individualism, gender and racial equality, the nuclear family, as well as the value of education and schooling.

Data from the 2006 Census is clear: the Canadian population is increasingly diverse and according to Statistics Canada projections, the racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of the country will continue to increase. These changes present new challenges to government institutions as the needs of Canadians also change with the diverse population.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Harold Troper, “Multiculturalism”. *Encyclopaedia of Canada’s Peoples*. Ed. Paul Robert Magocsi, The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, 998.

<sup>7</sup> Troper, 998

<sup>8</sup> Troper, 998

<sup>9</sup> *Annual Report on the Operation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act 2007-2008*. Ottawa: Citizenship and Immigration Canada. 2008.

The challenges that are mentioned in this government document are evident with respect to values promoted by the institution of schooling versus new-Canadian's values drawn from the home land. The values promoted by the schools, especially those that speak to individual rights, became so self-defining for most Canadians that in 1982 they were enshrined in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the supreme law of the land. The idea of individual fulfillment within a collective society is described as: “[The]...belief that ethnic group cohesion and individual fulfilment are not mutually exclusive.”<sup>10</sup> It is an ideal which Canadian society recognizes in light of our current multicultural belief system. The value of individualism has also been examined by a government immigration advisory group. In a document published in 1997 by the Immigration Legislative Review Advisory Group, Canada's core values and principles, which immigrants should be encouraged to understand when settling in Canada, are clearly stated. They are also entrenched by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and are as follows: self-reliance, compassion leading to collective responsibility, investment in children as the future of this country, democracy, freedom, equality, and fiscal responsibility.<sup>11</sup> These values are reiterated in the government document directed to new Canadians wishing to acquire citizenship. The document entitled, *A look at Canada*, also outlines the country's core values. “We value our democracy and every citizen is encouraged to do his or her share. Our laws are based on our democratic values. Canadian values include: Equality, freedom, respect for cultural differences, peace, law and order.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Troper “Multiculturalism”, 998.

<sup>11</sup> *Not Just Numbers: A Canadian Framework for Future Immigration*. Immigration Legislative Review, Ottawa: Ministry of Public Works, 1997, 6&7.

<sup>12</sup> *A Look at Canada*. Ottawa: Ministry of Public Works, 2005, 7.

Although the nation does recognize the ‘contribution’ to Canadian society by other cultures, the document states that, “As Canadians, we are proud that many different cultural and ethnic groups live and work here in harmony. The Canadian *Multiculturalism Policy* recognizes our cultural diversity. It states that we are all free to maintain and share our cultural heritage and to participate fully and equally in our national life.”<sup>13</sup> But the state still expects immigrants to acculturate to Canadian values despite its understanding or toleration for other cultures. “We also expect these same values from those who come to our country.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, sociologist Raymond Breton mentions in, *Ethnicity and Race in Social Organization*, that a *Maclean’s* magazine in 1989, asked Canadians and Americans: “What do you think is better for Canada/the U.S for new immigrants to be encouraged to maintain their distinct culture ways, or to change their distinct culture and ways to blend with larger society?” According to the study, 34 percent of Canadians believed in culture retention while 47 percent of Americans did so. This suggests that Canadians believe (even more so than Americans) that culture maintenance is only acceptable if conducted in private.<sup>15</sup> Anglo-conformity, the model that incorporates immigrants into Canadian society, “has prevailed in Canada.”<sup>16</sup> Breton suggests that Canada endorses acculturation with “symbolic ethnicity”, that is as long as the ethnicity which remains is parallel to Canadian values.<sup>17</sup>

In Ontario, where, since World War II, the government had greatly expanded educational opportunities, including those in the post-secondary area, the expectation

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<sup>13</sup> *A Look at Canada*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Not Just Numbers*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Breton, Raymond, Jeffrey G. Reitz, and Victor F. Valentine. *Cultural Boundaries and the Cohesion of Canada*. Montreal: Institute For Research on Public Policy, 1980, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Breton, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Breton, 103.

was also that each child would stay in school longer so as to reach a level of schooling reflective of that of her or his individual ability. This is contradictory to a statistic in 1991 which explained that Portuguese immigrants living in Canada are less likely to be university educated than other immigrant groups. Portuguese immigrants are also less likely to have a high school diploma. What is lost? Staying in school prolonged the period of childhood, kept students out of the paid labour force, promised to open doors to a station in life based on individual ability, and, all the while, inculcated in children, including immigrant children, core Canadian values. It is difficult to inculcate core Canadian values if there is tension within families which do not subscribe to individualism or individualistic gratification if the value of individuality is seen to conflict with family cohesion and undermine to the family economy. In 1991, Statistics Canada revealed that 37 percent of young Portuguese immigrants aged 15 to 24 attended school either full-time or part-time compared with 61 percent who were Canadian born. In some cases, including among some Portuguese, prolonging the years of schooling in schools that preach the doctrine of individualism and choice as well as promote individual achievement, the nuclear family, and upward mobility, is not necessarily welcomed in the immigrant home. Why should this sometimes be the case? This question addresses the very issue that is at hand.<sup>18</sup>

Statistical data reveals that Portuguese-Canadian students are not as successful in school as other students. A *Toronto Star* article published in April 2008 reported that 42.5 percent of Portuguese-Canadian students in Toronto publicly funded

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<sup>18</sup> "Profiles: Portugal". *Immigration Research Series*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada & Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1996, 6.

secondary schools did not graduate.<sup>19</sup> There seems to be a history of this. According to the Toronto Public District School Board data published from 1970 to 1997, Portuguese-Canadian students were one of the highest represented groups but had a low educational attainment rate. The report states that, “Portuguese-speaking students were more likely to drop out than any other major language group.”<sup>20</sup> This issue became so prevalent that in 2006, Sociologist, Michael Ornstein, categorized Portuguese-Canadian students as having one of the lowest educational attainment rates in his census report.<sup>21</sup> Ornstein stated, “Thirty-three percent of the Portuguese have not completed high school, *twice* the average for all other European groups.”<sup>22</sup> Portuguese-Canadian leaders continue to express concern over the lack of Portuguese-Canadian student school achievement. In speaking with Professor Fernando Nunes who studied the issues of Portuguese in public schools, many Portuguese respondents in three major cities in Canada, including Toronto, voiced concern over the many Portuguese-Canadian students failing to graduate.<sup>23</sup>

The question posed in this study is: Why is there a low educational attainment rate amongst Portuguese-Canadian students in public schools living in Toronto? One factor which suggests itself is that there are tensions between the values taught in school and those peasant societal values still cherished in the Portuguese immigrant home. Specifically, rural labouring class immigrants from southern Europe, including Portuguese, for the most part, who immigrated to Canada with little or no experience

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<sup>19</sup> Louise Brown. “Keeping Immigrant Kids in School”. *The Toronto Star*. April 2, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> Robert S. Brown. *Mentoring At Risk Students: Challenges and Potential*. Toronto: Toronto Board of Education, 1995, 15.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Ornstein. *Ethno-Racial Groups in Toronto, 1971-2001: A Demographic and Socio-Economic Profile*. Toronto: Institute for Social Research, 2006, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Ornstein, 237

<sup>23</sup> Nunes, “Portuguese-Canadian Women”, 25.

of democratic freedoms, individual initiative, notions of mobility or independence through education. In fact, life, for those who immigrated to Canada from countries such as Portugal between the turn of the century and the 1970s, was almost entirely shaped by a peasant society lifestyle.

Life in a peasant society embraced values particular to specific occurrences in their country of origin during a particular period in time. Peasant societies were top heavy with factors that acted to constrain upward mobility. Their class structure, job opportunities, and state structure all reinforced the peasant lifestyle. While each country's experiences are different, the experiences of the peasant societies contain shared elements. Therefore, in order to paint a larger picture of Portuguese peasant society values it is useful to look at the experience of the Italian and Macedonian peasant societies as well, in order to draw comparisons that help to explain why Portuguese values developed the way that they did.

Southern Italy, during the turn of the century, was a vast area of peasant societies. This was partially due to the Italian government's agenda and partially because of the changing conditions in the European market economy. Issues of land ownership and all it implied to agricultural labour were key. "The proportion of communal grazing land allocated to the cultivators in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was first put under communal administration by the courts as was the common forest land."<sup>24</sup> However, that changed as the government realized that people were willing to pay money for that communal land. As land well into fewer hands southern Italy began to develop an

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<sup>24</sup> McDonald, J.S. "Italy's Rural Social Structure and Immigration". *Occidario* 12, no. 5. (September 1956), 443.



agricultural market that severely threatened the peasant society.<sup>25</sup> Once new innovative agricultural methods became the dominant economic driving force, peasants in Southern Italy, who were marginal agricultural producers, were being driven off the land or out of land control by farming companies owned by rich land owners. The peasants who had grown accustomed to working the land which they thought belonged to them collectively became cultivators of the landowner's farms. These peasant cultivators would have had to rent land from the proprietors and would farm the rented land (*mezzadria*) or they would join sharecropping groups (*colonia paziaria*), where peasants would share in the farming and harvest of crops, cultivated off of a proprietors land.<sup>26</sup> "Hence in each of these areas a hierarchical social structure resulted from the very unequal property distribution and the two discrete classes of proprietors and cultivators."<sup>27</sup> As the barrier between the rich and poor grew larger, peasant life became about daily survival. While the circumstances surrounding land holding in Southern Italy's peasant societies are different than those which dominated in Portugal's peasant societies, the effects of the changes are relatable to those which occurred in Portugal. For that reason it is important to note the distinct divide that grew between the rich and the poor which served to alienate the peasants from the more wealthy. For peasant life became a grind.

One important and shared element of the peasant society is the family. The peasant family was the main vehicle for economic survival. The family routinely spend all of their available time working on the land in order to receive full benefit from the meagre plot allotted to them to cultivate. The Portuguese peasants' experience was

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<sup>25</sup> Barton, Joseph. *Peasants and Strangers: Italians, Rumanians, and Slovaks in an American City 1890-1950*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Barton, 38.

<sup>27</sup> Barton, 29.

similar to that of the Macedonian peasants where “in the villages of the Old Country, the family had toiled together. Boys obediently assisted their fathers with the daily tasks.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, peasants or cultivators in these societies, farmed using basic and often back-breaking agricultural methods with little monetary results, therefore, they had very low per capita income.<sup>29</sup> As a result, peasant upward social mobility seemed an impossible and unattainable dream. The way it was, was the way it will be. It was not in the interest of government or the wealthy to encourage change.

The situation was much the same for the Portuguese in rural mainland and the Azores during the time of the Salazar regime. Rural societies in Portugal were very similar to those in Southern Italy and Macedonia. Like other countries in Southern Europe, Portugal transitioned from a monarchy to a republic. The Portuguese transition, involved the country having a shift from royalist regime to authoritarian dictatorship under Salazar from 1926 to 1974.<sup>30</sup> But, for rural labour, little changed. As was stated in Chapter two, Salazar’s was an oppressive government where publicly funded schooling ended in the fourth grade and new technologies from the evolving European capitalist market little impacted northern rural Portugal and the Azorean Islands. Only the elite upper class owned land, thus the life of the peasants consisted of cultivating land that was not theirs using rudimentary agricultural techniques. If peasants in Portugal did own land, it was mostly marginal small plots for personal use and not to produce for the market.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Petroff, L. “Macedonians: From Village To City”. *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 9, no. 1. (1977), 36.

