

Community Projects for Rural Villagers: Health and Occupational Training

In the early 1960s, the International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto declared that the earlier urban and educated newcomers from Europe had effectively integrated – a sure sign being their move from the city’s poorer immigrant districts to modestly affluent suburbs – and turned their sights on the Southern Europeans of rural origins deemed far less equipped to adapt to modern urban life. The Institute carried out two “special” community projects, the first of which explored ways of improving these immigrants’ access to health and welfare services, and the second an educational project that focused on vocational training. There were also several pilot projects related to vocational education and trade-training programs. Lacking formal education, these low-skilled immigrants worked and lived in grim conditions, and the Institute’s acknowledgment of this reality speaks to the multifaceted character of its brand of pluralism. Not confined solely to sponsoring organized recreational activities ([chapter 7](#)) or folk festivals (part 4), the Institute also addressed economic inequities and sought to improve the material and emotional quality of life of economically vulnerable immigrants. Put another way, the Institute’s multi-layered pluralist agenda included an economic and labour reform component that was wholly lacking in the version of multiculturalism that became official policy in Canada in 1971. In practice, however, efforts to improve immigrant access to health and welfare resources and trade-training programs produced mixed results.

Canadian social worker Edith Ferguson directed both of the “special” community projects. Both projects were run out of an extension office that was separate from the main Institute building and referred to as the Branch Office. Both projects recruited field staff from the targeted immigrant communities, but differed in focus, scope, and gender profile. The health project involved Italians and Portuguese in Toronto’s west end and an all-female staff who dealt mainly with mothers. Focused on English instruction and skills-upgrading, the educational project included Greeks as well as Italians and Portuguese and operated

on a wider geographical scale. While this project involved mainly male staff and male workers, some of the related pilot projects (specifically the industrial sewing and hairdressing programs) included women counsellors, teachers, and workers. The records generated by the two community projects also differed in quality. Describing the approach as one of “meeting the immigrants at the point of need,” Ferguson attributed the successes mainly to the efficacy with which her fieldworkers – who, once again, were not professional social workers but mostly middle-class urban immigrants receiving on-the-job training – fulfilled their role as interpreters and intermediaries.¹ A focus on their front-line activities offers a useful yardstick by which to assess these efforts. Just how effectively did they negotiate interactions between the immigrants and community service providers? How did their efforts compare with those of the main Institute’s permanent counsellors who ran the pilot projects? How does the Institute’s labour-oriented multicultural activism compare with approaches lauded by today’s experts?

This chapter explores the Toronto Institute’s efforts to address what it saw as the special needs of a growing number of “rural villagers” who hailed from Southern Italy, the Peloponnese region of Southern Greece and Western Macedonia, and the Azorean Islands located far off the coast of continental Portugal. It addresses two major migration-related themes: immigrant health,² particularly that of children,³ and vocational training for adult immigrant workers.⁴ Not meant to challenge the “vertical mosaic,” the projects reflected instead a shared belief among liberal social welfare personnel, adult education advocates, and immigrant activists that well-placed reforms can create a greater equality of opportunity in a competitive democratic society.⁵ Without ignoring the limitations of creating an immigrant-specific field of health and welfare services and vocational training – such as possible ghettoization in underfunded sectors and preparation for second-class citizenship – I argue that these (uneven) efforts demonstrate the value of a community-based pluralist approach to the provision of social services and educational programs for immigrants. As regards race, these activities predated the significant presence of the post-1967 racialized immigrants. Still, the Institute’s efforts to assist Southern Europeans, often ascribed an inferior, or in-between, racial status as a “dark” people with “strange” customs, and “different living habits ... mental attitudes and ... goals,” through the recruitment of front-line staff from the immigrant communities reflected an inclusive principle that might have been productively applied to the later arriving racialized immigrants.⁶

A Champion of Immigrants?

