

CHAPTER 7 CASE STUDIES

MANUEL GOMES

It's kind of scary at first, especially if you don't know the language.

The first thing you would notice about Manuel was that he was constantly on the move, as if the engine had started and he was ready to shift to fourth without moving through the other gears. Of slight stature and with a somewhat rumpled look, Manuel had an infectious and lively sense of humor and a generally positive attitude about life.

Manuel Gomes¹ had emigrated to Boston with his family from Cape Verde when he was 11 years old. When he was first interviewed, Manuel was 19 years old and was to graduate from high school that year. In many urban high schools, 19 is no longer a late age to graduate. In fact, many immigrant students graduate quite late. Immigrant and refugee students are more likely to be retained in-grade, to be inappropriately placed in special education, and to be at risk for being placed in low academic tracks on the basis of language differences or slow academic progress. That Manuel was soon to graduate from high school is noteworthy because the dropout rate for foreign-born students is close to 70 percent.²

Even before gaining its independence from Portugal in 1975, Cape Verde, an archipelago of ten large and several smaller islands off the West Coast of Africa, had a huge out-migration of its population. Official documents estimate that close to 180,000 Cape Verdeans emigrated voluntarily between 1970 and 1973, some 20,000 to the United States alone. The process of emigration had begun with the arrival of North American whaling boats from New England in the late 17th century. By the end of the 19th century, there was already a sizable Cape Verdean community in Massachusetts.

Currently, well over twice as many Cape Verdeans reside abroad than live at home. The 325,000 who live in the United States (about equal to the number who reside on the islands) represent the largest Cape Verdean community outside of Cape Verde.³

Having suffered from more than 400 years of colonial neglect under Portugal, Cape Verde was left in poor economic and social condition. For example, the literacy rate in 1981 was 14 percent, a dramatic indication of the lack of educational opportunities available to the majority of the people. Since independence, the situation improved remarkably, and the literacy rate in 1987 was more than 57 percent.⁴ Although the official language of the islands is Portuguese, the lingua franca is Crioulo, an Afro-Portuguese Creole.

Most Cape Verdeans in the United States live in New England, primarily in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Manuel's family, like most, came to the United States for economic reasons. Although formerly farmers in Cape Verde, they quickly settled into the urban environment. Manuel's father found a job cleaning offices downtown at night, while his mother stayed home to take care of their many children. They came to Boston, which has a large Cape Verdean community, and they lived in a three-decker home with apartments occupied by other members of the large family. The neighborhood, once a working-class Irish community, had become multiracial, with a big Catholic church close by and Vietnamese and Cape Verdean restaurants up the street. The older homes, the din on the street, and the crowding all created to the sense of an aging but still vibrant urban community.

Manuel was the youngest of 11 children, and he would be the first in his family to graduate from high school. He had been in a bilingual program for several years after arriving in Boston. The language of instruction in the program was Crioulo. The State Assembly of Massachusetts passed legislation in 1977 distinguishing Crioulo as a language separate from Portuguese and required that Crioulo-speaking students be placed in separate programs from those for Portuguese-speaking students. The result was a scramble to find Crioulo-speaking teachers and aides and to develop appropriate materials, because few or none existed. The rationale for placing Cape Verdean students in a separate program, notwithstanding the administrative problems it could create, was pedagogically sound because students should be taught in the language they speak and understand, not in their second or third language.

A benefit of separating the program was that a strong sense of community among teachers, students, and parents developed. Some of the teachers and other staff in the program were intimately involved in the life of the community, and the separation that often exists between school and home, especially for immigrant children, was alleviated. Manuel's participation in the bilingual program proved to be decisive in his education because it allowed a less traumatic transition to the English language and U.S. culture. Nevertheless, he constantly referred to how hard it had been to "fit in," both in school and in society in general.

Boston, like most big cities in the United States, is a highly diverse metropolitan area. It is not unusual to walk from street to street and hear languages from all over the world, smell the foods of different continents, and hear the music of a wide variety of cultures. In spite of this diversity, and perhaps in part because of it, the city is not without its tensions, including diverse economic vested interests and interethnic

hostility. These tensions are evident in many arenas, including the schools. The attendant problems of segregation, with a long and tumultuous history in the city, are still apparent. The city's schools, for example, have experienced a vast decrease in the percentage of White and middle-class students since court-ordered desegregation and, although once highly regarded, have lost both resources and prestige.