<sup>29</sup> Barton, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Teixeira, Carlos. “Portuguese”. In *Encyclopaedia of Canada’s Peoples*, by Paul Robert Magocsi. Edited by The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1075-1083. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999, 1075.

<sup>31</sup> D. Adao, *Azores*, 20.

The primary concern for the peasant Portuguese was for the family economy. The only way for peasants to survive was to have all family members work as a unit for the family income. As a result, it was widely seen as a waste of time for families to allow their children to go to school since schooling for peasants in Portugal did not benefit survival.<sup>32</sup> A child in school beyond the fourth level drained the family purse rather than adding to it. With a corrupt and tight fisted government exploiting the landless, it is understandable why the peasant society distrusted the government and anything that represented the state including schools. Instead, what mattered most to those peasants, and what continues to be of most value to them, was the family, since the family working together was the only hope of economic survival. This is what stood at the centre of rural Portuguese peasant society and understanding this is crucial to the analysis that is to follow.

This “us versus them” family mentality, together with distrust for the upper class and government institutions, conflicts with Canadian values of civic trust and individual responsibility. Peasant society values, centred on the family, are threatened by Canadian values preached by the school system, the main enforcer and promoter of core Canadian values. For the Portuguese, the family is always at the centre of Portuguese life. “The family is the most important social institution in Portuguese life. All Portuguese exist within a network of family relationships, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, etc...”<sup>33</sup> Cultural retention is imperative to Portuguese values as well, and the family is the proponent of this. Sampling Canadian norms is not encouraged. “Ethnic youth who reject some ethnic cultural traditions will likely be met with hostility from parents

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<sup>32</sup> Catela 1990, pg. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Nunes, Fernando. *Problems and Adjustments of the Portuguese Immigrant Family in Canada*. Porto: Secretaria De Estado Das Comunidades Portuguesas Centro De Estudos, 1986. Pg. 14.

passionately defending their ethnic cultures.”<sup>34</sup> The most important values to most of the Portuguese immigrants in Canada are the security of the family and the preservation of their language and culture. Best to keep government and its institutions at arms length.

This distrust of government and its institutions continues to be a barrier to Canadian acculturation, especially since the host state is viewed as a threat to cultural retention by the Portuguese immigrants. “The centuries of government neglect, exploitation by unscrupulous or uncaring segments of their society and the hazards and demands of the medieval peasant lifestyle have created this dependence on the family unit as the only trustworthy social institution for the majority of Portuguese.”<sup>35</sup> This experience manifested itself as apprehension of the state power and is thus a point of contention that remains between the family and the state. As was stated earlier, most Portuguese feel that the family is the only stable and trustworthy institution in society. Therefore, attempts by government to impose acculturation through the school system, to wean children away from the family, are viewed by many Portuguese something to be resisted. This is especially true if the Portuguese parents feel that the government’s goal is to de-bone their children of their family-based values and thereby undermine the family unit. Onésimo Almeida, a professor at Brown University, argues this is a point of Portuguese community alarm. “Back home in Portugal it is easier to do so [retain family values], since this is a shared ideal. But in a foreign land, an excessive adherence to such alleged cultural habits may hamper us as a whole.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Noivo, 29.

<sup>35</sup> Nunes *Problems and Adjustments*, 14.

<sup>36</sup> Onésimo Teotónio Almeida. “Values, Conflicts, and Cultural Adjustment in North America”. In *The Portuguese in Canada: From Sea to City*. Edited by Carlos Teixeira & V.M.P. Da Rosa: 112-124. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000, 116.

One of the most significant ways in which the school system becomes a source of conflict for Portuguese-Canadian immigrants is the way the English language is imposed upon immigrant children while the importance of keeping their own language devalued. Although the Ontario government instituted heritage language in publicly-funded schools, the program is not sufficient for some parents who feel that speaking Portuguese fluently is imperative for complete cultural retention and familial values. For many mainland Portuguese families, being able to speak the mother tongue is imperative to keeping their culture alive in Canada. This is undermined when the children of Portuguese parents begin to speak English rather than Portuguese at home. In order for students to be successful in school, knowledge of the English language is of course essential. Successful completion of schooling and/or the acquisition of knowledge of the English language are not very important for most Portuguese parents, especially those from the first generation who often regard prolonged schooling and knowledge of English as not completely congruent with the goals of the family unit. “Attempts at changing personal habits and living patterns to suit the realities of Canadian society are often seen as acts of disdain towards the family.”<sup>37</sup> The goal of the family unit, for most Portuguese, is to retain their culture while accumulating as much wealth and property as possible.<sup>38</sup> While these goals are not necessarily in line with nor at all encompassing of the goals advanced by public schools, the attainment of these family-centred goals trumps all other goals for many Portuguese families.

Acquiring material goods and property is a priority of many Portuguese because wealth is a symbol of “making it” in the New World. This is accentuated by the fact

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<sup>37</sup> Nunes, *Problems and Adjustments*, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Nunes, *Problems and Adjustments*, 18.

that this was seldom possible in Portugal. Therefore, for the past six decades, many Portuguese immigrant families in Canada insisted that family members work in order to attain wealth. For many this is seen as even more important than schooling. A Toronto District School Board report states that Portuguese-Canadians are the most likely to work part-time while in school. In fact, they work the most hours of all ethnic groups while still in school, more than Greeks and Italians.<sup>39</sup> In an interview Sociologist Edite Noivo, conducted with a Portuguese father dubbed “Francisco”. Francisco, “recalls his eagerness for his children to grow up fast so that they could start bringing in some money to help support the household”.<sup>40</sup> The value of work over school is in direct conflict with Canadian values. This is a clear conflict between the family and the state, especially since it is mandated by law in Ontario that children must stay in school until the age of 18 (unless they graduate high school at a younger age).

These tensions between the Portuguese family and school greatly affect the children who are in the middle of what Nunes calls a “values tug of war”. “Children keep struggling with Portuguese values and Canadian values. This translates to tensions at home.”<sup>41</sup> Children have to deal with being the “other”, an ethnic, at school while also trying to keep their Portuguese ethnicity and being more “Anglo” at the same time. If the children acculturate to a point where they embrace Canadian values rather than the familial Portuguese values, then they are deemed to be destroying the family and its culture and are burdened with the guilt and shame that comes with that distinction. This is the most important of all of the tensions experienced by students of Portuguese decent

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<sup>39</sup> Maisy Cheng, & Maria Yau Cheng. *The 1997 Every Secondary Student: Detailed Findings*. Toronto: TDSB, 1999, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Noivo, 7.

<sup>41</sup> Nunes, *Problems and Adjustments*, 33-34.

in Canadian schools. They are constantly being placed into a situation where they are forced to deal with the internal struggle between the Canadian ways being pushed on them by the authority figures at school and the cultural norms being instilled by the authority figures at home. It is a struggle that exists even to this day.<sup>42</sup>

These Canadian and Portuguese cultural tensions have contributed to the barriers existing in Canadian society for those who do not conform to mainstream values of trusting government institutions and seeking success through education. Although Canada has subscribed to a multicultural policy which publicly claims to respect ethnicity, particularly the retention of language and certain customs, as long as the customs confirm with Canadian law and convention, tensions concerning Canadian and Portuguese values not only persist, but have resulted in socio-economic tensions as well. The trend witnessed in Canada is that the educational attainment of immigrant parents is a key predictor of the educational attainment of their children; first generation Canadians. “The educational attainment of men and women whose parents were born in Canada is much more strongly tied to that of their fathers and mothers than it is for second-generation Canadians.”<sup>43</sup> This is clear in Fernando Nunes’ work on the Portuguese community. Nunes, states that Canada has moved from its *Multiculturalism policy* (1971) and *Act* (1988) that focused on language and culture retention, to programs that promote integration and combating racism. This has allowed certain ethnic groups, particularly the Portuguese, to “slip through the cracks”. Nunes explains that although the children of Portuguese immigrants have doubled the educational levels of their

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<sup>42</sup> Nunes, *Problems and Adjustments*, 30 & 17.

<sup>43</sup> Statistics Canada, October 2008

parents, their incomes have failed to improve.<sup>44</sup> This he attributes to the low educational attainment levels of Portuguese-Canadians schooled in the Canadian public schools. In 1998, Nunes authored a research report entitled, *Portuguese-Canadians from Sea to Sea: A National Needs Assessment*, which sampled Portuguese-Canadian attitudes based on the statistical results of the 1991 census. Those in the sample were also provided with an opportunity to voice their opinions. Here is one Portuguese-Canadian's (from Toronto) opinion quoted in the study.

If our children do not complete high-school...do not go to University, we are going to continue to have a Portuguese community that is the mirror image of...the first generation. This is my biggest worry, it is seeing that the second generation is following in the foot-steps of the first.....I think of that, if we do not pay attention to this, [this will in turn into] a great calamity for the Portuguese community. This is the key issue that we have to discuss.<sup>45</sup>

This comment echoes the concern of many observers of the Portuguese community as well as those within it. If tension between home and school faced many Portuguese students is not taken seriously and not given the attention that it requires, then the poor attainment rates will continue, and the prosperity that these immigrants hoped for their children when they immigrated to Canada will remain largely unrealized.

As was discussed above, there are numerous tensions and points of conflict that undoubtedly exist when an immigrant group leaves their place of origin for a new land. This is especially true with regard to the experience of children of Portuguese descent in the Canadian public school systems. As was also noted earlier, there are several push factors that encourage to ethnic groups to leave their native homes. While someone who immigrate to Canada from peasant societies hope to one day go back, most choose to stay

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<sup>44</sup> Nunes, Fernando. "Striking a Balance in Canada's Diversity Dialogue: The Case of the Portuguese-Canadian Community". *Canadian Diversity* 6, no. 2. (Spring 2008): 121-125. Pg. 121.

<sup>45</sup> Nunes 1986, pg. 7



in their adopted country instead. This results in many families from rural societies living in Toronto where, in effect, they cluster in urban villages where they can speak Portuguese to the store owner, read Portuguese papers, watch Portuguese programs and actually resist initial acculturation.<sup>46</sup> The most direct external intruder into this urban village is the school system that in-gathers their children. In order to accept the fact that immigrants must leave their homeland for another country, which if not embraced as a new home, is the place of birth of their children, they have to deal with the norms of the host country. “At the deep level of cultural structures they seem to experience a similar struggle for adjustment and adaptation as people mostly of rural origin adapt to an urban, industrial society and as they try to reconcile southern European/Iberian, Catholic values and an Anglo-American world.”<sup>47</sup> It is this struggle for adaptation, or a struggle against adaptation, which underpins this conflict. It is evident through the arguments and evidence presented that the values associated with Canadian identity are often in conflict with those of the Portuguese culture. As a result, immigrants, of Portuguese background, often find it very difficult to welcome into their homes the values being presented to them in the classroom.

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<sup>46</sup> Anderson, *Networks of Contact*, 170-1.

<sup>47</sup> Almeida, 112.

