



PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING STUDENTS IN THE TDSB: AN OVERVIEW

Amie Presley, Research Analyst
Robert S. Brown, Research Coordinator



Research & Information Services

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Amie Presley and Robert S. Brown

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Research and Information Services
Toronto District School Board
1 Civic Centre Court, Lower Level
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Tel.: 416-394-4929
Fax: 416-394-4946

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INTRODUCTION

This document is in response to a newly formed Toronto District School Board (TDSB) task force for Portuguese-speaking students. The Task Force was established to examine patterns associated with Portuguese-speaking students and look at options to support increasing their achievement. This document combines TDSB demographic information, Federal Census data, as well relevant scholarly literature in order to support the Task Force. This document first presents historical information about our TDSB Portuguese-speaking students, followed by a summary of external literature pertaining to the Portuguese-speaking community within and outside of Canada, and finally current academic achievement trends within the TDSB.

Historical Background and Achievement Patterns

Students speaking Portuguese (a proxy for Luso-Canadians) are one of the largest language groups in the TDSB. Detailed in the 1981 and 1991 Federal Census, Portugal was identified as one of the top 10 countries of birth for recent immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2008). However, the numbers have been declining in recent years. As of the 1996 Federal Census, 78,535 Portuguese people lived in Toronto. The community was made up of a high proportion of young people, (18.8% under 15 years of age), and people 65 years of age and older accounted for 8.1% (Ornstein, 2000). At the TDSB, in Fall 1999, 2,182 students were identified as speaking Portuguese¹; as of Fall 2010 this number had fallen to 1,398, a decline of 36%.

The majority of students speaking Portuguese are second or third generation immigrants. At the TDSB, over three quarters (76%) of Portuguese-speaking students were born in Canada; 12% were born in Brazil; 5% in Portugal; and 4% in Angola. Gender distribution is approximately the same as the full TDSB population (53% of males and 47% females compared to 52% males and 48% females for the TDSB).

In the City of Toronto, the largest number of Portuguese-speaking students attend the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) rather than the TDSB. As of October 2007, the TCDSB had 4,773 Portuguese-speaking students, compared to the 1,486 Portuguese-speaking students in the TDSB.

For over 30 years, the TDSB and predecessor boards have found Portuguese (Luso-Canadian) students to have lower than average achievement. Nunes (2003) in looking at the Portuguese

¹ Students are identified through the TDSB registration information.

(Luso-Canadian) community in Canada, most of whom are concentrated in Toronto and Montreal, concludes that the academic underachievement problem cannot simply be attributed to the lack of Luso-Canadian parental support for education, but rather is the result of the ongoing economic, political, and cultural challenges (this will be addressed further in subsequent sections).

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

Immigration Context

The immigration (in large numbers) of Portuguese-speaking people to Canada began in 1953 and continued into the early 1990's. These immigrants were disproportionately from rural and/or low income regions in Portugal and Azores with very low education levels. They moved into unskilled construction, manufacturing, or service industries managing to overcome many of the limitations from their low education levels while achieving a measure of economic success and security in Canada (Nunes, 2008). They have also been noted for their high-levels of home ownership (Abada, Hou, & Ram, 2009). However, the limited professional and educational profile of the first Portuguese immigrants, paired with high rates of school dropouts, soon led this community to experience levels of unequal participation in Canada's economy (Nunes, 2008). Unfortunately, the marginalized economic and educational profile of the first generations of the Portuguese-Canadian community also gave rise to a negative image of this group, held by many members of the Canadian society (Nunes, 2008). The Portuguese community in Canada, despite the appearance of prosperity and stability, show evidence of facing severe systemic barriers to a full integration into Canadian society, particularly in the realm of education (Nunes, 2008).

Current Day

Today, the Portuguese community, entering into its third Canadian-born generation, continues to be largely marginalized from many sectors of Canadian society (Nunes, 2004). Among all Canadian minority groups, Portuguese-speaking Canadians still display the highest percentages of individuals with only a primary school education (Matas & Valentine 2000; Nunes 1998, 2000, 2008; Ornstein 2000, 2006a & 2006b). Furthermore, their proportion of university and college graduates is equal to those of the Canadian Aboriginal communities.

