

PERCEPTIONS OF THE PORTUGUESE COMMUNITY SCHOOL LEADERS IN THE UNITED STATES: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Many ethnic communities in the United States have founded community schools to perpetuate in their new land their cultural “roots”, their own languages and their values. The Portuguese community in the United States is not exception and founded their first school almost one hundred years ago to promote the language and the culture of their ancestors. The purpose of this qualitative study, multiple case work, is to analyze the perceptions of six school community leaders about the context of the Portuguese community schools in the United States namely on the problems they face today, the type of leadership of the schools and the reasons of parents to place their children attending those schools. The narratives of the six leaders interviewed are consistent with common conclusions specifically that the schools face many problems nowadays related with lower enrollments and finances, lack of coordination, poor communication and collaboration among the Portuguese community schools although they benefit from a voluntary, dynamic and democratic type of leadership. These community schools are essential for the Portuguese communities in the United States. They represent the culture, the history and the special “link” to Portugal. For those reasons, these schools should be cared for and recognized by their efforts, leaderships and perpetuation of the national identity and values of our ancestors. It’s extremely important that these community schools be supported and cared for because they provide an important service to the Portuguese communities and to its students

Keywords: Portuguese community schools; leadership; Culture; Portuguese Language; United States

Introduction

Many ethnic communities in the United States have created and maintain heritage or community schools to preserve the language and culture of their ancestors. Thousands of such community schools exist today in the

United States. They provide alternative and/or supplementary educational resources as well as valuable cultural and social experiences for many American children (Fishman, 1999).

Among such schools are those of Portuguese origin. In fact, Portuguese-American communities have sponsored heritage schools in the United States for more than a hundred years.

For many Portuguese-Americans, Portuguese heritage or community schools represent “grass roots” commitment and community effort aimed at wakening the reasoning and sensibility of the young to the values of their culture (Bento, 2001). These schools also seek to perpetuate the community language, culture and identity in the United States of America. In light of that tradition, this qualitative study analyses the perceptions and opinions of the schools leaders about the role and specificities of those schools and the difficulties they face nowadays. In this context, we conducted semi structured interviews to six school leaders of Portuguese community schools in the east coast of the United States of America.

Community schools in the United States

Joshua Fishman relates that the United States, as the greater multilingual and multicultural nation cannot disdain the thousands of schools and the hundreds of thousands of children that the Ethnic or Community Schools serve. Fishman (1980) states:

These schools must be enclosed in the list of our educational, social and intellectual resources for national reasons given the fact that the United States cannot give itself the luxury to ignore six thousand schools attended by six hundred thousand children (p. 236)

The Ethnic or Community Schools are supplemental schools functioning between six and 10 hours per week and between three to five sessions of two hours each (Bradunas & Topping, 1988). According to Fishman (1989), linguistic education is only one of the multiple objectives of the ethnic schools. The education of traditions and history of ancestors, the wakening and the development of the ethnic identity, the improvement of communication between parents and children and the creation of chances for the members of the community to work and to socialize among them, are also essential objectives of great importance. In this way, Ethnic or Community Schools had given an important and independent contribution to the maintenance of ethnic languages and cultures. Bentley (1982) affirms:

For besides keeping the identity and increasing academic education, the proficiency in two languages is one advantage in a cosmopolitan world. Nine of ten Americans don't know how to speak, to read or to understand

another language for beyond the English. An education that leads to a high degree of bilingualism in English and a minority language is of great value for this country (p. 114).

Similarly to all the other ethnic or community schools, the Portuguese ones located in the areas of major Portuguese concentrations, transmit to its pupils significant levels of reading, writing and comprehension of the Portuguese language. Moreover, Portuguese Community schools give also emphasis to history, literature, customs and traditions to the Portuguese people.

During their research into heritage schools, Bradunas and Topping (1988) found the following similarities to be typical across ethnic groups:

- a) Emphasis on the importance of identity
- b) Acknowledgement of the significance of the native language
- c) Propensity to organize a school-type structure for their educational programs
- d) Similar problems with teachers and curriculum materials
- e) Identical headaches concerning enrollments and finances

The few differences they noted were related to language instruction. While more recently created schools such as Lithuanian, Polish, Hungarian, Turkish, Cambodian, Portuguese and Korean schools, seem to stress the importance of language above else, older schools, such as Japanese, Ukrainian, and Greek schools seem to place less emphasis on language instruction. To cite another contrast, the older Chinese schools seem to focus solely on a few ethnic arts while the oldest German-Russian and Dutch schools focus more on the social history of their community in its particular locale.

Portuguese Community schools in the United States

Five years ago, according to Castanho (2010) there were in the United States 65 Portuguese community schools distributed by 13 states with 3.286 pupils and 210 teachers. In the state of Massachusetts there were 9 schools and Rhode Island it had 5 schools a Portuguese population of 279.722 in Massachusetts and 91,445 in Rhode Island.

Fifteen years ago, Bento (2000) reported the existence of 62 schools serving 3,518 students and 195 teachers in the academic year of 1999-2000.

Nowadays, the state of **Massachusetts** has nine Portuguese community schools:

Portuguese Official school of Cambridge and Somerville

Portuguese school of Hudson

Portuguese school of Ludlow

Portuguese school of Milford

Portuguese Official school of Peabody

Portuguese United for Education (in New Bedford)
Portuguese school of Casa da Saudade (in New Bedford)
Portuguese Official school of Fall River
Portuguese school of Taunton

The state of **Rhode Island** has five schools:

Portuguese school of the Youth Lusitana Club (in Central Falls)
Portuguese school of Pawtucket
Portuguese Official school of East Providence
Portuguese Official school of Bristol
Portuguese school of Cranston

Methodology

For this qualitative study, we conducted six in-depth open ended semi structured interviews to the leaders of the Portuguese Community schools located in the east coast of the United States and used direct observation during the visits to the schools. Three schools were located in the state of Massachusetts and the other three in the state of Rhode Island. This is a case study, multiple in nature, as according to Best and Khan (1993)

The case study is a way of organizing social data for the purpose of viewing social reality. It examines a social unit as a whole. The unit may be a person, a family, a social group, a social institution, or a community. The purpose is to understand the life cycle or an important part of the life cycle or unit. The case study probes deeply and analyzes interactions between the factors that explain present status or that influence change or growth (p. 193).