## **Chapter 4**

### **A Discussion with Former Students and Teacher/Administrators of Toronto Schools in West Toronto and Little Portugal**

Although the government of Ontario recently raised the age of compulsory schooling to eighteen years of age, the new age standard, the policy does not completely disguise the fact that there remains a low educational attainment rate for Portuguese-Canadians in Toronto schools. In fact, this topic remains prominent to the Toronto Portuguese community. On April 15, 2008, TVO aired a program entitled, “The Portuguese Paradox”. This episode of TVO *The Agenda* delved into why Portuguese Canadian students remain less likely than most other groups to graduate high schools or go on to higher education. As was discussed during the program, many in the Portuguese-Canadian community feel that this is an issue that needs to be analyzed. A Portuguese community spokesperson noted:

If our children do not complete high-school...do not go to university, we are going to continue to have a Portuguese community that is the mirror image of...the first generation. This is my biggest worry, it is seeing that the second generation is following in the footsteps of the first...I feel that, if we do not pay attention to this, [this will turn into] a great calamity for the Portuguese community. This is the key issue that we have to discuss.<sup>1</sup>

The question that will be examined here is: Why is there a low attainment rate among Portuguese-Canadian students in Toronto secondary schools? This chapter will examine the educational experiences of several former Portuguese-Canadian students as well as those experiences from teachers and administrators in Toronto’s publicly funded secondary schools located in Little Portugal and adjacent areas.

To gather the research data, I interviewed seven Portuguese-Canadian students who previously attended Toronto schools in Little Portugal and the surrounding area. The informants

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<sup>1</sup> TVO, “The Agenda”, April 15, 2008.

were between the ages of 23-40 years of age and all were males. Four of the informants were either born in or had parents from mainland Portugal and three were either born in or their parents were from the Azores. No claim is made that these seven speak for the entire Toronto Portuguese student population, but their experiences are real and to the point. Similarly, the voice of the school system is sampled by interviews with three high school teachers and two administrators. All of the teachers and administrators have experience teaching within Little Portugal and adjacent areas. Conversation with these informants centred on the issues of Portuguese school achievement and often expanded to discuss underlying causes and remedies to low achievement rates.

It is only natural that I begin by writing about student's experiences in schools because much of the available statistical research is about students. Often the student voice is not heard. The informants in the student category were all raised inside or just outside of Little Portugal. Those who resided just outside of the core area of Little Portugal were all see themselves as having grown within the Portuguese community.

When speaking with those who agreed to be interviewed for this study, most recalled their high school experiences with mixed emotion, recalling both good and bad stories. Some recalled struggles while others spoke fondly of their years in school. All of the informants assured me that they were being as truthful as possible. Some of the informants knew me prior to the interview while others agreed to speak to me because someone they trusted assured them that I too could be trusted. Most of the former student informants felt comfortable in me using their using their real names in the study while others preferred me using pseudo names. I have respected their wishes.

When I asked the informants to describe their school experience, many began by speaking about their behaviour in a school environment. Mark, for example, explained that his behaviour was poor beginning with elementary school. “I was a terrorist in elementary school.”<sup>2</sup> He claimed to have caused a lot of trouble for his classroom teachers. He explained that this behaviour was considered normal amongst the other boys in his class. Speaking of his classroom behaviour, Rui explained; “[I was a] bit of a trouble maker in school”<sup>3</sup>. When asked to elaborate, he responded with examples: “...speaking out loud in class...a lot of interrupting...lines for punishment. There were a lot of lines. It’s the type of person that I am because I brought those same traits to high school...those same qualities”<sup>4</sup>. Whether it was described as a personality trait or as a conscious choice that they made, John and Manny both mused about their behaviour either in school or about their general attitude at the time when they were enrolled in school. For example, John spoke of missing a lot of school on his own accord.

I stayed home for like three months straight...grade 10...I don’t know, it was winter, I didn’t want to go to school...it was like, ‘I really don’t like this class and this teacher is like a punk’ so I ended up dropping this class and other classes, so I had one class in the morning and like fourth period, and I was like, ‘I’m not going to wake up to go to my first period’...I couldn’t change it [the class]. I wanted to change it for afternoon. They didn’t want that so I was like, ‘forget it’...I stayed home for like three months straight. I guess they didn’t really go out of their way to suspend me. They would call and I would delete messages...they only found out when they called the emergency contact and got a hold of my mom.<sup>5</sup>

John eventually explained the outcome of this experience as well as other experiences at another high school. “I kinda got kicked out from St. Mary’s so from there I went to West Toronto (Landsdowne and College). My last year was in grade 11 at St. Mary’s. Well if I left in grade eleven it was the beginning of grade 11 so grade 10ish...I was 16. It was right by my house. I

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Mark Terceira

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Rui

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Rui

<sup>5</sup> Interview with John

went there for a semester. It was more laid back.”<sup>6</sup> Manny’s experience was similar to John’s, Mark’s, and Rui’s. “I was very rebellious in high school. I didn’t like listening to teachers, let’s put it that way.”<sup>7</sup> His rebelliousness resulted in poor attendance. “I barely came on time...My first period class...English class...Mr. L...use to make us sing, ‘I’m a little tea pot’[as punishment for being late]. I didn’t like that so I didn’t go to class.”<sup>8</sup> All four informants who spoke about their negative behavioural history in the school setting also spoke negatively about the school system in general.

### **School system**

Those informants who had negative experiences in school had a lot to say about what they perceived to be the faults of the school system. For example, “At St. Mary’s it was like, ‘Fix your pants! Fix your shirt! Five seconds late! You’re outta here!’”<sup>9</sup> One memorable story came from Miguel. He recollected a dark time in elementary school when he was mistakenly assessed as being developmentally delayed. While this story period was particularly a sour time for Miguel in his interaction with the school system, it also underscores his pride of success despite the school system.

Another thing was they wanted to put me, they thought I was retarded...well you know at home I came from a very loving family, I was the youngest and I didn’t acclimatize well to not being home with my family. So I didn’t respond. So they thought I was retarded. I wasn’t socializing well enough. I refused to work and stuff like that. They wanted to keep me back and put me in Special Ed from first grade to the second grade. My brother who already finished high school, a rarity, stepped up and asserted himself and saved me from being in Special Ed which at that time was like a black hole. So, because I all of a sudden became the guy whose brother was in University and whose brother was going to become a teacher and so now attention had to be paid to me and my needs which were...however there was a compromise. I was kept back and

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with John

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Manny, October 30, 2009, Toronto.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Manny

<sup>9</sup> Interview with John

I remember it was the worst summer of my life...my friends were moving on. But it worked, it woke me up. I did so well I skipped the third grade and they put me right into the fourth. It was that deal that my brother worked out with them and then I graduated elementary school as valedictorian.<sup>10</sup>

He remembered that if it was not for his older brother, who had done well in the classroom, the school would have kept Miguel, back a year and likely shuffled him into a special education program.

Manny also recalled his struggles with the school system. "I started off in gifted and...I didn't like the way they separated me from everything. I just wanted to be in like a normal class..."<sup>11</sup> He informed me about the struggles he faced in high school, in particular his struggle to finish high school.

I didn't graduate. They kicked me out...I skipped a lot, a lot of suspensions...the principal...she didn't really care. I had my last chance...I was turning 19...that was the last year I was allowed to be there. I was two credits shy and I asked the principal just to give me two credits and she said no...I asked if I could graduate and get out of her hair. So I stopped and waited a year and went to Monsignor Frasier...I actually went to co-op and the co-op closed half way through the year so I got stiffed on that. I had to wait 'til next year [to get a co-op placement] so I kinda like didn't really give up on that I'm not like a stupid kid I figured I could use my brains...so I kinda just went on my own way.<sup>12</sup>

Manny was upset about not finishing his co-op and about not obtaining the credits necessary for attaining his Ontario Secondary School Diploma. "I actually gave it a try. A lot of things were falling in front of me...I wanted it more for my mother."<sup>13</sup> Although Manny and others discussed what a poor fit they were in schools, one has to wonder what their homework and study habits were like.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Miguel Sousa, May 4, 2010, Toronto

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Manny

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Manny

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Manny

### Homework and study habits

Homework and study habits were also topics which surfaced in conversation with these former students. Mark mentioned that he “worked at school only”<sup>14</sup> because he did not feel that homework was necessary. However, Mark was not the only one that mused about his homework and study habits, or lack-of them. Rui, for example, felt that school was really not for him. “I don’t think school is for me. I do not like it...well first of all it’s the commitment of going everyday...I like to work at my own pace. It’s how strict everything is too...studying, assignments all of that, how assignments are due on certain days...and how you have exams... I don’t really like that whole concept.”<sup>15</sup> John was very blunt when he gave his response for the same question. “There was no homework because I didn’t want to do it...just do whatever I did in school and that’s pretty much it.”<sup>16</sup>

Then there were those who did complete some form or other of after school study. Sergio, for example, explained that although he did homework, he sometimes worked in front of the television. “There was never a set time to do homework. There was no one there to say, ‘turn off the T.V and do your homework’.”<sup>17</sup> He was apparently, “never a homework guy. Assignments were always handed in on time...there was no one there to check up on me.”<sup>18</sup> No one was there at home to check on him or his progress in school, he contends, because his parents were too busy providing for their family. Also, another factor Sergio claims is that parents were really unable to assist him in his studies due to their lack of educational experience and knowledge in the subjects. At first his father was able to assist him in math and his mother

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Mark Terceira

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Rui

<sup>16</sup> Interview with John

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Sergio Leite

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Sergio Leite

was there to cut-out letters for his assignments that required a presentation board.<sup>19</sup> But lack of time or unfamiliarity with school subject matter soon left even the most willing parents unable to assist with homework.

### **Family influences**

Family influences also impacted all seven former student informants greatly, particularly with regards to parental values and beliefs about schooling. While each person interviewed had a different perspective on education, all spoke about the parental influence they encountered regarding schooling. The topics which were common amongst this group were: family values concerning school and language spoken at home. High expectations concerning cultural retention were common to all the former students. Any discussion concerning cultural retention centred on Portuguese language retention because, either one or both parents encouraged and sometimes demanded their children speak Portuguese at home. Sergio, Kevin, Rui, and John all stated that they spoke to at least one of their parents in Portuguese. “First language is Portuguese and all throughout school it was Portuguese. My mom picked up a little English. My dad picked up a little bit of English but we never really communicated in English.”<sup>20</sup> If either of the parents were able to speak English it tended to be the mothers. There are a variety of factors that must be explained in order to fully understand why this was so. Some factors include the fact that the mothers generally immigrated at an earlier age and therefore they learned at least some school in Canada. Some women came into greater contact with the English language through their work environments where possibly their boss or others at the workplace spoke English almost exclusively except for those co-workers who, if they were Portuguese, most likely communicated

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Sergio Leite

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Sergio Leite



in Portuguese. “My mom speaks broken English...It’s Portuguese all the way,”<sup>21</sup> John explained. Another reason was that the mothers were most likely, of the two parents, to have contact with the schools and therefore they picked up a few words in order to effectively communicate with their children’s teachers. As Sergio points out, “My mom communicated with the teachers...even though her English was limited the teachers accommodated her.”<sup>22</sup>

Fathers were more likely to only speak Portuguese, especially in the home because they were less likely to have attended let alone have completed schooling in Canada. When asked about his father’s abilities with the English language, Manny pondered, “My dad...yeah I guess he speaks English.”<sup>23</sup> Another reason which was mentioned by most of the informants for the father’s lack of English facility was that their fathers worked as labourers and mostly in construction. Their fathers were actually more likely to speak more Italian than English in the workplace because their co-workers were mostly Italian-Canadians. Another reason mentioned by Rui was that his parents continued speaking Portuguese because their long-term goal was to eventually move the family back to Portugal.<sup>24</sup> However, the predominant reason why their fathers encouraged speaking Portuguese at home was to retain the language of their homeland.