In a report using the 1996 Federal Census, Ornstein (2000) identified groups experiencing significant disadvantage in education, employment, and income. Specific to the Canadian

Portuguese-speaking community, his results showed that among European immigrants, educational attainment is distinctly lower for the Southern European groups. Almost 70% of Portuguese immigrants aged 25 and older had not graduated from high school and more than half had not attended high school at all. Furthermore, amongst the European immigrant groups, the Portuguese had a strikingly high proportion of young people not in school and not high school graduates (29%); only 3.6% of Portuguese were University graduates.

Abadi and Lin (2011) examined the 1996 and 2006 Federal Census data to understand the educational attainment of immigrant children in Ontario (see Table 1). Their results correspond with Nunes (2003, 2004, 2008) and Ornsteins (2000) findings. The children of Portuguese immigrants have the lowest percentage (17%) of individuals with a BA (or higher). This is four times less than the highest group attaining a BA (or higher) (children of Chinese immigrants, 69%). However, the second and third generation Portuguese individuals are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree than their first generation counterparts. As well, those with Portuguese background are not necessarily disadvantaged in terms of income levels and employment rates even though they have lower rates of education.

Table 1: Summary Characteristics of the Two Generations by Source Country, Ontario, 1996 and 2006 Federal Census

2006 Census Data									1996 Census Data		
Education		Unemployment Rate			Employment Income						
% with PSE	% with BA and above	All	Male	Female	All	Male	Female	Total	% Father with PSE	% Father with BA and above	Total
54.65	17.32	4.16	3.86	4.50	36,706	40,607	32,317	29,390	11.65	0.65	35,115

* Second generation and third generation, aged 25-34 in 2006 Federal Census and the fathers' generation in 1996 census (adapted from Abadi and Lin, 2011).

As a consequence of the disproportionately low numbers of university graduates, low numbers of professional and management positions are held by Portuguese-speaking Canadians and they continue to earn significantly lower average incomes than other Canadians (Nunes, 1998, 2000 & 2008; Ornstein 2000, 2006a & 2006b). Portuguese-speaking Canadians also continue to be underrepresented within the political, economic, social, and cultural sectors of our nation (Nunes, 2008).

The differences in education across ethnic groups observed among the foreign-born population may affect the differences in the second generation's academic achievement (Abada, Hou & Ram, 2009). Abada et al. (2009), using the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey, presented the ethnic differences in family background and individual characteristics. The Portuguese community identified low levels of parental education (0% of fathers and 1.6% of mothers had post-secondary education graduation) emphasizing that low levels of parental education are the most important variables contributing to the relatively low university completion rates among Portuguese.

Portuguese-speaking Youth in Canada

The Portuguese-speaking community's full inclusion into Canadian society has been most impeded by the academic underachievement of its youth (Nunes, 2008). For over four decades, consecutive generations of Portuguese-speaking Canadian children²:

- ❑ have been performing at significantly lower academic levels,
- ❑ have been found to be disproportionately represented in Special Education and remedial reading programs, and
- ❑ were reported to be dropping out of school earlier and in greater numbers than most other students (Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 1992; Cheng & Yau, 1999; Cheng et al., 1989; Santos, 2004; Nunes, 1986 & 2003; Ornstein 2000, 2006a, 2006b & 2006c; Yau, Cheng & Ziegler, 1993; as cited in Nunes, 2008).

Portuguese-speaking Canadian students in Toronto have also been more likely to plan not to attend university because of their lack of confidence in their ability to succeed in post-secondary education. They also work the longest average hours of part-time work, and spend the fewest hours per week on homework (Cheng & Yau 1999; Cheng, Yau & Ziegler, 1993; Larter et al., 1982; Project Diploma, 2004; as cited in Nunes, 2008). At the turn of the millennium, only approximately 6% of all Portuguese-speaking Canadians over the age of 15 had obtained a university degree (Nunes, 2008). The lower likelihood of Portuguese-speaking youth pursuing a university education may be reflected in the lower proportion of Portuguese immigrants in management and professional occupations (Ornstein, 2000).

