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Leaving School Too Soon

Attitudes Among the Portuguese in the Azores and Southeastern Massachusetts

Owen McGowan

Inhabitants of the Azores, a cluster of mid-Atlantic Portuguese islands, might almost be said to exist in a time warp. Life is slow-moving and many attitudes prevalent a century or more ago in the rest of the Western world remain unchanged here.

Education is a case in point. Whereas in most fast-paced modern cultures it is taken for granted that a young person must possess at least a bachelor's degree if he or she hopes for success in a business or profession, in the Azores the situation is quite different, and has been so for a long period.

A study of Portuguese immigrants to New England published by Donald Taft in 1923 indicated that the newcomers carried with them their negative attitudes towards schooling.

Portuguese children leave school almost invariably at the earliest possible moment and almost never attend high school. ...These evidences of educational backwardness are hardly greater than would be expected of children coming from homes more often illiterate than not, where education is not part of the family mores, and where more income is desired and sometimes greatly needed.¹

Twenty-six years later, in 1949, conditions were substantially unchanged. In a study of Portuguese-American speech patterns, Leo Pap wrote:

There has been a close relationship between the low literacy of the Portuguese, their rural background and their attitude toward schools. The average American...is tempted to expect greater appreciation for educational opportunities among poorly educated immigrants. The fact is, however, that most Portuguese immigrants had little craving for education and only reluctantly sent their children to school, because in the simple rural economy in which they



had grown up, they had not learned to see the economic advantage of education.²

Again in 1960, Ira Sharkansky could write of "the traditional Azorean disregard for education" as he examined the integration of Azorean immigrants into a New England mill town.³

Aware of these earlier findings, I was not surprised, when I visited Sao Miguel, the largest island of the Azores, in the course of my doctoral research in 1974 and again in 1978, to encounter similar attitudes.

In 1967 the legal school-leaving age in the Azores had been raised from 12 to 14 or until the sixth grade had been completed, which usually amounted to the same thing. In 1974, seven years later, at the time of my first visit to the islands, Sao Miguel parents were still not reconciled to the new regulation.

Although some of the other Azorean islands experienced a 1960s surge of upward mobility that saw young people turning from farm work to the teaching profession, on Sao Miguel the vast majority of rural parents felt that their children did not need more than minimal education "to take care of a house and have babies" or "to learn to feed the pigs."

Their resentment, keen in 1974, remained quite evident on my second visit in 1978. By the spring of 1985, on a third visit, although I noted more awareness of the importance of education in the poverty-stricken village of Rabo de Peixe, I found no child over age 12 in the local school.

Early school-leaving continues to be a problem among children still living in the Azores as well as among those who have emigrated to the United States. This is true despite efforts to change education policy in the Azores and the continuing emphasis on completing school in America. Seeking to discover why this situation obtains, I conducted studies in 1976, 1978 and 1985 focusing on the possibility that the parents of these students teach them attitudes towards education that result in early school-leaving.

Before summarizing my research, I think it will be helpful to describe some aspects of the Azorean educational system and the attitudes that persist within it.

Primary education on the islands begins at age 6 in the populous areas where infant schools are available, at age 7 in more rural

districts. Most schools hold two sessions daily in order to accommodate more children.

The primary school curriculum is divided into basic and preparatory cycles according to the chart below:

Basic Cycle				Preparatory Cycle		
1	2	3	4	5	6	
Phase I		Phase II				

Children in the basic cycle are normally 7 to 10 years old, while those in the preparatory cycle are 11 and 12. As noted above, the usual school-leaving age is 14, unless a child completes the basic and preparatory cycles earlier. Nor need a child remain beyond age 14 if he has not completed the cycles by that time.

The basic cycle is taught in two phases, grades 1 and 2, then grades 3 and 4. Pupils are automatically promoted to grades 2 and 4, but must pass examinations to go into grades 3 and 5.

The curriculum offers grammar, history, mathematics, geography, natural science, biology, English or French and a smattering of music, physical education, manual arts and drawing. Religion and morals are available but not mandatory.

I visited many village schools on the island of Sao Miguel, the largest of the Azores. Teachers are for the most part conscientious and appear to be regarded with real affection by their pupils, who in the more remote areas come to know them very well, since in those districts, the teachers move from first through fourth grade with their pupils. Some educators feel that this arrangement is good for little children, easing the transition from grade to grade; while others feel that teachers would gain more specialized experience by remaining at the same grade level. For their part, some parents object to the practice because they feel the teacher becomes all-important to the child, superseding the mother and father; while others cite the advantage of children being well known by the teacher.