Dad - I always speak to him in Portuguese. At first he was very adamant about speaking Portuguese at home because he didn’t want us to lose the language, ‘at home you’re speaking Portuguese’ and ‘when you’re outside’, he said this all the time, ‘beyond that door you can speak English’. But that didn’t really last because he would speak to us in Portuguese but we would speak to my sister in English and my mom in English and my dad we would have to speak to him in Portuguese.<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to keep the Portuguese as the exclusive home language when the children are educated in the English language school system. To reinforce Portuguese language skills, some

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with John

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Sergio Leite

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Manny

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Rui

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida

parents made the decision to enrol their children in Portuguese school. Both Kevin and Mark recalled attending Portuguese school.<sup>26</sup> The classes were offered by local Portuguese-Canadian organizations and were held after regular school hours in elementary schools in the area, such as St. Helen's Elementary and Brock Junior Public School. Kevin recalled his experience.

I went to school 5 days a week. It was from 5-7[pm]. We were taught the history of Portugal, geography, the language and math. We learned about the kings...dates like the day of independence, and when the Muslims from Morocco came to Portugal. The classes were taught in Portuguese.<sup>27</sup>

Going to public elementary school and then to Portuguese school would take a lot out of the student's day. "So you'd come home after school, you'd eat, watch a little bit of T.V., then you'd have to go to Portuguese school, come home maybe another little snack or something then you'd do your homework and go to sleep."<sup>28</sup> Both Mark and Kevin stopped attending Portuguese school around age 12 because they chose to stop going.<sup>29</sup> This led into a discussion of parental values regarding schooling in general.

### **Values towards school**

All the informants discussed their family's values towards schooling. The common theme highlighted through the conversations was that parents knew that schooling was important in Canada and that their children would have to go. But parents were unclear of their role regarding their children's schooling and guarded about how what their children were being taught would impact the family household. "My mom...she really advocated the importance of education and I guess so for my dad. My mom was a little bit more vocal, more involved

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida; Interview with Mark Terceira

because my dad was working all the time.”<sup>30</sup> Expectations regarding education were also often outlined to their children.

The expectations were we went to work, we listened to the teacher, we were quiet and I think the expectation was not to fail. I don't think they knew enough about the grading system until a couple years after...they just knew if you failed it wasn't a good thing, passing was a good thing...the expectation was you passed...it wasn't until after that they understood the marking system and you were rewarded for higher marks [by getting high marks]. You were expected to go to school and for lack of a better term shut-up and listen...there were never any phone calls home and God forbid there would be serious consequences.<sup>31</sup>

Mark's parents also communicated with him about the importance of the family's own values. “They'd talk about consequences; about values, respect is a big issue for them. No talking back. How we'd treat people mattered.”<sup>32</sup>

The informants also remembered their experiences with parental interaction with the schools. Manny and John explained how their parents got involved as little as necessary and only when necessary. “My mom was strict about it...she was only strict to a certain point, she wouldn't pass a certain boundary...she would yell at me that's about it...I'd lie sometimes, too. Dad was strict about it. Whenever I got suspended or whenever they got a phone call...I would hear it.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, Manny's relationship with his father was affected by his school record. “My dad was upset, but like my dad and I don't really talk. He's not an emotional person...in his head he's like, 'do whatever you want', but I know he's upset...it would be an altercation every night so I would like avoid it. Father's role, dominant role I would say. Typical Portuguese male.”<sup>34</sup> Rui explained what effect parent-teacher interviews had on his family and on his schooling. “It would be at parent teacher interviews when my sister and brother would get

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Kevin Almeida

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Sergio Leite

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Mark Terceira

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Manny

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Manny

involved with helping me for homework for a few weeks but then they would give up and I would give up and then I would be back in the same boat again.”<sup>35</sup> John explained his struggles regarding parental interactions with schooling. “She yelled. I said I didn’t feel like going. There’s not much she could do...a Portuguese lady...I was like 16. She was just worried about taking care of her family putting food on the table...try to get a hold of homework, she barely speaks English. How was she going to help me with my homework, right?”<sup>36</sup> Mark expressed similar memories. “[My] parents weren’t strict. They’d ask, ‘did you do your homework?’ [I would respond] ‘Yes’. Then the conversation was over.”<sup>37</sup>

Some of the informants discussed parental interactions with their schools and teachers as well as with their homework. Rui explained that the language barrier hindered his parents’ ability to assist him with homework. “They wouldn’t be able to help me anyway because of the English.”<sup>38</sup> It was only up to the ninth grade that Rui’s father would help him with math. “But the math work, my dad says he learned that stuff in the third grade or the third class...this is my grade nine work...”<sup>39</sup> Overall, the common thread was that parents were too busy working to help with homework or to make sure it was done. “My mom and dad were busy working. But my mom and dad would be home at six and dinner was on the table...strong family.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Jobs**

Part-time work was another topic that emerged out of discussions. According to many Toronto District School Board studies that were conducted during the past decade and the statistics analyzed in the Ornstein study, Portuguese-Canadian students tend to work outside

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Rui

<sup>36</sup> Interview with John

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Mark Terceira

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Rui

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Rui

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Miguel Sousa

school for most hours while in high school than any other children. Manny worked a part-time job during his high school years. He worked every day after school until 9 or 10pm.<sup>41</sup> Mark, at 14, worked at a grocery store. He worked twenty hours per week. He kept that job for three years.<sup>42</sup> After that he worked construction. At 14, Kevin worked for a heating and air-conditioning company in the summer. Rui worked at a grocery store during the school year. He worked about twenty-four hours per week. He also worked construction in the summer. Making money was important for most. John explained his story:

When I was 16...worked at Toys R Us...worked three or four days...I worked at Home Depot...17...after that construction...concrete and draining. The concrete and draining was in the summer. Then I went to school then I dropped out and I went to sewers and water mains...then I tried to go back to school for two months at Monsignor Frasier...that didn't last too long. The school's corrupted. Again, I wanted to make money so I said, 'screw this'.<sup>43</sup>

Part time jobs were a fact of life for all my informants as it was for most Portuguese-Canadian students; a fact that certainly did not make their struggles with school any easier.

As will be illustrated in the next section, teachers and administrators also felt that the topics of discussion described here were very important in answering the central question of this study.

## TEACHERS & ADMINISTRATORS

The three themes that the student informants discussed homework and study habits, behaviour and the school system, also threaded through discussions with the teachers and administrators. The only significant difference was their perspective. Why is there a low attainment rate for Portuguese-Canadian students in secondary schools? I interviewed five

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Manny

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Mark Terceira

<sup>43</sup> Interview with John

informants who worked in schools; three secondary teachers, one elementary principal, and one secondary principal. The two principals also spoke about their prior teaching experience. All of those interviewed had extensive experience teaching in Little Portugal and West Toronto.

When I asked the interviewees about working with Portuguese-Canadian students, the topic that surfaced the most was the behaviour of Portuguese-Canadian students in the classroom. There was quite a bit of discussion of the general uncooperative behaviour of these students in the classroom and the attitude they had towards school in general. “Many times when they would skip...they probably hung around somewhere. They thought school was boring, they didn’t like it. They want to hang out at the mall because they want to be with their peers.”<sup>44</sup> Bianka simply stated that it was, “...just a lack of interest”.<sup>45</sup> She argued that part of the reason behind absenteeism was that most of the students were not interested in the course content being offered to them in the classroom.

They don’t like being in class because it’s boring for them. It should be [analyzed] how students are being evaluated because they would be put to some apprenticeship program right away from elementary then they would achieve and be put in the workplace much faster then have then sit in a class and not achieving and everyone is going crazy, teachers and administration. You have so much support and you try to help.<sup>46</sup>

Bianka’s experience at a school located at Dufferin and Bloor, suggested to her that Portuguese-Canadian students, males especially, generally tended to enjoy hands-on work in the classroom rather than academics.

When it comes to practical hands on they really excel. It’s almost like this is their thing. I teach art and over the years I have developed projects and assignments where I have to accommodate to their interests. And so the stuff that I do is always what interests them. For example the most popular projects I do is when they work with clay and so we create pottery...and they love doing it. They would be so engaged. If they are misbehaving during different

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec, July 5, 2010, Toronto.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

activities like once you give them something like something to do with their hands they really enjoy that. Even print making because they have to carve that out and they can be so meticulous.<sup>47</sup>

Also, when the course content was not very interesting to the students, classroom management became difficult. As Gerard noted: “They [the boys] were difficult for us...They came to school and we had to teach them self-control. And the hard part is that if they didn’t learn self-control then there were consequences, suspensions...when they sat in the classroom they needed to express themselves but they didn’t know how.”<sup>48</sup> When punitive measures, such as calling home, were taken, Bianka recounts what occurred. “But then if you call home then there is a respect. You would talk to mother or father, then I think they are strict when it comes to the schools. But then how often can you call? You call once and maybe the student behaves better for a week but then it goes back to before.”<sup>49</sup> There seemed to be a common thread that which linked all of the interviews together. That common thread was that these students were generally bored in class, especially if they felt that the course content was not relevant to them.

### **School system**

Another and related topic of discussion centred on the ability of the school system to keep the students engaged. Discussion of this topic varied from the types of programs mandated by the Ministry of Education to the school boards and local schools, to classroom teaching techniques which would aid in keeping students in the classroom. Informants tended to speak about the programs within the schools themselves. Robert spoke about the school he worked at. “In this school we’re lucky we have the pathway program, transportation and hospitality, we’re hooked up with the youth apprenticeship program that provides our kids to go into electrical,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Gerard M. Ardanaz, June 22, 2010, Toronto.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

plumbing, drywall, and carpentry.”<sup>50</sup> He felt that these programs would ultimately assist in keeping Portuguese-Canadian students in school. Bianka also described the programs run at the school she taught at.

At [our school] we have auto-shop. The shop was upgraded a few years ago. And now we have a special program where they have to major in high school. They have to take it for four years so they have to start off in grade nine with one course and then grade ten and then they have two periods in auto-shop...it's a whole new program we've had this for a few years now.<sup>51</sup>

This program is a school board and Ministry of Education initiative which, Bianka was hopeful, will make a difference to the Portuguese-Canadian student attainment rate. Manuela, a principal at an elementary school in the area, spoke about her thoughts on success.

We [the board] have pathways now. We're not all geared towards university. Not everyone is geared towards college and not everyone is geared towards the workforce. But somehow in our society, whether it's Portuguese or not, we value people with a University degree and don't value the plumbers who charge us 400 do an hour. They [society] don't value that. In elementary we have pathways...it's our job for you to [recognize] your gifts so that you value who you are and ultimately a contributing member to society. But, when we want to turn university students who are not university bound and we bring all our stereotypes because teachers are all university graduates and sometimes we walk our stereotypes, we talk then but we walk them then kids don't find a place in school.<sup>52</sup>

Society's norms and the school system were also matter of concern for Bianka. She agreed that success does not necessarily mean going to university, however all teachers and administrators interviewed agreed that not finishing high school represented failure.

When you look at the Portuguese students, many of them after high school are doing well and working hard. Who cares if they fail the literacy test twice? The whole worry of this group of people is they're not going to post-secondary education, but post secondary education should not be for everyone. It's statistically proven...we're just fooling ourselves. It is so important to have labour and people who work in these jobs. Somebody has to do those jobs.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with Robert Merolle, November 5, 2009, Toronto.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira, June 21, 2010, Toronto.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec



The issue at hand is to ensure Portuguese-Canadian students graduate from high school. Many teachers talked about the students' struggles with graduation. "It takes our students mostly five years...to get their credits. We have all the programs...all the ministry programs that are out there; Success for all, credit recovery...trying to help them as much as possible."<sup>54</sup> A story was told about a Portuguese-Canadian principal who regarded the academic success of Portuguese-Canadian students as very important, and therefore, according to the teacher who told the story, was hesitant to expel students from the school when not enough high school credits were attained.