First hired by the Institute in 1962, Edith Ferguson was a veteran social worker with experience in social welfare administration. A Welsh Canadian

professional woman who, like many other female social work leaders, never married, Ferguson had taught in a one-room schoolhouse before attending Queen's University in the late 1920s. After earning a Bachelor of Arts in English and History in 1931, she earned a teaching certificate and taught high school before enrolling in the University of Toronto's School of Social Work. In Windsor and then Toronto, she worked with a number of social welfare organizations during the 1940s, including the Toronto Children's Aid Society (CAS). At the end of the Second World War, Ferguson, like many Canadian social service personnel, worked overseas with UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Association), first in France and then as part of a team in Germany supervising activities in the displaced persons (DP) camps.⁷

When asked by a reporter how she became "a champion of immigrants," Ferguson referred to her identity as a bilingual Canadian who grew up speaking English and Welsh in the small town of Dunvegan, Ontario, and to her work with refugees in Europe and North America.⁸ Upon returning to Canada from Europe in 1947, she joined the liberal voices calling for a more open-door immigration policy. In the popular news magazine *Saturday Night*, she criticized the high rates of rejection in the recruitment of displaced persons for Canadian industry and called for a more generous refugee policy based on humanitarian grounds. As a signatory to the UN resolution in support of refugee resettlement, Canada, she argued, was obliged to resettle older and sick refugees, including Holocaust survivors and those who contracted TB in the DP camps.⁹

Shortly after returning home, Ferguson spent a year in New York City, where she earned a master's degree in adult education and "rubbed shoulders with immigrants in New York settlements."¹⁰ Back in Canada, she worked for Ontario Radio Forum, a progressive radio program that promoted adult education and social activism among rural families, later joining the staff of the Canadian Association of Adult Education, a progressive organization that also advocated for immigrant rights. Having spent most of the 1950s with the Windsor Community Welfare Council, Ferguson returned to Toronto in 1960, where she soon joined the staff of the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto (SPC). She left the SPC, an Institute co-sponsor, to work with the Institute on what became the first of two contracts, the second of which ended in 1966.¹¹ Both sympathetic to immigrants and well-versed in the regulatory features and liberal aspirations of her profession, Ferguson's work with the Institute was also shaped by the paradoxical character of liberal pluralism.

With private grants secured from a few charitable foundations and public funds from the federal and provincial departments of immigration and citizenship, both Branch community projects had a modest but independent budget of about \$20,000. (The Institute could not have afforded to finance the projects out of its own operating budget.) The largest concentrations of the three targeted groups, which together comprised a majority of the estimated 255,000

to 265,000 Southern Europeans in mid-1960s Metropolitan Toronto, were in the city's historically important reception areas in the west and east ends, and, in the case of the numerically dominant Italians, in some suburbs as well.¹² As project director, Ferguson enjoyed some autonomy, but also reported to an advisory committee that included representatives from the Institute board. The advisory committee for the health project also included representatives from various social agencies, the Public Welfare Department, the Toronto Board of Education's Child Adjustment Service (a counselling service for students), and the University of Toronto's School of Social Work. The education advisory committee included Joseph Carraro, the progressive immigrant priest (who later left the church) behind COSTI (Centro Organizzativo Scuole Tecniche Italiane, est. 1962), an Italian community organization whose initial mandate to help Italian tradesmen meet Canadian (Ontario) certification requirements expanded into a broader multi-ethnic immigrant job-training program.¹³ The other consultants included senior personnel with the provincially funded industrial training programs and trade institutes in Toronto and with the federal and provincial departments of labour.

Health and Welfare Project, 1962–4

The goal of the first Branch project was to explore ways of reducing an identified "gap" between the available health services and their underutilization by disadvantaged immigrants. Working out of an extension office that changed location a few times, the Branch staff, following an initial misstep, chose a neighbourhood not far from the main Institute with many Italians and Portuguese.¹⁴ Once again, the Institute hired a multilingual staff of educated immigrant women thought to possess the appropriate insight and judgment and trained them on the job. The strategy did not eliminate class and other distinctions between staff and clients, so the women expected to break through the "wall of suspicion" and build trust with immigrants leery of "outsiders" still faced a daunting challenge.¹⁵ Still, given the hostility with which many "Anglo" personnel in the city's government departments and agencies treated the Italian and Portuguese clients they dismissed as "backward" and "stubborn," the use of immigrant female fieldworkers represented a progressive measure.¹⁶

The first fieldworker hired was Maria Cosso, a Northern Italian who spoke French as well as English and Italian. A graduate of the University of Genoa's teacher-training program, she had also dabbled in business and journalism. Marucia Montgomery, a university-educated Brazilian from Rio de Janeiro (who appears to have married a Canadian), became the Portuguese-speaking worker after the search failed to produce an applicant from Portugal. Aware of the division between Portuguese immigrants who supported the Salazar regime and opponents of the dictatorship, Ferguson hoped both sides would regard