Portuguese-speaking Canadian children of immigrants are not progressing beyond their parents' socio-economic roles (Nunes, 2008). A 2005 report on the intergenerational mobility amongst the children of immigrants indicated that while Portuguese-speaking Canadian youth

² Particularly in the city of Toronto and Montreal.

had nearly doubled the education levels of their fathers, their incomes had failed to improve compared to those of their elders (Aydemir, Chen, & Corak, 2005, 2008). The report further illustrated that the income levels of the Canadian-born Portuguese children are similar to those of more recent visible minority immigrant groups (who also have similarly low education levels) (Aydemir, Chen, & Corak, 2005). Aydemir et al. (2008) explain that the more educated communities are able to steer their children through the barriers they may face in broader society in a way that gives them an advantage.

As we look at the academic achievement and socio-economic status of Portuguese-speaking Canadian families and their youth, we should also consider the identity negotiations³ of these youth. Sardinha (2011) explains that “given the size and importance of this community, and given the tendency of younger generations to occupy the same low societal ranks of their parents, the study of Portuguese-speaking Canadian descendents and their identity negotiations, sense of belonging, and civic engagement (within the frameworks of multicultural Canada) is considered crucial in order to better understand their placing and ensure their greater inclusion in Canadian society” (p. 3).

Portuguese-speaking Canadian youth, while growing up in their parents’ emigration country, are defined by bicultural and pluralistic life patterns which resulted from a *bi-socialisation process* involving the internal (primarily within the family unit and the Portuguese community) and the external (the space outside of the family and community) (Sardinha, 2011). These youth, from an early age, experience an intercultural coexistence predominated by a sociocultural relationship between family unit/community and the external ‘society’. At different times and spaces in the youth’s life, the two spheres take on different degrees of meaning and importance. The two spheres are constantly negotiating opposing relations and involvement (Sardinha, 2011). According to Rumbaut and Portes (2001), given the choices of retaining their (parents’) ethnic identity, adapting a *hyphenated identity*, identifying merely with the host country culture, or alternatively identifying with a larger pan-ethnic background, the majority of immigrant descendent youth will opt to identify with a *hyphenated identity* which is assuming aspects of the Canadian culture and mixing them with elements of the Portuguese identity.

³ This does not refer to actual *identity negotiation theory*, but more the internal struggles with identity Portuguese-speaking youth may face.

New cultural identities are emerging; drawing on different traditions and harmonizing old and new without assimilating or abandoning the past. “This lends true to the argument that most descendents do not possess a single clear-cut and unmistakable ethnic identity but, instead, are divided into various cultures and split among various loyalties” (Sardinha, 2011, p. 16).

Portuguese Youth in Portugal

The information discussed in the prior sections relates to Portuguese-speaking individuals in Canada. Woessmann (2004) presents interesting information about Portuguese students in Portugal. He uses data from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)⁴ to estimate the impact of parental education and other measures of family background on children’s test scores. Woessmann identifies that Portugal has the lowest mean TIMMS score out of all Western European countries. The mean Mathematics performance in TIMSS of the Western European countries ranges from 438.3 in Portugal to 561.7 in Flemish, Belgium⁵.

Woessmann’s report also presents country means of the data on family background. The average parental education varies widely among the Western European countries. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of Portuguese parents do not have any secondary education. On the other extreme, 40% of parents in French Belgium have a finished university education. Interestingly, all cases except Ireland and Portugal show that native students perform statistically significantly better than immigrated students. In Portugal, immigrated students perform statistically significantly (at least at the 5% level) better than native students in Portugal (Woessmann, 2004).

⁴ TIMSS measures student performance separately in Mathematics and Science, using an international achievement scale with scores having an international mean of 500 and an international standard deviation of 100.

⁵ As a comparison, Singapore was the international top performer at 622.3, South Africa was the lowest performer at 351, and the United States scored an average of 487.8 test-score points in Mathematics (Woessmann, 2004).