Manuel's plans for the future were sketchy, but when interviewed, he was working in a downtown hotel and wanted to use the accounting skills he learned in high school to find a job at a bank. His positive experience in a theater class as a sophomore, along with his great enthusiasm and expressiveness, also sparked a desire to continue in the acting field. He had also talked of continuing his education by attending a community college.

Manuel was excited and proud of graduating from high school but reflected on the pain and fear of immigration. This is the major theme that characterized Manuel's experiences, both as a student and as an immigrant to this society. The role reversals within his family is another central theme that emerged. Finally, the *mediating role of bilingual education* in his success as a student was evident. Each of these themes is further explored in the following sections.

The Pain and Fear of Immigration

We have a different way of living in Cape Verde than in America. Our culture is totally different, so we have to start a different way of living in America. It's kind of confusing when you come to America, you know.

I liked going to school in Cape Verde, you know, 'cause you know everybody and you have all your friends there. In our country, we treat people different. There's no crime. You don't have to worry about people jumping you, taking your money, or walking at night by yourself. There's no fear for that, you know. In Cape Verde, you don't have to worry about something happening to your child, or you don't have to worry about using drugs.

My father and mother used to work on plantations. We used to grow potatoes; we used to grow corn; we used to grow beans and stuff like that. We had a lot of land. Every season, we farmed. We had cows. Me and my brother used to feed the cows and take them to walk and give them water to drink and stuff like that. We used to sell our milk to rich folks, and I used to deliver [it]. It was kinda fun. These rich people, every time I'd go there, they'd feed me, which I liked very much [*laughs*]. They used to give me cake and stuff like that, cookies. I liked that. We'd have a lot of crops and we'd give some away to poor people, those that don't have any. We had a lot of friends and stuff like that.

When we came to America, it was totally different.

In Cape Verde, they have this rumor that it's easier to make a living up here. So everybody wants to come up here. They have this rumor that once you get here, you find money all around you, you know. So, when you're, like, coming up here, they make a big commotion out of it: "Oh, you're going to America, rich country", and stuff like that. So they think once you come here, you got it made . . . you're rich. People in our country actually think that we're rich here, that we are filthy rich, that money surrounds us—we eat money!

I was disappointed in a lot of ways [when we came here], especially with the crime, especially with the kids. They don't respect each other; they don't respect their parents. It's very different here. It's very tough.

I was afraid. I had people jumping me a few times, trying to take my wallet and stuff like that. It's a scary situation. It didn't really bother me, but like what got to me, is, if they try to start a fight

with you, you go to tell, like, a teacher, they couldn't do nothing about it. That's what got to me, you know?

It was a few students. I know this kid, this big Black kid. He tried to fight me, like, three times. Then I had a brother that was going to the same middle school, so he had a fight with my brother, my big brother. After that, it calmed down a little bit, you know?

Kids might try to stab you if you probably step on them. That happened to me once. I stepped on this kid's sneaker once, and he tried to fight me. He said, "What you doing?" I said that I'm sorry and he said, "That's not enough," and he tried to punch me. He didn't, but he was very furious.

You gotta get used to it. That's why a lot of Cape Verdean kids, when they get here, they change. They become violent, like some of the kids in America. So, it's sad. It's very hard for the parents. The parents are not used to that, and it's happening [to] a lot with parents in our neighborhood. It's happening to our family. I have a cousin, and his mother tried to commit suicide because her son was dealing drugs and hanging with the wrong crowd, with all these hoods. The son almost died because someone beat him up so bad. And it's sad, you know?

They try to be strict about it, you know. But with kids, they try to copy kids that were born here. They try to be like them. They try to go out and do the stuff that *they're* doing. It's like teen pressure, you know? So, it's very hard, you know? You want to fit in. You like to fit in with the crowd. If you hang with the wrong crowd, you're going to be in big trouble. You just change . . . and you're going to be a person that you don't want to be. You'll probably end up in jail.

I been here eight years, and I never hang with the wrong crowd. I've never used drugs in my life. I've never *smelled* cigarettes. So, I really hate when I see other kids doing it. It's sad when you see especially your friends doing it. So I had to say, "Go away. I don't want that life." So I had to separate from them. I had a hard time finding friends that wasn't doing that stuff like they were doing. It's very hard if you hate what your friends are doing.