Five participants, in this research study, were women and one was a man. All community school leaders have had experience in running the Portuguese community schools ranging from 4 years of experience to 15 years. All of them hold Bachelors' degrees either from Portugal either from the United States except one which has only the Basic educational level from Portugal. The number of students per school range from 20 to 40 students. Schools survive, financially, with the money coming from tuitions and fundraising.

Results

Content analysis of the six interviews as well as results of direct observations allowed us to arrive at the following conclusions in several categories:

a) Leadership and decision making:

The school leaders interviewed practice the following type of leadership: collegiate, collaborative, democratic, voluntary and based on personal values. It affirmed one school leader: *"the leader has to perceive that the others also are individual leaders; the school is not the school of Professor X, is our school, of all of us; it is the faculty, the totality that deserves the distinction, the recognition for the work that the school has made "* (I# 1). In the same direction, another school leader said: *"What I say to the teachers it is that here all of us are in "equal foot", to have availability, what I can do, I always ask for contributions of my colleagues; no decision is taken without being articulated among us and with the parents as well "* (I# 4). Another participant, stated: *"For me it is very important that the school functions with great success, or either, that the children are learning Portuguese, is for that, that they are here that feel protected are loved and, respected; and, not only the pupils but also the teachers and the school commission "* (I# 3).

b) Qualities that a Portuguese Community School leader must have:

The participants had related that a leader of a Portuguese community school must have certain attributes such as, sense of balance, being friend of the colleagues and pupils, capacity of initiative and organization, deep knowledge of the Portuguese language and culture and sensitivity for the necessities of the educational community and of the *"parents who are the pillars of the Portuguese schools "* (I #4).

Stated the first one interviewed (I#1)*"the Director it is a landmark, the fiduciary office of the scale, guarantees the cohesion and even the appropriate behavior, everything he makes in the school"*.

c) Support from the mother land (Portugal):

The participants interviewed related that the support from Portugal is nonexistent almost null financially. It has had some collaboration with the cession of some manuals to some schools although those materials are out of our context our reality in the present time; *The Coordination, headquartered in Washington, is far away from the communities in such a way, geographic and pedagogically. It affirmed the participant (I#4): "it does not have and we are not waiting to receive checks from Portugal but it there are other supports that do not demand great investments: curriculum development, , materials thought with our opinion, people who work here in the field, and to place all in the same page."*

It has been acknowledged that the support from Portugal to these community schools had been significant many years ago but nowadays is practically nonexistent. The community schools, according to Bento (2001), had had great influence in creating special links of students and communities to the mother land. **Parents' motivations**

Portuguese families want their children to learn the language and culture of their ancestors and for that reason place their children at the community schools. Stated one participant (I# 5), *“they want their children to learn Portuguese and they don’t want that the language dies”* Another participant had stated that *“They want to see their son or daughter to speak their own language and to learn the history and culture of Portugal”* (I# 6). Parents of students appreciate the language, culture and history of Portugal and intend to pass that on to the next generation. The community schools are the instrument used to accomplish that legacy (Fishman, 1999).

Conclusion

This research study, qualitative in nature, and multiple case, intended to assess the perceptions of the directors of six Portuguese schools in the United States (east coast) in several issues related to the Portuguese language, culture and traditions as well as the communication with the Portuguese government and its representatives in the area of education in the United States; for those purposes we conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews to six directors of the Portuguese schools in the east coast of the United States.

The ethnic minority groups in the United States and in other parts of the world tend to preserve and maintain their languages, cultures and their ethnicity through various means. One of the major instruments used are the ethnic or community schools which teach to the new generations the language, the values, the culture and the traditions of their ancestors. The Portuguese communities in the United States have been maintaining these ethnic schools for more than one hundred years. The Portuguese community schools are organizations rooted in its communities that are facing, on the present time, some challenges. Portuguese schools are led by people with great service spirit, deep cultural and language identity, and, devotion to the cause of the education of the Portuguese language and culture to the Portuguese descendants. They expect from Portugal and the Coordination Cabinet more support and orientation (and not so much financial support) in the elaboration of adequate materials appropriate to the reality of the learning public (they are now teaching the third generation no more the second) as well as orientation on audiovisual materials that represent the uses and customs of the several regions of Portugal (I#3).

It’s essential that these community schools be supported and cared for because they provide an important service to the Portuguese communities and to its students; Fifteen years ago, one researcher observed the effects of these schools: Bento (2001) found that the Portuguese community schools facilitate the following for students and communities: a) acquisition of the Portuguese language and culture; b) enhanced educational opportunities; c)

stronger links with Portugal; d) passing of a legacy to future generations; and, e) development of positive language and cultural attitudes. Although the schools face many challenges nowadays, they continue to provide great benefits to the Portuguese communities and their students. Therefore, they need more attention and support from the Portuguese government. Another researcher, had recognized the need of a closer connection between the Portuguese government and Portuguese community schools: "...it is a moral obligation of Portugal to support the teaching situations of integrated education, as well as the community schools with quality teaching, therefore we need everyone to dignify the Portuguese language in the foreign countries" (Castanho, 2010, p. 61).

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