Montgomery, whom she felt had the cultural sensitivities required, as politically neutral and trustworthy. Because of the influx of Italian clients, in the project's second year the Institute hired June Zelonka, a recent graduate of the University of Toronto's bachelor's program in psychology and a multilingual Polish refugee whose languages included Italian.¹⁷

Along with Ferguson, who initially combined front-line interviews with administrative duties, Branch staff advertised their services in the local shops and churches, and conducted home and school visits. Ultimately, they interacted with a few thousand immigrants and accompanied dozens of them to clinics and social welfare offices. Published as *Newcomers in Transition*, Ferguson's final report concluded that the rural immigrants' "special cultural characteristics" largely accounted for their underuse of the adequate if not generous existing social services.

Ferguson acknowledged that these immigrants' "special cultural characteristics" were the product of historical, material, and social factors, but she also traded in stereotypes of rural (primitive) and urban (modern) people. As she explained, an understandable wish to improve a low standard of living "catapulted" many thousands of impoverished peasants from an "underdeveloped agrarian society" and frozen "rural folk society" based on face-to-face relations into a terribly different "industrialized city" where they occupied "the bottom of the economic scale." Further marginalized by language, customs, and physical appearance ("short, with dark complexions, black hair and dark eyes"), these mainly family-sponsored immigrants were turning entire city districts into self-enclosed communities. Just as centuries-old poverty and suspicion of outside authorities explained why in Italy and Portugal they avoided urban doctors and dentists unless in extreme pain, and city hospitals unless critically ill or needing surgery, they were reluctant to tap even free services in Toronto or interact with Canadian personnel in whose presence they felt like country bumpkins. Ferguson understood the preoccupation among former land-hungry peasants with achieving financial security through multiple-family home-ownership strategies that involved large and risky mortgages. But she also portrayed the parents as so cut off from modernity that they did not even think to ask about health services for their children.¹⁸

Ferguson noted that language was the single greatest disincentive to accessing resources, hence all the staff time spent on translating documents and interpretation. But in issuing a call to "overhaul" the approach taken by Canadian personnel towards these immigrants, she combined insight, stereotype, and contradiction. Arguing that rural villagers could not possibly start "from the same place" as urban immigrants because of their backwardness, she thought it wrong-headed to criticize them for "living in colonies" when at home they lived in small-scale villages, or for not allowing their children to go on summer camping trips organized by the "Y" when "they believe that good parents keep



Institute staff may have winced at the sight of this “peasant-looking” woman carrying a burlap bag of produce (onions?) on her head, but her smile suggests she took pride in her capacity for physically demanding labour. Kensington Market, 22 December 1967. York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, Toronto Telegram fonds, ASC12872.

their children close to home.”¹⁹ She preferred an approach that encouraged rather than dictated their transition into modern urban citizens. Also willing to admonish Canadians, she argued, in the immigrants’ defence, that, while initially “much more helpless” than people realized, most of them needed well-placed support only temporarily as they adjusted to city life and became more self-sufficient.²⁰

Immigrant Children’s Health

Ferguson’s success in negotiating an arrangement with Toronto’s public and Roman Catholic school boards owed much to the fact that the schools were receiving an escalating number of immigrant children whose parents’ poor English, long working hours, and distrust of outsiders made communication with them difficult. The influx of Italian and Portuguese students meant overcrowded classrooms in aging buildings that lacked modern facilities. The building of some new public schools took some pressure off the older ones. As for



Institute staff would have approved of these children eating slices of fruit (melon?) during Greek Orthodox Easter celebrations on “the Danforth” in Toronto’s east end “Greektown,” 10 April 1965. Note the boy’s hockey jacket and the girl’s fancy dress and bow. York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections, Toronto Telegram fonds, ASC34431.

the (publicly funded) Catholic schools, the provincial government’s decision in the 1960s to provide grants to the long under-resourced separate schools allowed them to accept many more Eastern as well as Southern European Catholic pupils.²¹ Ill-equipped to deal with the health challenges posed by a huge spike in Italian and Portuguese students, the overcrowded schools in the west end welcomed the Institute’s project.