Start learning the language was hard for me. And then start making friends, because you gotta start making new friends. When American students see you, it's kinda hard [to] get along with them when you have a different culture, a different way of dressing and stuff like that. So kids really look at you and laugh, you know, at the beginning.

It was difficult like when you see a girl at school that you like. It's kind of difficult to express yourself and tell her the way you feel about her, you know? When you don't even know the language, it's kind of hard. I had a hard time. It's kind of scary at first, especially if you don't know the language and, like, if you don't have friends there. Some people are slow to learn the language and some just catch it up easy. It wasn't easy for me . . . like, the pronunciation of the words and stuff like that. Like, in Portuguese and in English, they're different. It's kinda hard, you know?

I don't think I want to be an American citizen. To tell you the truth, I don't like America at all. [Well], I *like* it, but I don't like the lifestyles. It's different from my point of view. What I'm thinking of doing is work in America for 10 years and go back to my country, because America's a violent country. It's dangerous with crime, with drugs.

Role Reversals Within the Family

I took [my father] to the hospital. Then I found out that he had cancer. I didn't wanna tell him. The doctor told me that he had cancer. I didn't wanna tell him because he hates to get sick and he hates to die! He hates to die. If you tell him he's gonna die, he'll kill you before he dies!

This happened when I was in school, so I was missing school a lot. I was the only one that was able to understand the language and stuff like that. It actually got to the point that I had to tell him. It was, like, sad when I had to tell him because it's very hard to tell him that he had cancer.

Because they don't speak English, I have to go places with them to translate and stuff like that. So I'm usually busy. We have a big family, you know. I have to help them out.

If I felt like I had support from my family, if they only knew the language. . . . If they were educated, I could make it big, you see what I'm saying? I would've had a better opportunity, a better chance.

I'm very happy about [graduating]. It means a lot to me. It means that I did something that I'm very proud [of]. It feels good, you know? And I'd really like to continue in my education because, you know, I'm the first one. And I want to be successful with my life. I just wanted to help them, you know? I wanted to be the one to help them. They didn't support me, but I wanted to support them.

My mother's proud of me. My father is too. It was tough for me when I found out that my father had cancer because, you know, I really wanted to graduate. I just want to show him that I can be somebody, you know? I actually did this, try to graduate from high school, for him, you know?

Bilingual Education as Linguistic and Cultural Mediator

A Cape Verdean person is usually, he looks like he's a nice person, educated, you know? Not all of them, but like 70 percent of Cape Verdeans, they look educated. They're not violent. You can tell someone is Cape Verdean . . . if he starts pointing at you. That's a sign that he's Cape Verdean automatic. If he starts staring at you, he's Cape Verdean. We have problems when we look at American people. They might think we are talking about them and stuff like that, so we have to change that behavior. We have to get used to not pointing at people and not looking at them very much, because American people are not used to people staring at them.

What we do in our country, we *observe* people. It don't mean nothing to us Cape Verdeans. It's just normal. But if we do it to an American person, it makes that American person nervous, I guess, and he would ask you, "What are you looking at?" or "Why are you looking at me?" and start questioning and probably start trouble with you.

It's normal to us. That's why other people got to understand that not everybody has the same culture; not everybody is the same. So some people don't understand.

Like a Spanish [Hispanic] person, what he usually do, they use their body in a different way. With [Hispanic people], what they do, they point with their lips. They go [*demonstrates puckering of the lips*]. So, that's different. Other cultures, they might use their head; they might use their eyebrows.

It's good to understand other people's culture from different countries. America is made up of different countries, and we all should know a little bit about each one's cultures.

I think [teachers] could help students, try to influence them . . . that they can do whatever they want to do, that they can be whatever they want to be, that they got opportunities out there. Most schools don't encourage kids to be all they can be.

What they need to do is try to know the student before they influence him. If you don't know a student, there's no way to influence him. If you don't know his background, there's no way you are going to get in touch with him. There's no way you're going to influence him if you don't know where he's been.

You cannot forget about [your culture], you know? It's part of you. You can't forget something like that. . . . You gotta know who you are. You cannot deny your country and say "I'm an American; I'm not Cape Verdean." That's something that a lot of kids do when they come to America. They change their names. Say you're Carlos—they say, "I'm Carl." They wanna be American; they're not Cape Verdean. That's wrong. They're fooling themselves.