Village teachers, however, tend to be among the less qualified applicants for teaching positions. My conversations with officials confirmed my observation that the better candidates, both from the standpoint of experience and ability, are awarded what are considered the plum positions in

the island towns, especially in Ponta Delgada, capital city of Sao Miguel.

In a culture nearly 100 percent Roman Catholic, some schools begin the day with prayer. Although the practice is not officially encouraged, crucifixes are displayed in most classrooms, and there is usually also a picture or statue of the Blessed Virgin. In at least one village school I visited, I also observed a large poster encouraging religious vocations.

Classes are fairly small, usually numbering from 25 to 27 pupils. Until 1973, boys and girls were taught separately whenever possible, but classes are now integrated, over the protests of many village parents, who cling to male/female stereotypes and would like to see girls prepared for marriage and homemaking and boys directed towards farm tasks and assumption of the modest leadership roles available in village society.

A uniform methodology obtains in primary schools. In reading, arithmetic and science classes, for instance, the teacher reads a story or explains a portion of the text, after which discussion follows, usually with the teacher asking questions and children responding. There is much rote teaching and little opportunity for creativity, nor are there provisions for gifted children.

Discipline seems not to be a problem. I noted that even the youngest pupils remained in their places and paid close attention to what was being discussed. Teachers are notably patient and seem truly interested in their charges.

Testing is rudimentary, confined to classroom assignments. Standardized testing is used mainly to determine promotion. Intelligence tests are not administered and only in the city of Ponta Delgada did there seem any appreciation of the concept of intelligence quotients.

State-operated secondary schools are located in major population centers throughout the Azores. Students from remote villages must board away from home during the school year if they wish to pursue their education, but the government is beginning to provide centers and/or financial aid for such students.

The five secondary schools on the island of Sao Miguel are typical. Each offers a six-year general course, with the equivalent of an American high school diploma awarded after the 5th year. The secondary

cycle (see chart below) adds physics and chemistry to the preparatory curriculum.

Secondary Education						College preparatory year
7	8	9	10	11	12	

Many Azorean students continue their education through 9th grade, usually completing it by age 15. No diploma is given but achievement of this level usually gives a young person preference in the working world. Secondary school is completed by 11th grade, roughly the equivalent of a American 12th grade, but a student planning a university career must complete 12th grade.

A Recent Study

It is apparent that the styles of education in the Azores and in American schools, such as those in Southeastern Massachusetts, are very different. Yet the dropout rates of Azoreans in both systems suggest that attitudes towards education seem to carry over after immigration to the United States despite a new style of education and pressures to assimilate into American culture. To examine this hypothesis, I conducted a comparative study of student attitudes towards school leaving.

The Samples

In Sao Miguel and Southeastern Massachusetts a questionnaire was administered to 184 students between ages 12 and 14. (Fourteen is the legal school-leaving age in the Azores.) All Azorean respondents lived on the island of Sao Miguel and for the most part attended a secondary school in one of the larger school districts.

They were randomly selected from class lists in the five major secondary schools: Capelas, Ponta Delgada, Povoacao, Ribiera Grande and Vila Franca.

In Southeastern Massachusetts the questionnaire, with slight revisions reflecting the change in locale, was administered to 30 boys and 30 girls, largely in Fall River, New Bedford and Taunton areas. The questionnaire was given in Portuguese to the Azorean students, while those in Southeastern Massachusetts were given a choice of Portuguese or English. In Southeastern Massachusetts, respondents were ages 14 to 16, 16

being the legal school-leaving age in Massachusetts. All were immigrants from Sao Miguel and had attended school there.

Measures Used

The questionnaire first sought information regarding the students' backgrounds and their plans with regard to immigration. Its body consisted of 13 statements, to the first 11 of which the students were asked to respond according to the following scale:

- Agree totally
- Agree
- No opinion
- Disagree
- Disagree totally

The last two statements were in multiple-choice format. The 13 statements follow:

1. When a student goes to another country he should be taught in his native language.
2. In general, students who leave school at age 16 do so because of parents.
3. In general, parents feel that education is very important for their children.
4. It is easy to find a job without a diploma from high school (without a high school education).
5. Education is more necessary for boys than for girls.
6. Schools should teach only reading and writing.

7. Everyone should be obliged to have a high school education.

8. Students who have left school in the Azores should not be obliged to return to school in the United States.

9. Most of my friends have already left or are planning to leave school at the age of 16.

10. In general, students who come to the United States do well in school.

11. If you live in the United States, it is important to learn to speak English.

12. Most students leave school at 16 because (choose one or more answers):
They do not like school.
Parents want them to earn money to help pay bills at home.
They want to earn money for themselves.