I remember when I first started, our principal was Portuguese and he really saw the school as a community because this was the only school he had ever been at...his heart was in the school. He gave so many opportunities to each Portuguese student...it was backfiring though because we would have, back then, students who were like 18 or 19 years old and some were 20, but they would still be in school because the principal did not want anyone to leave. He didn't want to kick them out or send them to Frasier [an alternative school in the board] so it basically reflected in discipline which was going down the drain. We had a lot of...it was really bad back then...we had a lot of vandalism in the hall ways. If we probably analyzed to see how many of those students who stayed longer [at the time the principal was giving them chances], many didn't end up graduating. We have to show them that, no, you cannot take advantage and that there needs to be structure.<sup>55</sup>

In fact, some of the teachers even suggested the possibility of changing the school system, since it is clear that not every child fits into the same school model or has the same learning style.

Maybe the school wasn't really structured to take care of the boys [Portuguese community]. Let's take high school for example. Kids walk into grade nine or ten and they're not ready for grade 9 or 10. That's a problem. But after you finish grade nine if you're not successful you're behind and then you go to grade 10 and if you don't pick yourself up and catch up you're behind...at the end of two years where you should have 16 credits you might have 6 or 7 credits. You're asking this kid to hang around younger kids, you're asking them to take longer in high school it's a really tough thing for a kid to handle. And this is where when you don't have parents who for example to don't keep

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

you up to par...for a kid who hasn't got the support, that's the advantage that occurs with kids of other groups of people.<sup>56</sup>

Bianka felt that changes needed to be made with respect to the school model as well.

Having every level in each school I think is just outdated. So most principals, when they start off at this school, wanted to bring academics. But for a small school (we have 750 students) it's really challenging because we have to offer everything and we have a large number of identified students special ed students and a lot of essential, locally developed courses...you're stretching our resources very thin then we cannot offer enough for academic for example because there's only so many courses you can offer.<sup>57</sup>

Some agreed that we should revert to past school system models.

About thirty years ago they had apprenticeship schools and it was working and then they got rid of them [they government policy]...when you look at especially the European school system, for example, they've had their systems in place for ECE for years [Ontario government looked to those countries] you cannot keep changing the system in order for it to work properly.<sup>58</sup>

Also, it was mentioned by some that standardized education and educational testing are not helpful for student success. "How are you going to measure everyone's skills fairly by standardizing the school system?"<sup>59</sup>

On the contrary, Manuela felt that the schools are generally successfully reaching out to students and their parents. Manuela explained that the school board and the schools send out information in different languages to the parents and that they now have interpreters in the schools.<sup>60</sup> She stated that there was nothing wrong with the Ministry and/or board initiatives. Instead, when asked why there was a low attainment rate for Portuguese-Canadian students in Toronto secondary schools, she spoke about engaging students, advocating for students, and

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<sup>56</sup> Interview with Gerard M. Ardanaz

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

being role models for them. She spent some time discussing what she thought was “fair” to help students succeed in schools.

There’s this definition of fair and fair [is] not equal. It’s giving everyone what they need and some kids need more and some kids need less just like some adults need more and some adults need less. Some students in this school need more and some need less. The worst thing we could do is say, ‘St. Mary of the Angels doesn’t fit the profile’, again we’re assuming or ‘St. Mary of the Angels based on tax and income this is what it is’ ...we just need role models [regardless of what ethnicity they are].<sup>61</sup>

When asked why the unsuccessful completion of secondary school is endemic to the Portuguese-Canadian community, Manuela, who is also Portuguese-Canadian, stated:

I don’t know why it’s so prevalent in the Portuguese community. I don’t know...whatever ethnicity it is I think it’s just that we need a bit of everything. We need role models. We need possibilities. We need to show these kids that there is a higher standard. And by raising the bar we don’t want them all to be university students...there’s no jobs for all of us...we want kids to find their way.<sup>62</sup>

The “we” in Manuela’s explanation referred to the schools. She stated that the schools must be advocates for children and for their parents as well. “It’s pretty huge to say, ‘my child has an issue’. We use the words ‘advocates’. A lot of parents whether it’s Portuguese or other minorities, we haven’t done a lot to advocate for your child without going against the school system. How do we teach parents by not putting the blame on anyone? We, meaning the board and the ministry.”<sup>63</sup>

The literacy level of Portuguese-Canadian students was another core area of discussion for the teachers and principals interviewed for this study. Manuela agreed that it was the school’s job to advocate for students to their parents and to treat parents, no matter what their

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

literacy level, with respect, therefore shoring up lines of communication between the schools and the home.

If a parent does not know what good literature means, well it's our job to send those books home... We [at St. Mary's of the Angels] will communicate to all of our parents just as if they were all business professionals. And as a teacher I did this. As a teacher I didn't say, 'well, I'm at Pope Paul and most of these kids are never going to get anywhere'. You don't do that. Now, do all teachers do this? I can't speak for that. Do all principals do that I don't know.<sup>64</sup>

### **Homework/study habits**

The homework and study habits of Portuguese-Canadian students were also topics discussed by teachers and administrators. Most agreed that homework was rarely completed. In fact, Robert explained that expecting homework to be completed was the wrong approach when dealing with these students.

When you're at the front of the class where you understand that there would be no way that they would go home and do your homework so to begin your class and say I'm going to check homework: good luck. The way I would plan my classes [my lesson] was work done in class so I'm trying to give them as much as I can while they're in front of me because I know after that there was no more that was coming my way.<sup>65</sup>

Some teachers attributed this to a large number of students having one or another learning disability and having difficulty reading at the high school level. "I notice that with Portuguese students there are a lot [in relation to the rest of the school population] that there a lot girls and boys who can't read."<sup>66</sup> Some teachers also mentioned that they felt that the difficulty with reading came from home.

They're not exposed to reading books at home and parents many times do not speak English or they definitely do not speak English at home. They hear the Portuguese language and it depends at what age they immigrate because...it

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Robert Merolle

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

varies and some might be born here. Maybe it's because they don't try hard in school because they're not encouraged.<sup>67</sup>

A good question to ask would be: Are these students encouraged by their parents to do well in school? The students' view on parental involvement was discussed in the previous section. Teachers and administrators also conversed about parental influence on students regarding schooling.

## Parents

Manuela had a perspective on Portuguese-Canadians' attitudes towards education and schooling.

I think that...the Portuguese parents are essentially very respectful people in terms of they respect the teacher and the role of the educator and they don't see their role as a partner. But then again that's a huge stereotype because you have a lot of different generations of Portuguese-Canadians that are incredibly involved in their children's academic school life and social life.<sup>68</sup>

She stated that it is not necessarily true that parents do not care about schooling, but rather that it is possible that parents who are from countries with a different way of life and attitude towards schooling might not know how to interact or communicate with the school system. "We're expecting the parents to have the expertise to collaborate with the school, but that expertise needs to be built."<sup>69</sup> She stated that there are government agencies as well as the school board which could assist parents. "The key is we as a school can be everything and our roles sometimes are just to connect families to those agencies that can provide a little extra. Then it's the parents' willingness."<sup>70</sup> She admitted that there is work to be done so that parents would be more willing

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

to seek out assistance. “There’s a lot of talking that needs to be done because sometimes parents don’t go because they’re afraid of not knowing.”<sup>71</sup>

Most of the time, and often the only time, when parents are exposed to the schools is when they attend parent-teacher interviews. Bianka, Gerard, and Angelo discussed the topic of parent-teacher interviews.

Many times parents do go to parent-teacher interview. And if they come only a few are really concerned or really interested on how their kids are doing. Many parents just come to chat to meet the teacher. As far as their children are passing that’s good enough for them. So they wouldn’t get upset if he’s [student] is getting 60s or 50s or sometimes he’s even failing...and they take it lightly.<sup>72</sup>

Gerard’s experiences with parents who attended parent-teacher interviews were similar.

One of the things I always found about parent’s night is that at the end of the night I always felt like a million bucks...I was so humbled because they would come and talk to you and you were somebody. And the questions wouldn’t necessarily be about academics the questions would be is my son behaving is my daughter behaving? Their idea was help us raise our kids and education...they didn’t make up the connection.<sup>73</sup>

In addition, Gerard added that the Portuguese-Canadian community had respect for the institution of schooling and, specifically, for teachers. “The parents...were incredibly loyal to the teacher and grateful to the teachers to the point where really it was a weakness in the community where they had blind faith in us.”<sup>74</sup> Bianka concurred with Gerard that parents generally have respect for the teacher especially when the teacher calls home.

Although there was some discussion regarding respect for the teacher, those interviewed mentioned that their experience with Portuguese-Canadian parents, regardless of whether they were born in Canada or not, was that the parents either did not feel comfortable or did not have

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Manuela Sequeira

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Gerard Ardanaz

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Gerard Ardanaz

the knowledge or access to interact with the schools. “When you’re teaching primary level, for example, many of them [parents] didn’t know about school sometimes. When you look at grade 5,6,7,8 students there was nobody at home to tell them to do their homework for example.”<sup>75</sup>

Gerard was adamant in stating that he has nothing against this ethnic group. “These are good people...from a totally different world.”<sup>76</sup> Most teachers and administrators discussed that they understood the struggles and the context of their students’ family background.

Those who come from a poor background and not poor in the sense of the richness of their culture because they could be very rich in terms of their family structure...but I’m talking about they worked the land and they take care of themselves and they’re very successful with that and all of a sudden they’re misplaced in a totally different world. If you think that their culture is going to change in the next 10 to 20 years not likely it’ll probably change in the second generation where the parents...their children might be told all of a sudden this is the value of school...that’s what I think might be happening.<sup>77</sup>

Angelo, a Portuguese-Canadian secondary teacher, spoke about what he felt the struggles for Portuguese-Canadian students were by describing a situation which occurred between the student, her parents, and the school.

A case of a student in grade nine a female student. Her mother actually wanted her in grade nine to quit school and go clean houses. She did not encourage her to go school. It was myself and another colleague of mine at our school that pulled her aside find out what the problem was, divorced family dad doesn’t care, told her the importance of education and after four years at St. Mary’s she’s the spokesperson for the ESP team, she’s now got accepted and will be attending U of T in science. I think her problem was a lot of girls don’t have self esteem, they don’t have that, ‘yes you’re capable, you’re intelligent’ and once you grab a kid and say, ‘yes you can do this’ in stepping stones you’ll get a lot of them.<sup>78</sup>

When asked what he thought the issue was for this student, his answer was that she had “no support, low self-esteem. They criticized school. It was a waste of time because they had no

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Gerard Ardanaz

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Gerard Ardanaz

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Gerard Ardanaz

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Angelo Picamilho, April 30, 2010, Toronto.

educational background themselves and they wanted to push her as early as grade nine to go clean houses.”<sup>79</sup> Robert was frank when he stated, “You try to change the kids’ values because their parents are not going to change”<sup>80</sup>. He also had a case involving a student, parent, and the school system.