TDSB ACHIEVEMENT TRENDS

a. Grade 6 EQAO Mathematics Spring 2006 and Spring 2010

The achievement of Portuguese-speaking students in the Grade 6 EQAO Mathematics tests was examined, comparing achievement in the Spring 2010 administration, to the Spring 2006 administration four years earlier. This demonstrated that:

- In the Spring 2006 administration, out of all TDSB Grade 6 students, 60.1% were at Levels 3 or 4; of Portuguese-speaking students, 42.4% were at Levels 3 or 4, a negative gap of 17.7% compared to the full TDSB population.
- In the most recent Spring 2010 administration, out of all TDSB Grade 6 students, 62.5% were at Level 3 or 4; of Portuguese-speaking students, 48.4% were at Levels 3 or 4, a negative gap of 14.1% compared to the full TDSB population.
- The overall TDSB Grade 6 EQAO Math improvement was 2.4% while the improvement of Portuguese-speaking students was 6%, higher than the full TDSB.

b. Graduation Rates of the Grade 9 Cohort, Fall 2000 - Fall 2004

The Grade 9 Cohort reports (Brown, 2010) examined the five-year graduation rate of five cohorts from those starting Grade 9 in Fall 2000 through those starting in Fall 2004. The five-year graduation rate of key language groups increased between the Fall 2000 and Fall 2004 cohorts. The three language groups with the lowest graduation rates in both Fall 2000 and Fall 2004 were Portuguese, Spanish, and Somali-speaking students. However, each language group showed a pronounced increase over the five (5) cohorts. The graduation rate of Portuguese students increased from 48% to 66%, an increase much higher than the full TDSB cohort (which increased from 69% to 76%). Therefore, results were mixed: Portuguese-speaking students had noticeably increased in graduation rates over time, but the current 66% graduation rate of Portuguese students is still 10% lower than the full TDSB cohort graduation rate of 76%.

Thus, with both Grade 6 EQAO Mathematics achievement and secondary graduation rates, the improvement of Portuguese-speaking cohorts has been noteworthy, but at the same time, achievement remains lower than the full TDSB population.

c. Grade 6 EQAO Mathematics Comparison

At the TDSB, we have also looked at Grade 6 EQAO Mathematics for the 2007-08 school year and compared Portuguese-speaking students to other students. Portuguese-speaking students had significantly lower achievement rates than other TDSB students. However, whenever we controlled for parents' education; the LOI of the school; parental expectations (that is, whether the parent expects the student to go to post-secondary) for the student; and the income of the neighborhood in which the students lived, the achievement of Portuguese-speaking students was still lower compared to others, but the difference was no longer statistically significant. This means that as Nunes noted in the previous section, these external socio-economic challenges of the students account for much of the lower performance of these students.

WHAT DO WE DO?

Community groups and agencies have been brought to the table, but despite efforts, the Portuguese-speaking community in Canada face significant barriers to integration. There is a lack of research effectively examining the Portuguese community. Being a “predominantly White, European minority, the Portuguese are most often not identified as a separate target group in many government research and policy documents” (Nunes, 2008, p. 124).

Consequently, in such reports, data on this community is often amalgamated under “European,” “Southern European”, or “White.” Because of this, the Portuguese Canadian’s community issues are not highlighted for policy-makers (Nunes, 2008).

Nunes (2008) calls the above the *diversity dialogue* and notes how it is hurting the Portuguese-speaking community in Canada. At the policy level, this lack of attention is reflected in the lack of inclusion of the Portuguese community in equity initiatives. For example:

- ❑ The Portuguese community is not counted among the designated federal government equity groups, despite suffering severe structural barriers to education (Nunes 1998).
- ❑ Individuals who identify as being born in Portugal are not identified as a visible minority (e.g., job applications) (Nunes, 2008).

The absence of an ethnocultural focus in much of the governments’ policies and practices does not effectively address the systemic barriers which are experienced by the Portuguese-speaking Canadian population (Nunes, 2008).

CONCLUSION

This document provides an overall summary of literature pertaining to the Portuguese-speaking Canadian community. Outlining immigration patterns, socioeconomic patterns, trends in student achievement, cross-generations post-secondary pathways, identity negotiation of Portuguese-speaking youth as well as where the Portuguese-speaking community is situated within Canada's *diversity dialogue*. All of these factors point to the timely need for effective strategies to address the intergenerational pattern of low academic achievement and the largely marginalized place Portuguese-speaking Canadians hold today.

A tipping point rests on the shoulders of the Portuguese-speaking Canadian youth and their supporters. The successful integration of this community is more intimately tied than most to the development of the "social capital" of its youth (Nunes, 2008). "A point of urgency on this matter is the fact that this community's under-24 youth component is proportionately larger and has a faster growth rate than the overall population, or similar ethnocultural groups (e.g., Italians, Greeks)" (Nunes, 2008, p. 123).

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