13. I am in school because (choose two answers):

- I want to get a good job.
- I like to learn.
- My parents want me in school.
- It is the law.

All statements were designed to elicit information about student attitudes toward education. However, because previous studies have shown that parental pressure is the main reason for early school leaving, four statements (2, 3, 12, & 13) measured the influence of parental attitudes.

Percent "Agreeing" or "Agreeing Totally" with statements 1-11

Question	S.E. Mass	Azores
1. Native language	51.6%	63.3%
2. Parents request	55.0%	55.0%
3. Education important to parents	65.0%	91.6%
4. Easy to get job	13.4%	21.7%
5. Boys need better schooling	16.6%	20.0%
6. Reading and writing	5.0%	11.7%
7. High school needed	65.0%	90.0%
8. Should not have to return to school	26.7%	36.7%
9. Friends leave at 16	75.0%	
Friends leave at 14		48.8%
10. Students do well in U.S.	43.3%	53.4%
11. Important to learn English	81.7%	98.3%

Table 1

Results

Item 1: In both systems more respondents agreed than disagreed that students should be taught in their native language. In discussing this topic with students it became clear that they felt it necessary to learn English while retaining an understanding of their own culture and language.

Item 3: A large percentage of students from both areas stated that parents felt that education was very important for their children. However, in discussion afterward it was apparent that the usual parental definition of education was limited to the ability to read and write.

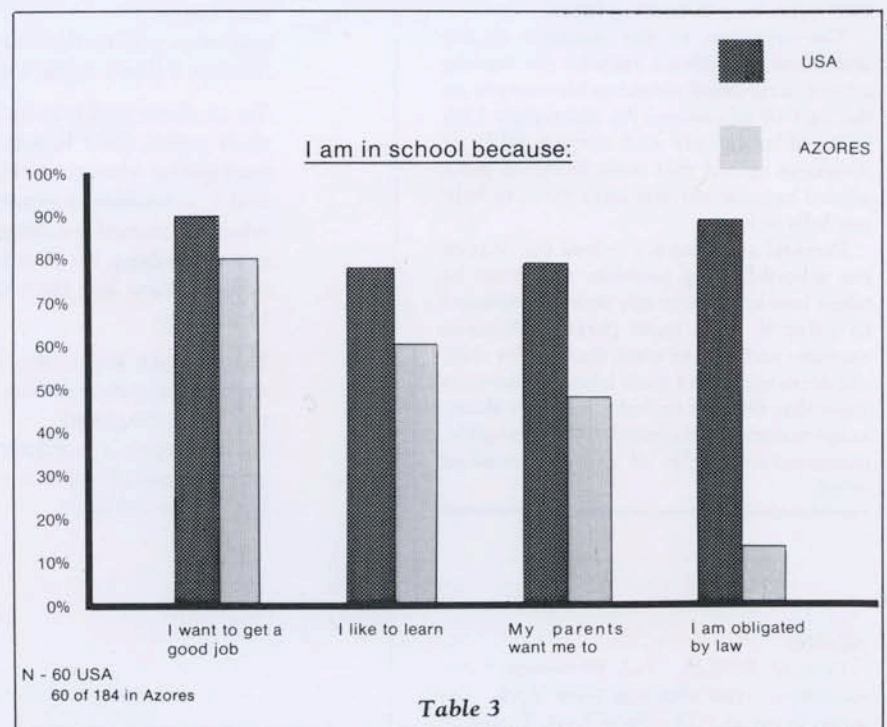
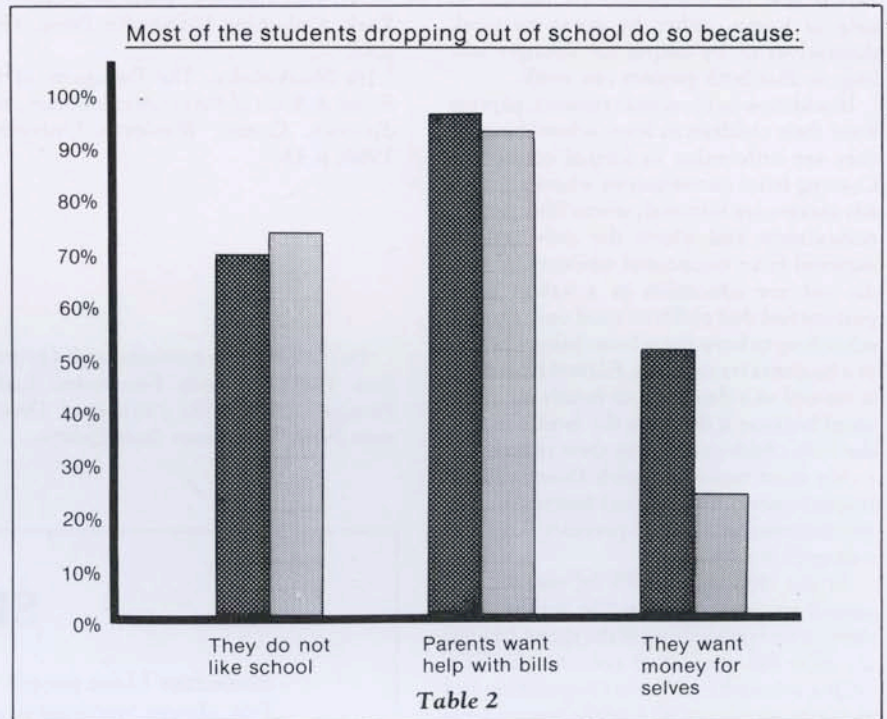
Items 4, 6: Most students felt that obtaining a good job was more easily accomplished with a high school education and only a few felt that the schools should teach only reading and writing.