I identify myself as Cape Verdean. I'm Cape Verdean. I cannot be an American because I'm not an American. That's it.

[Describe yourself as a student] I'm not a genius [laughing]! [But] I know that I can do whatever I want to do in life. Whatever I want to do, I know I could make it. I believe that strongly.

◆◆◆ Commentary

Manuel was eloquent in expressing his concerns as an immigrant and student, concerns related to his academic success and his motivation for graduating and possibly continuing his education. But, behind the sometimes forced enthusiasm he displayed, Manuel's voice was also tinged with sadness at what might have been. His expression changed when talking about his early experiences in Cape Verde. In spite of the obviously difficult circumstances of going to school—where he was in a crowded, one-room schoolhouse with many other students of all ages and where corporal punishment was a common practice—over the years, Manuel had idealized his experiences there. He seemed to have forgotten the harsh life he had in Cape Verde, although he did admit that he did not like farming. In spite of the difficulties, life there was, at least when he reflected on it years later, easier and more familiar. Manuel often contrasted the crime and violence in the United States with his romanticized memories of a bucolic childhood in Cape Verde.

With obvious pain, Manuel described what it was like being perceived as different by his peers when he first arrived in the United States. For example, other kids would call him names ("foreigner" and stuff like that) and ridicule him ("It really gets to a student when other students make fun"). The situation had changed after he reached high school, but those first years were indelibly etched in his memory.

The distress caused by immigration is multifaceted. Not only do immigrants leave behind a country that is loved and an existence that is at least familiar, if not comfortable, but they also leave a language and culture that can never find full expression in their adopted country. In addition, they are coming into a situation that, although it may offer many exciting possibilities, nonetheless is often frightening and new. Manuel was ambivalent about his experience in the United States.

Several of the painful incidents described by Manuel focus on interethnic rivalries and violence. This situation is a guarded secret, especially at many urban schools. School officials, perhaps fearful of being labeled racists, are reluctant to confront the prejudicial behaviors and actions of one group of students toward another, whether they involve conflicts between Black and White students or between different students of color, yet the issue is real and is becoming more apparent all the time. Racial stereotypes and epithets are commonplace, voiced by even the most seemingly sensitive students. For example, Manuel's comment about a "big Black kid" reinforces the negative stereotype of African American as frightening and violent.

Many immigrant children experience role reversals with their parents as a result of their parents' lack of English fluency as well as their lack of knowledge of U.S. customs. Based on their extensive studies of immigrant children, Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut explain: "This role reversal occurs when children's acculturation has moved so far ahead of their parents' that key family decisions become dependent on the children's knowledge."⁵ Manuel had the role of "language broker" in his family

because his was the public face that interacted with the greater community. Manuel's role as translator was especially prominent when his father developed cancer a few years before. Because his parents spoke little English, Manuel was placed in the extraordinary position of being the one to tell him that he had cancer. This experience had a great impact on Manuel, especially because the cancer was considered terminal. He also had to tell his father that he needed an operation, not an easy task given his father's memories of Cape Verde, where surgery was used only as a last resort and where, according to Manuel, the chances of recovery were slim. Although his father recovered from the cancer against all the odds, the experience left Manuel shaken. His grades also suffered during that period.

Many immigrant students play the role of family interpreter and arbiter, resulting in the transfer of authority and status from parents to children, which in turn can lead to further conflicts at home. In addition, teachers not accustomed to this kind of adult responsibility often interpret students' absences and lateness as a sign that their parents do not care about education or that the students are irresponsible. Frequently, just the opposite is true. Immigrant parents are not oblivious to the benefits of education, but they often need support in attending to their basic needs. Here is where the school, as an advocate of children and their families, can come in. The school can help by finding needed services or by helping parents devise ways to attend to family needs without keeping their children out of school.

There may also be different perceptions of family involvement among immigrant parents. Manuel's parents, for example, rarely visited his school. This is not surprising: Parent involvement in schools in most countries is minimal because, in these countries, the feeling is that, after children begin school, it is the school's responsibility to educate them. The parents, in essence, hand over their children to the school, trusting that the school will educate them. To jump to the conclusion that these parents do not care about education is to miss the mark. On the contrary, most economically oppressed parents see the role of education as extremely important and stress this to their children constantly.