There was this one time in co-op this poor girl 15 years old her mother said, ‘we’re taking her out of school because we need her to come to work. At that time we had learning to 16 [government policy to keep students in school until they’re 16] it wasn’t the learning to 18 [which is what we have now]. I called the parents and said, ‘you’re not allowed to take her out of class. She’s only 15 years old! ‘We need her to come to work’. I said, ‘ok you can have her at the end of the school day. But I need you to realize you’re going to destroy this girl’s life because she’s not going to get her high school diploma’. And where does she go from here, right?...I struggled with that family for about a month before they finally let her come to school which was amazing...their priorities were very different and I understood it. It was about working class families struggling to make a paycheque.<sup>81</sup>

He tried to indicate that he had empathy for the family’s situation because other ethnic groups had similar struggles. “The people from the [Azores] Islands – I describe them as from the little towns in Italy who came to Canada. What they remember there they brought here and for the next 50 years that’s how they lived. It’s not a criticism it’s an observation.”<sup>82</sup> He also made note of a difference that he observed between Portuguese immigrants and Italian immigrants.

The one condition that was different and this is just my opinion is that they didn’t want or necessarily see that their children to do better than them. As long as they did what the parents were doing then that was enough. That was their expectation. ‘They need to go to work like I do because I go to work they need to make money and provide because that’s what I do and at the end of the day that’s the measure of success; whereas in the school we were trying to get them to break that cycle. ‘You no longer have to work like your parents did because you have that opportunity.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Angelo Picamilho

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Robert Merolle

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Robert Merolle

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Robert Merolle

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Robert Merolle



He felt that “breaking the cycle” of doing the same work as parents once did is the key to academic success. He continued to reflect on parental values. “They saw more value in that [paid work] because that’s a means to an end, right? Their kids were opening a book, reading and writing it down, they [the parents] saw no value in that piece of paper. Child learning how to change breaks, that’s money...whether it’s making money or saving money, they saw value in it.”<sup>84</sup>

When Bianka was asked why Portuguese-Canadians have a low attainment rate in secondary schools she offered her explanation.

Maybe because parents and involvement...how they not really encourage their children to do well in school since because it’s mostly working class people they might not have time to get involved as much. And also it seems that education is not the priority with parents because they themselves they do not education most of them. Most parents I met were mostly first immigrants themselves. They are mostly from the Azores the islands and the second generation Canadians were already raised a certain way. Many times I would meet parents who are former students at St. Mary’s because they tend to marry and have children really early...I think that’s one problem because they want their children to start working as soon as possible and usually they pass on professions especially if males...have some kind of construction business...boys are expected to help during the summer.<sup>85</sup>

And it is not necessarily incapability of academic success that is the factor for this group.

I can think of examples when students were pretty good academically they were doing well in school but they wouldn’t even consider doing post secondary education. They would already say, ‘oh no I’m not going to college, I’m going to start working construction, I’m going to make good money. Nobody in my family goes to college.’ It was also status to have a car for Portuguese boys. And in general if would talk to them you would see they would say, ‘well I’m going to work construction. I’m going to buy a car. I’m going to get married. It’s just the lack of interest.’<sup>86</sup>

Robert also reflected on his experience teaching in a predominantly Portuguese-Canadian school located in downtown West Toronto in the 1990s.

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with Robert Merolle

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Bianka Hudec

Although [Portuguese-Canadians] had been [in Toronto] probably four or five years [or longer], they took the values from Portugal and brought them here...now I don't want to say for every family but education was not a priority. The priority was that there was shelter and that there was food on the table and the one thing about the Portuguese is that everyone contributes including the children were expected to work until 3 O'clock in the afternoon and work an eight hour shift.<sup>87</sup>

The context of this comment concerns the issue of homework being completed. He clearly believed that the reality for most Portuguese-Canadians was that everyone in the household works and that there is just not enough time for study when young people are all working shift work right after school.

### **Jobs**

Part-time work is viewed by the former students interviewed as well as the teachers interviewed as a relatively important issue for students of Portuguese descent for a variety of reasons. Teachers and administrators saw part-time work interfering with success at school. Certainly Angelo and Robert were adamant that part-time work undermined schooling. Gerard and Bianka mentioned that although part-time work did interfere with the students' ability to complete homework, they were equally adamant that the students felt working part-time was very important to them and that they enjoyed it.

When I worked at St. Mary's I'd go to Dufferin Mall the same guy or girl that was giving me trouble in the classroom was one of the most trusted employees there because they had a sense of loyalty and they had a sense of working hard...the kid wouldn't give the time of day in the classroom but for the employer, maybe because he was getting paid money...they just didn't see the significance of it.<sup>88</sup>

While students, teachers and administrators interviewed held different perspectives depending on their particular vantage point, the themes raised were common. And if all agreed

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Robert Merolle

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Gerard Ardanaz

there was a problem, there was no agreement on a solution. The next chapter will discuss the perspective of Portuguese-Canadian community leaders with regard to the central question of this study and what the organized Portuguese-Canadian community is doing to deal with the problem of low student achievement.

## **Chapter 5**

### **A Discussion With Leaders From the Portuguese Community: Organized Community Response**

In the previous chapter students, teachers, and administrators had their say on the issue of educational attainment rates among Portuguese-Canadian students in Toronto schools. It is also important to know what the organized community's response to the issue. This chapter will focus on the thoughts and contributions of several Portuguese community leaders in Toronto who have, in one way or another, experienced, observed, or assisted in trying to remedy the problem that is central to this study.

Four individuals were interviewed for the purposes of this chapter. All of these community leaders had a connection to the Portuguese National Congress in some way, shape, or form. One worked with and remains active in the Portuguese National Congress. He also served as a liaison between the Portuguese community in Toronto and the Toronto Catholic District School Board. Two of the interviewees were employees of Working Women, a non-governmental organization which has been active in encouraging Portuguese student success in Toronto schools. In alliance with the Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education, Working Women in 2001 helped organize an educational intervention program for Portuguese students called *On Your Mark Tutoring Program*. The organization received a three year grant to run the program. The grant ran out about seven years ago. But, the program still continues today thanks to the commitment of a local settlement agency, the United Way, and several other organizations as well as the two Toronto school boards.

The fourth person interviewed is a lawyer, a member of the Federation of Portuguese-Canadian Business and Professionals [FPCBP] and the Portuguese-Canadian Lawyer's Association [PCLA]. She was a member of a FPCBP committee which created and sponsors

scholarships for Portuguese-Canadian students seeking post-secondary education in Canada. She was also involved with a PCLA mentoring program designed to encourage education opportunity in elementary schools with a high Portuguese-Canadian population in Toronto.

The interviews with these four individuals were of particular importance since, not only are they well aware of the troubling statistics which indicate there remains an educational attainment gap for Portuguese-Canadian students in Toronto secondary school but the four are at the forefront of the organized community's reaction to the issue. However, before considering the interviewees' views, it is important to take note of the statistics on Portuguese-Canadian student success in Toronto schools, especially as noted in the Ornstein report.

In light of the unfavourable educational attainment rates for Portuguese-Canadian students, in 1994, the Portuguese-Canadian National Congress conducted a federally-funded study entitled, "A National Needs Assessment". The study put the problem of Portuguese-Canadian student performance on the agenda of the organized Portuguese community in Toronto. More than ten years later, in 2006, Michael Ornstein, a sociologist from York University, published yet another study of the Portuguese-Canadian community in Toronto, based on the 2001 Canadian census.<sup>1</sup> In that study he noted that, "thirty-three percent of the Portuguese have not completed high school, twice the average for all other European groups"<sup>2</sup> and that, "the Portuguese group is unusual: 22.5 percent of Portuguese between 18 and 24 are not in school full-time and have not completed high school and just 37.9 percent are in school full-time"<sup>3</sup>. He came to the conclusion that this is the result of a generational lag. Based on the

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<sup>1</sup> Fernando Nunes. "Marginalisation, Social Reproduction, and Academic Underachievement: The Case of the Portuguese in Canada". In *The Education of Portuguese Children in Britain: Insights From Research and Practice in England and Overseas*. Edited by Guida De Abreu, Tony Cline, and Hannah Lambert, Luton: University of Luton, 2003, 139.

<sup>2</sup> Ornstein, 37

<sup>3</sup> Ornstein, 37

census of 2001, people in the 25-34 age cohort were born between 1967 and 1986. Immigrants or children of immigrants, many entered Canadian primary schools without a solid command of English. While those born in Canada grow up in a more English-speaking environment, overall low education rates prevailed with negative consequences for adults and their children. This fact also predetermined the group's low entry rate into post-secondary studies. Among members of the 48 European ethno-racial groups in Canada between the ages of 25 and 34, the Portuguese and Bosnian communities showed the lowest proportions of university graduates, 11.6 and 9.4 percent respectively.<sup>4</sup>

The information contained in the Ornstein Report echoes statistics collected by the Toronto District School Board. These statistics sparked controversy as well as remedial action by the organized Portuguese-Canadian community, especially after the issue of Portuguese achievement in the schools, or lack of it, was taken up by the media. On April 15, 2008 TVO aired an episode of *The Agenda* entitled "The Portuguese Paradox". This episode featured Portuguese-Canadian community members discussing the high school dropout rate amongst Portuguese-Canadians. The program made reference to statistics gathered by the Toronto District School Board. From the years 2000 to 2005, the dropout rate amongst Portuguese-Canadians reached 43 percent. The program went on to address the question of "why is there a high Portuguese-Canadian dropout rate?" The panel, which consisted of Peter Ferreira, a former president of the Portuguese-Canadian National Congress, Maria Rodrigues, a school trustee from the Toronto District School Board, Fernando Nunes, a former graduate student from OISE/UT and presently a professor at Mount St. Vincent University, Maria Manuela Marujo, a professor at University of Toronto, Marcie Ponte an organizer for Working Women Community Centre in

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<sup>4</sup> Ornstein, 37

Toronto and Nellie Pedro, a local TV personality, all of Portuguese descent.<sup>5</sup> The panel suggested several reasons which they believed underlay the drop-out problem. One was that Portuguese speaking students were dropping out of high school in order to enter the workforce. Students did this because of the priority attached to pitching in to help families financially or because, parents with little education of their own, did not know how to engage with the school system. Some panellists added that the large percentage of drop-outs was because Portuguese-Canadian students do not have a positive role model to showcase educational opportunities to them.<sup>6</sup>

Another point discussed by the panel was the possibility that these statistics might promote stereotyping of Portuguese-Canadian students as low achievers. “Maybe this perception has created more perception...maybe that our kids are not clever...and as an educator I know that perception means a lot.”<sup>7</sup> One panellist went on to state that as this notion, “becomes developed, assumptions are made that our community doesn’t value education. There’s a historical truth about that which I think explains some of the drop out rates...the reality is the numbers are what they are...It’s rooted in history in the 50 years that we’ve been here...it has created a nuance of our community”<sup>8</sup>.