Items 7, 8: Most students felt that a high school education was important and supported the concept of obligatory schooling for students coming to the United States who were over 14 and under the legal Massachusetts school-leaving age of 16.

Item 9: In Southeastern Massachusetts 75% of respondents stated that most of their friends had already left school or were planning to leave at the age of 16 and in Sao Miguel about 50% of the respondents stated that most of their friends had or would leave as soon as they reached the legal age for doing so. It is noteworthy that every Azorean respondent said that he/she would leave at age 14, while in Southeastern Massachusetts only four said that they would remain in school beyond age 16.

Items 5, 11: Almost all in both areas felt it was important to learn English and most felt it was as important for a girl to be educated as for a boy. Many other similarities between the groups emerge from a study of tables 2 and 3 below.

In 1976, when I published my doctoral dissertation, one of my major conclusions was that early school leaving among Portuguese immigrant children was largely due to parental pressure frequently dictated by economic need. I found that school authorities, community officials, students and the parents themselves were in general agreement that Portuguese immigrant children leave school early because of parental



insistence. The main reason given by parents is that the youngsters are needed to help at home, either by going to work themselves or by caring for younger siblings so that both parents can work.

In addition to economic reasons, parents want their children to leave school because they see little value in formal education. Coming from communities where cultural advantages are minimal, where libraries are nonexistent and where the only reading material is an occasional newspaper, they do not see education as a value. Most parents feel that children need only enough schooling to keep them from being cheated in a business transaction. Formal education is viewed as a deterrent to family advancement because it deprives the family unit of the help children can give their parents.

My most recent research shows a slight improvement in the school-leaving picture but nonetheless parental pressure remains a strong factor.

In the 1985 study 55% of respondents agreed to the statement: "In general, students who leave school at the age of 14 (16) do so at the request of parents." In 1976 with a somewhat different population but the same statement 90% of the respondents agreed. The decrease is indeed notable but 55% remains a disturbing figure.

The response to the multiple choice statement #12 about reasons for leaving school occasioned considerable concern on the part of educators. An alarmingly high 95% of emigrants and almost 92% of Azoreans agreed that most students leave school because parents want them to help pay bills at home.

Parental attitudes are indeed the crux of the school-leaving problem and must be taken into account in any strategy designed to solve it. Like most parents, Azorean mothers and fathers want the best for their children; educators must labor to convince them that the best includes not only short-range material goals but also the intangible, incomparable prize of a well-furnished mind.

1969 (originally published 1923), p. 347.

² Leo Pap, *Portuguese American Speech*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1949, p.16.

³ Ira Sharkansky, *The Portuguese of Fall River: A Study of Ethnic Acculturation*, Middletown, Conn., Wesleyan University, 1960, p.43.

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SINNER

Somedays I love people so much
I do almost anything to stay with them.
They can say what they want
and I agree
and even add to their arguments
in ways I don't believe at all.

To sit there and just look at them --
their noses, their hands, their eyes
expressing what they will
and I, a devotee, a penitent
who has sinned by disagreeing with them
on other days, by dismissing what they stood for
when I knew less than they
but better.

Home again and alone, I've confessed
my lust, my inattention
to truth, my greed
for company, my adoration
of their god. Forgiven
I have sinned again.

Fran Quinn

NOTES

¹ Donald R. Taft, *Two Portuguese Communities in New England*. New York, The Arno Press and The New York Times, c.