By the time he got to high school, Manuel had learned enough English to be able to speak up. He said that the bilingual program at the high school provided a safe environment for him and other Cape Verdean students. It was a rather large program, much larger than the one at the middle school, and most of the teachers and some of the other staff were Cape Verdean as well. Cape Verdean students in the city had a strong identification with this high school and looked forward to attending it. In fact, it was always one of the more constructive and distinguishing characteristics of this particular urban school. That the bilingual program acted as a linguistic and cultural mediator was evident in many of Manuel's comments. For example, he was extremely perceptive about culture and its manifestations. This perceptiveness is a common by-product of bilingual programs, in which culture and language become a natural aspect of the curriculum. The description of how his Latino classmates use their lips to point rather than their fingers demonstrates Manuel's sensitivity and sophistication in understanding nonverbal cues. Many teachers, even those who work with students from different cultures, fail to pick up these sometimes subtle cues.

Manuel spoke fondly of his experiences with the teachers and students in the program. He said that it was "more comfortable" for him there. The program also helped

mediate his experiences in the rest of the school and in his community in general. For example, he remembered the theater workshop that he took as a sophomore (a project that was unfortunately eliminated shortly thereafter). Although it was not part of the bilingual program and all the skits were in English, it focused on issues that were relevant to immigrant and language-minority students. Manuel recalled with great enthusiasm a monologue he did about a student going to a new school, a situation he could identify with because it was so reminiscent of his own experiences.

The significance of the bilingual program in Manuel's life cannot be overemphasized, and this has been true for many Cape Verdean and other language-minority students in Massachusetts. It is especially ironic, then, that Massachusetts became one of the latest casualties in the national attacks against bilingual education. Massachusetts, the first state to pass legislation mandating bilingual education in 1971, became one of the states to eliminate it in 2002. The bilingual program helped Manuel retain his language and culture and, with it, his ties to his family and community. It gave him something to "hold onto." Even this kind of program, however, is not enough if it is not part of a larger whole that affirms the diversity of all within it. It and other bilingual programs like it become tiny islands in a sea of homogeneity and pressure to conform.

One of the ways Manuel dealt with finding a place to fit in was by joining and becoming very active in a fundamentalist Christian church. As Manuel so eloquently expressed it, "That's the place I belong to. I fit there. I felt that God had moved there. Jesus got hold of me. He said, 'Calm down!'" A number of issues were apparently influential in leading Manuel to this particular church. It was about this time that his father developed cancer and Manuel was immersed in his role as "the man of the family." It was also around the time that he decided to drop some of his friends (as he said, "It's very hard if you hate what your friends are doing"). In looking for something to keep him on track, as the bilingual program and other cultural supports had done previously, he looked toward the community. Although Manuel had been raised a Catholic, the local Catholic church was completely unappealing to him. This, too, became an issue of "fitting in." Manuel said that the Catholic church had made few accommodations to its newest members, many of whom were immigrants who spoke little or no English. His new church, however, seems to have gone to great lengths to welcome Cape Verdeans, and Manuel felt he had finally found a place to fit in.

The tension of fitting in was well articulated by Manuel when he pitted being Cape Verdean against being American. He did not perceive the possibility that he could be *both* Cape Verdean *and* American as an option. That is, if he identified with being American, he felt he was abandoning his culture and country; on the other hand, if he chose to remain Cape Verdean, his possibilities in this society might be limited. These are hard choices for young people to make and are part of the pain of living in a culture that has a rigid definition of "American."

◆◆◆ Reflect on This Case Study

1. Considering some of the ways in which Manuel's experiences as an immigrant were frightening and painful, what can teachers and schools do to help?
2. Why do you think Manuel idealized his former life on the Cape Verde Islands?

3. What can account for Manuel's highly developed sensitivity to cultural differences? What can teachers and schools learn from this?
4. Given Manuel's many absences from school during his father's illness, it is probable that school authorities and teachers assumed that his family was wrong in keeping him home to attend to family business. What do you think? What could the school have done to accommodate his family's needs?
5. Why was it important for Manuel to graduate "for" his father?
6. How do you think the bilingual program acted as a linguistic and cultural mediator for Manuel? What can teachers in nonbilingual programs learn from this?
7. Do you understand why Manuel felt reluctant to identify himself as "American"? How would you approach this issue if he was one of your students?