Fernando Nunes added that he believed that the statistics do not stigmatize the community anymore now than was the case in the past. The percentage was negative in the past. It’s negative now. He recounted several instances where teachers had spoken about Portuguese-Canadian students in deprecating ways. He argued that teachers simply have low expectations

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<sup>5</sup> *TVO-The Agenda*. [http://www.tv.org/cfm/tvoorg/theagenda/index.cfm?page\\_id=7&bpn=779176&ts=2008-04-15%2020:00:45.0](http://www.tv.org/cfm/tvoorg/theagenda/index.cfm?page_id=7&bpn=779176&ts=2008-04-15%2020:00:45.0) (November 16, 2010)

<sup>6</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”. *The Agenda*. Toronto: TVO, April 15, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”

<sup>8</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”

for Portuguese-Canadian students.<sup>9</sup> This stereotyping has resulted in the streaming of Portuguese-Canadian students out into the workforce instead of encouraging them to stay in the academic stream. “By the time the students get streamed in grade nine the students are behind because it is the failure of the school system in address reading, writing and math difficulties.”<sup>10</sup> Nunes also made the argument that the Portuguese-Canadian community in Toronto is mainly a working class community and that school failure rate is not an ethnic issue. It is a class issue. The panellists spent a fair amount of time discussing this point but consistently lay responsibility for poor Portuguese graduation rates at this door of the school system. Nunes argued that the school boards use standardized testing in order to determine if a student should be in the special education program. These tests, he concluded, are culturally and class biased. This is also why the Portuguese and other ethnic groups, that are predominantly working class, do poorly on these tests and are over represented in Special Education.<sup>11</sup>

The panel also dismissed the stereotype of Portuguese parents as not caring about their children’s schooling.<sup>12</sup> The notion that parents do not care about their child’s education was overwhelmingly rejected by the panel. They felt that reality was contrary to this stereotype. They care but, uneducated themselves, do not know how to deal with the situation. The organized Portuguese community had taken steps to address the issue and try to fix it. That is why the *On Your Mark Tutoring Program* and *Project Diploma* were created and still exist today.<sup>13</sup> Instead of blaming parents, several panellists challenged school boards to engage with parents of the community. However, in defence of the school it was conceded there is a language barrier between the parents and the school system and it reinforces this home/school

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<sup>9</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”

<sup>10</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”

<sup>11</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”

<sup>12</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”

<sup>13</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”



disconnect. The school system, it was urged, needs to work on making Portuguese parents feel comfortable with the system. “Knowing that [parents] can come to the schools anytime to talk to the principal or teachers [is comforting]. Parents may not be familiar, English is not the first language, they’re not familiar with the system they don’t feel comfortable. It’s our job [the school boards] to do that.”<sup>14</sup> Maria Marujo, another one of the panellists, correctly pointed out that, “the [school] system in Portugal did not have expectations of parent involvement. Here it relies heavily on parent involvement.”<sup>15</sup>

My interviews with prominent Portuguese community leaders reinforced several of some the same points. Enir Bessani, one of the interviewees for this study, began taking action in response to low Portuguese-Canadian attainment rates back in 1995.

I started in 1981 and then the major step forward was in 1995 when *The Toronto Star* [published] in the front page news and it stated, Portuguese are comparing their low attainment rate to other ethnic groups that are doing poorly as well. Based on that in order to help around the kitchen table, I created a collection, a tool of 25 books with songs and CDs for parents to try to teach their own language [to their children]. Since they are not participating in class, we use the international language program in and, at that time 12 schools, to teach children Portuguese and have the parent to participate and be involved in education. *Sons Alphabet*.<sup>16</sup>

He, along with the Portuguese-National Congress, organized a conference on the topic. “Around forty people in the community took part in this. [It was] entitled *Being a Parent in a Foreign Country*.” The conference discussed why Portuguese-Canadian children were having difficulties in school and how parents can trust government institutions and agencies.<sup>17</sup>

Enir, an experienced community organizer, pointed an accusing finger at teachers and the school system.

To see the end product one has to take little steps...it’s like trying to move an elephant. What I’ve been trying to, since 1981 is to hammer try to bring it out

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<sup>14</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”

<sup>15</sup> “The Portuguese Paradox”

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani, November 2009, Toronto.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

to the media to the radio...the most important conference was in 2006 with the question: why are our children lower than the expectations of other ethnic groups in academics. We are still failing. And based on that and another factor with the institution are the teacher and the schools.<sup>18</sup>

These barriers will now be examined in more detail.

## THE BARRIERS

### Parents

The Ornstein and school board statistics as well as *The Agenda* episode speak to how parents factor into determining a child's educational attainment and that an educational generation gap plays an important role in charting the educational course for future generations. Enir described what Portuguese parents' experienced with the school system and how their reasons for entering Canada affect the educational attainment rates of their children.

The issues mainly there was a distance between what's going on with the schools behind the trenches. The school was kind of an entity an institution that parents because of their lack of understanding of the system. One, they [were not well versed in English]. Second, they were not used to asking questions and third because they see the school as an institution teachers are supposed to know what to do and they didn't question that or very little questioning went on how the teachers were doing their job, and how parents could contribute to that. Teachers are supposed to know and they didn't do that. Of course there is always the minority that get involved and but a good majority that get in between communication and relationships and partnerships.<sup>19</sup>

The reason why the Portuguese come to Canada was "...for the labour market and construction jobs and other low pay scale jobs."<sup>20</sup> This, Enir argued, led to the lack of educational attainment within this community. "Academically they are behind; we need to give them opportunities, chances. The effort needs to come from the schools, from the family. If the family is not able to

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

assume this partnership...You need to have a common effort.”<sup>21</sup> The parents, community, and the schools, Enir argued, must form a united front.

Michelle, from *Working Women Community Centre* in Toronto, agreed that communication between parents and the schools is absolutely crucial to student success. That is why the *On Your Mark Tutoring Program* prioritized school communication with Portuguese-Canadian parents who enrol their children in the program.

The other thing that we always done...is that we make sure we have contact with the parent. That’s always been one of the difficulties – how do we connect with parents. Parents ship their kids off to school and there’s this sense of like the almighty organization where, “I think they’ll be fine. And you will return them to me. I’ll feed them I’ll give them dinner. I’m a mother and that’s what I do.” And it makes that contact kind of difficult to establish sometimes. The fact that also that the staff also spoke Portuguese really kind of enabled that a lot and it allowed the staff to also advocate for the parents with things like interpretation and access to principals teachers and things like that. So that’s a place where we want to put more into that. Engage parents.<sup>22</sup>

She also stated that the Portuguese-Canadian National Congress as well as the Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education felt that community organizations should also develop links with the Toronto school boards.

Another is that it allowed an organization to work with different levels of the education system and to work with boards to try to leverage things from there. Members of the coalition were placed at different levels of the board and the liaison people that used to exist within the boards...those people were always there...we actually cultivated good relationships with the different levels. Most of the programs function at the school. It’s because we’re operating at all these different levels.<sup>23</sup>

Sonia, an organizer with the *On Your Mark Tutoring Program* admitted that parental involvement needs to improve beyond its current level and that the program was trying to address this.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Michelle, July 8, 2010, Toronto.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Michelle

I think these workshops are something that we wanted to work on the parent component because we found that without the parents being playing a bigger role in their child's education and understanding the school system and what their rights are as a parent when communicating with the school if they don't know that then only then the child will potentially suffer. The workshops help with for example parents would say, "I don't know how to read or write in English. I can't help my child with their homework. So some really good suggestions come out of the workshop. Have your child read to you in English. Or read to them in Portuguese. It doesn't matter what the language is. And specifically such as your child needs this many credits to graduate high school or do you know that they have to complete forty hours of service hours. We find that parents are sometimes lost when it comes to specifics. [When] Talking about parent teacher interviews, you can ask questions at the interview. It doesn't have to be the teacher talking to you."<sup>24</sup>

For mainstream society to assume that Portuguese-Canadian parents do not care about their children's schooling is incorrect. But it is true that Portuguese-Canadian parents may be illuminated about how schools operate in Canada and what schools expect of parents.

Many parents do feel that teachers are superior. That whatever the teacher says is correct when we know that in many cases it's not. I think that mainly for what I see, I think it's dangerous for someone to say well parents don't care...I think that's wrong and dangerous to generalize them that way but I can introduce to hundreds of parents that do care but their not equipped for whatever reason whatever barrier that is. Whether...because it's a language barrier or they work two jobs. Which not only in our community, but members of many different communities. Are the schools engaging and making a point to engage the parents.<sup>25</sup>

## **Institution**

The interviewed accused the school system of creating barriers to Portuguese parent and community involvement. The issues of stereotyping and streaming were also a concern amongst the group. Enir was emphatic and felt that there is "stereotyping within the institution itself".

It is quite common amongst immigrant children because today when you go secondary schools basically the school with more immigrants specifically the Portuguese, Spanish like this you see the same result. The majority are special education. It is not that they are not preventable. Yes there is a percentage that

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Sonia Neves, July 8, 2010, Toronto.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Sonia Neves.

is suppose to be like this but also we confronted the statistics at the time with the Toronto catholic district school board, board wide special education was seven percent. And the Portuguese community schools were 14 percent. This motivated me to do all the initiatives I was talking about, kitchen table education and parents getting involved and work toward a solution together in the schools.<sup>26</sup>

Enir's comments coincide echo Fernando Nunes' study. Nunes states that in the 1990's the Special Education Department became a dumping ground for Portuguese-Canadian students with low literacy levels. Michelle expressed similar concerns.<sup>27</sup>

Michelle expressed similar concerns.

Streaming is a real concern. Teachers are human and they go into a classroom and they see that some students are really keen...some kids want to learn and some just don't care. So who are you going to invest in? You don't invest in the hard cases. You don't invest in the...it's much easier to invest in keeners. And it's satisfying for them absolutely. Then the problem is in communities of good concentration you're also going to get that thing that divides in cultural lines. And there are associations made. The former principal at a high school in the area said, "Oh these Portuguese. Forget it." They were heard saying that. "These Portuguese Kids". They're not talking about Johnny and Ralph or Maria they're talking about, "these Portuguese kids."<sup>28</sup>

Teachers harbour negative stereotypes of Portuguese students. In addition, mainstream students and parents are dismissive of working with Portuguese students.

Immigrant communities still clump together so you're still going to get those cleavages. You have this cultural baggage you have this lack of motivation and support coming from the home front. It's reflected in the classroom and it divides along cultural lines and then that teacher goes to another school and has that thing in their head, "these Portuguese kids. Forget it." When a principal says that this establishes the culture in the school. And then you have the odd teacher who's in their fighting. We've got a window of teachers, while they're still fresh and have the energy. Then they just capitulate because nobody can fight the fight on their own. You need the support. On the ground culturally this is happening but institutionally these same sorts of transitions are supposed to happen.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

<sup>27</sup> Nunes, *Marginalisation, Social Reproduction* 132 & 137

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Michelle

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Michelle

When groups of people are categorized and streamed based on preconceived notions, it becomes more difficult for them to break free of the stereotype. Enir offered an anecdote to prove his point.

[In] 1996-7 out of eighty four students in grade one thirty six were already labelled special education. We intervened with those 84 kids and teachers and try to offer each one of those kids the best opportunity in short compact way [short compact lessons] and try to make them aware there is no lack of intelligence or capacity of their children it was lack of opportunity. After three months of strong intervention all those children were working at levels with the other children and also reading and writing. The only problem was six of them because of multiple problems that they couldn't all the other thirty six of the children were reading and writing at the appropriate age level.<sup>30</sup>

### **Culture/personal experience?**

As noted in previous chapters, Portuguese-Canadians immigrated to Canada for a better life and Canada absorbed them into the labour force. To this day the majority of Portuguese-Canadians living in Toronto remain “working class”. Thus, it would also not be surprising to infer that most Portuguese-Canadians tend to value financial stability more than a diploma or a degree.

“It’s more worthy to pay your mortgage and you have a car.”<sup>31</sup> Michelle concurs that this mind-frame is an issue in Portuguese student’s educational attainment in the schools. “There’s not a tremendous amount of push or heartfelt respect of education as a stand alone thing regardless of what kind of job you get...like education is a means that leads to an end.”<sup>32</sup> When asked why this was the case, Enir explained in detail. “Around the kitchen table they didn’t speak English. They didn’t know how. They are not willing to help their children academically. They do not know how. They did not know that when you strive for academics you have more opportunities

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Michelle

in life. They went for the immediate compensation.”<sup>33</sup> Michelle explained that it is difficult to break this old world view when there are very few role models, to promote the value of education in the Portuguese community.

My opinion is that the generations that preceded them were all exposed to the exact same thing dealing with a government regime which actively discouraged education. Hard work was the way to go and if you’re faithful and hardworking this is the road to heaven. So, all of this stuff pushes people in that direction. And you don’t break that in a generation or two.<sup>34</sup>

Sometimes it seems daunting for those caught in a repetitive cycle to pursue a goal that many people they know have not succeeded in doing. That is why, as Michelle explained, new roads to opportunity need to be charted for those who do not know how to succeed on their own.

The thought is one of barriers, “I don’t think this is for me. We can’t possibly do this. It’s so foreign or so outside their realm of cogitation...sort of presenting the opportunity. And they’ve been really successful. [there are a lot of bus loads that go to U of T, York and Ryerson.] So those have been really successful. And we have both school board supports to run those things as well. [about the buses going to Universities]<sup>35</sup>

She states that Portuguese-Canadian parents do in fact want their kids to succeed in schooling. “Parents [today]...are keen for their kids to do well.”<sup>36</sup> The issue is that they just need help on how to assist their children along that path. That is why the organized Portuguese-Canadian community has become so involved. The Portuguese-Canadian National Congress, as well as the FPCBP and PCLA, assist the community by serving as middle-men or advocates for parents with the school system.

## **Middle-Man**

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Enir Bessani

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Michelle

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Michelle

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Michelle

Susie, a lawyer and a member of the Federation of Portuguese-Canadian Business Professionals and the Portuguese-Canadian Lawyers Association, has worked with the Portuguese-Canadian community for a number of years. She was chair of both the Federation and the Association. “The Federation itself is an organization that has a number of mandates and one of them is promoting education with youth.”<sup>37</sup> The Federation’s school agenda includes a scholarship program for students of Portuguese descent who are applying to post-secondary programs. The Federation also publicizes their efforts as a model for others by providing examples which illustrates to the Portuguese-Canadian community that post-secondary success is both possible and desirable. The reason why Susie felt recognition of individual achievement was as important for the community was:

Because our community has experienced some struggles in post-secondary success in education, this scholarship, this program, I thought was a good way to both increase the visibility of success by recognizing students everywhere by highlighting how academically successful they were and by bringing them back into the fold. The second prong which I tried to do for this scholarship program is to highlight academic excellence. Financial need is for some a barrier. But during the two years that I was there the objective was to make visible academic success and highlight that. During the time I was at the federation one objective was that I wanted to show people within in the community and the mainstream because we certainly promoted with mainstream speakers that our students could and did compete with the best...we have true brilliance in this community. I felt it was important to highlight that.<sup>38</sup>

The Federation also sponsors essay writing contests which Portuguese students reflect on what it means to be Portuguese-Canadian. This not only gives students incentive to write and perhaps receive a monetary award for their efforts, but it also, highlights academic excellence in the community even as it promotes pride in being Portuguese-Canadian.

The Portuguese-Canadian Lawyers Association, of which Susie is a member, has provided mentoring role models for the community. Susie explained the Association’s mandate.

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Susie, July 13, 2010, Toronto

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Susie



“We went into schools to promote education in elementary schools to show and mentor them in how to get into good high schools and to think on ways on how they can plan to achieve their goals.”<sup>39</sup> In recent years the PCLA collaborated with ten schools in the Toronto area that had a high Portuguese student population. The schools, such as St. Nicholas de Bari and St. Helen’s are located in Toronto’s “Little Portugal”, and nearby area.<sup>40</sup>

The organized community’s efforts were all in response to the disturbing educational attainment statistics for Portuguese-Canadian students. Working Women, a settlement agency for the Portuguese community in Toronto, remain very much a part of this effort. The *On Your Mark Tutoring Program* began eight years ago as an idea generated by members of the Portuguese-Canadian Coalition for Better Education including Susie.

This was all prior to my arriving there was this Portuguese [Canadian] Coalition for Better Education and for educators were coming together to try to address this issue of drop outs and poor academic outcomes. And then we were approached, so working women were approached, to basically run this project to understand, it was kind of co-written, by that coalition which we ... that’s my understanding but I could be wrong with that. It was a grant from the trillium coalition. It was a three year grant. 2001 not sure. So we were basically the host organization and so we hired the staff, we supervised the staff and then there was the steering committee who worked with us through course of the project. And it was a way of servicing the community from a settlement perspective and yet actually really means meeting the needs because in general the organization doesn’t do youth services. **We don’t see this as youth services we see this as like kind of a community development initiative for the Portuguese-speaking community.** We were always clear that we were going to open this thing up for Luso-phone communities not specifically the Portuguese so...in fact increasingly we’re seeing this next generation...this was not the case when we first started...it’s been an evolution. But it also means that the kids that were working with.<sup>41</sup>

The organized community hoped to ease the problem of educational attainment

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Susie

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Susie

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Michelle [author’s emphasis]

rates by serving as go-betweens, bridging the gulf between the Portuguese-Canadian working-class home and the school. Michelle described the importance of liaisons:

The liaisons have been big in that [infiltrating into the system] through the boards. They are also getting access to other people. You need those middle people at the board connecting with the community and connecting with the board who are actually compassionate and actually committed. They see this as a partnership [between the board and working women] We need something that stitches together what's happening at the board with what's happening at the ground. Whether it's a community organization or whether its parent groups somebody has to knit those things together. What does this mean on the ground or how are we going to make it fly. How are we going to get people to care. You really have to address that [parents who need to come to parent teacher interviews who do not come.] both boards are supporting the program financially 50-50. That commitment is formed over time with awareness. With part of this partnership they understand morally that there needs to be something done here.<sup>42</sup>

To this day, the organized community battles what they regard as negative stereotyping. “The trick is to prevent stigma, prevent that total disillusionment and the negative associations that happen.”<sup>43</sup> The community leaders of the *On Your Mark Tutoring Program* also hope to prevent the stigma of Portuguese parental indifference from spreading by assisting parents in communicating with the schools.

We have many times helped parents that either ask me or the co-ordinator or their children's tutor for help. Or sometimes just randomly mention, oh I'm not too happy with my child's teacher and then we'll kind of pick at it, “well what do you mean?” oh but I don't want to say anything because I don't wanna put my daughter in a difficult situation. And when we say to them no you do have a right to speak to the teacher and if that doesn't resolve it speak to the principal...so we equip the parents with this information.<sup>44</sup>

In response to the census data, published reports, and the media attention given to the high Portuguese-Canadian dropout rate in Toronto secondary schools, the community has attempted to act as the middleman between parents and their children's schools in order, they

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Michelle

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Michelle

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Sonia Neves

hope, to lower the Portuguese-Canadian school drop-out rate. The way in which the community has responded, by giving support to the family, by being the translator, and by providing additional literacy and numeracy support after school hours, as well as by providing financial assistance and role modelling, suggests that the reason why there remains a high dropout rate is because these areas were not being addressed either by the school system or the parents. But do their initiatives address the underlying reasons for the high Portuguese student drop-out rate? Whether it is because the families have yet to acculturate into mainstream Canadian education values or the schools need to understand the context in which families of different ethnic backgrounds come to understand the value of schooling or deal with the schools, there is still much work that needs to be done. The information that was provided to the interviewer underscores the disconnect between the family and the school system. It still remains to be seen if the organized community can become the glue which will ultimately bind the two together.

## **Conclusion**

As of 2008, the dropout rate for Portuguese-Canadian students in Toronto was 42.5%. This thesis asks the question: “Why is there a low educational attainment rate amongst Portuguese-Canadians in Toronto secondary schools?” The question was asked of and discussed by a small number of former students of Portuguese descent, teachers, administrators, and Portuguese-Canadian community leaders in Toronto. While many interesting insights were brought to light through the interviews, there are some findings that deserve to be highlighted.

While former students, school personnel and community leaders spoke from differing perspectives they all focused on the same issues family values, the history and cultural values of pre-immigration Portugal, barriers to educational success such as literacy and first language barriers, stereotyping, and streaming in the schools. Based on the interviews, one of the causes of the high Portuguese-Canadian dropout rate stands out as most important. The information collected indicates that the disconnect between the parents of Portuguese-Canadian students and the public school system in Toronto is regarded as the single most vexing problem. All those who were interviewed agreed there is both a lack of communication between home and school and even a degree of mutual hostility between home and school. This study did not include interviews with Portuguese-Canadian parents and any further research on this topic should make this a priority. The information which might be obtained from parents could well be useful in filling in blank parts of the drop out study.

But information obtained through conversations with these individuals interviewed, surrounding the key question of this study, repeatedly pointed to barriers between the two institutions of family and schooling. This is the concern of community leaders and school officials because it is the parents who ultimately have direct impact on whether an individual

actually stays in school or drops out. Community leader, try as they might to fill the communication gap between home and school, cannot change any individual student's home situation, at least not directly. In fact, those community leaders feel that the mere fact that they provide abridging services indicates that a core problem certainly exists. While some are reluctant to discuss it, they dare not overlook the impact of low educational-attainment rate of Portuguese-Canadians and an old-world devaluing schooling as a utilitarian asset.

On a practical level, there are pressures for change. The government of Ontario has raised the compulsory education age from 16 to 18. Whether or not this move will keep Portuguese students in school longer remains to be seen. But there is reason to hope. A recent news report featured on CBC's *The National* stated that the provincial dropout rate for all students has been reduced by half due to the "Pathways program" that the Ministry of Education implemented through provincial school boards. The report stated that "Pathways" has assisted inner-city students stay in school long enough to graduate incorporating an apprenticeship or trade certification into the secondary program. How this will impact Portuguese-Canadian students living in Toronto is still unknown. Even though the apprenticeship option has changed the parameters of the dropout situation in Ontario, it is still very possible for students to dropout or not receive an Ontario Secondary School Diploma and, according to my informants, many still do. How much difference it would make to better engage with parents is an open question. Many of those interviewed insist it will make a difference, specifically if account is taken of class based attitudes.

As Ornstein notes in his report and is echoed by Morgado:

The role of Portuguese Canadian Parents could also be linked to class. As previously noted, family plays a critical role in the reproduction of social class inequities including the way in which parents invest time and resources in their children's education. Thus parents who are educated in the Canadian system

have more familiarity with the education system. This may include, for example, how the curriculum works, different forms of assessment and evaluation, or how to ask the right types of questions at parent-teacher interviews.<sup>1</sup>

The question can be asked in the context of class. The Portuguese-Canadian enclave in Toronto is predominately working class. The disconnect that exists between family and schooling also exist among other ethnic groups as well. And, as many of those interviewed argue, class trumps ethnicities. What impedes completion rates for the Portuguese-Canadian ethnic group can also impedes other working-class ethno-racial groups, if somewhat less so. This too opens the door for potential future research in this area.

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<sup>1</sup> Vickie Morgado. *Educational Explorations: Schooling Experiences of Second-Generation Portuguese-Canadian Students*. Master Thesis. St. Catherines: Brock University, 2009, 51.

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