Shortly after Ferguson and Cosso visited some school principals in the project’s early weeks to inform them of their health project, Branch staff began receiving requests from the local schools for interpreters to help them

communicate with the parents of sick or (medically) neglected children. The Institute then signed a formal agreement with the Toronto Board of Education and its Catholic equivalent to act as intermediaries between the schools and the parents. The agreement covered a dozen elementary schools (kindergarten to Grade 8). Individual teachers or the school nurse might initiate the process, but, with the principal's approval, the school nurse usually contacted the Institute's Branch Office to request assistance. Well aware of the problem of relying on children (their students) to act as interpreters in their dealings with the parents, the school principals and nurses welcomed the project's multilingual female staff. The schools most affected particularly by the incoming Italians were the heaviest users of the service, but requests came from all participating schools.²²

The Branch staff's closer relationship with the schools meant working more closely with public health nurses. Fieldworkers did plenty of one-off interpreting for visiting public health nurses, relaying information about diagnoses, clinic appointments, or baby formula over the phone, or visiting a hospital to explain a procedure to a patient. It also became increasingly common for them to accompany public health nurses conducting afternoon visits, and to conduct evening visits (as more women than expected were in the workforce) or follow-up visits on their own.²³ The arrangement was mutually beneficial: the overloaded nurses appreciated the assistance and the staff considered the nurse a direct route into an immigrant household, where the bigger picture might be revealed.²⁴

The main Institute's "permanent" counsellors also handled cases that were primarily or, far more commonly, partially about health and welfare issues. Together, such cases shed light on the everyday challenges faced by newly arrived adults coping with illness, their own and/or that of others, while dealing with other challenges. Those involving Southern Europeans, for example, confirm what others have found for Toronto's working Italian and Portuguese women: they often withdrew from the workforce in response to a child's illness whereas a husband's illness or injury usually prompted wives at home to seek paid work in order to make up for the lost wages.²⁵ However, the health project records offer more insight into the Institute's interventions because of the availability of fieldwork notes for 75 cases (60 Italians and 15 Portuguese). While the adult-related cases are valuable insofar as they show how illness complicated or sabotaged the plans of financially vulnerable newcomers, the richest records are the 30 cases of children (under 16 years of age) who were referred to Ferguson and her health project staff.²⁶

Most of the 30 referrals came from six of the one dozen participating schools (four public and two Catholic) located in the vicinity of the Institute and its Branch Office.²⁷ These 30 cases involved 16 girls and 14 boys and fell into four broad and overlapping categories: physical ill health (67 per cent), mental and emotional ill health (33 per cent), parental neglect of medical needs (53 per

cent), and “retarded development” (20 per cent). They document overlapping “problems,” such as poor attendance/performance (35 per cent), known health problem (11.5 per cent), and transfer to a remedial/vocational school or school for “retarded children” (21 per cent).

Some cases (20 per cent) cite a mix of physical and emotional or psychological factors (such as rheumatic fever and severe loneliness). However, a third of them fall into a grey area of reportedly “slow,” inattentive, belligerent, or underperforming children considered in danger of failing or being sent back a grade, and whose difficulties are attributed to the material conditions of their underprivileged lives. The contributing factors included overcrowded and noisy households, poor diets and malnourishment, exhaustion due to part-time jobs that got them up too early (to pick worms, sell newspapers) or kept them up too late (setting pins at a bowling alley), and the absence of parents or siblings to help with homework. In the four cases of “delinquent behavior,” all involving boys, poor parenting was added to the mix.

Together, these cases capture Institute involvement with immigrant children and their parents, particularly mothers. The rate of positive outcomes recorded among the health project’s child cases was considerably higher than that for the adult health cases handled by the main Institute’s permanent counsellors (one-third and under 5 per cent respectively), suggesting that the health project’s female fieldworkers achieved a noticeable degree of success with a comparatively small clientele.²⁸

Women in the Field

An analysis of the child cases with a positive outcome shows project fieldworkers as effective intermediaries. The first school referral came from a school nurse – also a public health nurse – who asked Cosso to persuade the mother of a 14-year-old Italian girl whose deteriorating eyesight was affecting her studies to get her glasses. The nurse explained that she had been trying for two years to convince the mother to take her daughter to a nearby eye clinic for testing; each time the mother promised to consult a private doctor but did nothing, and then, on a follow-up call, insisted that her daughter was perfectly healthy – a classic strategy of evasion. It took two home visits and at least one phone call, but Cosso secured the mother’s permission to make an appointment and escort the girl to the clinic for tests and then to pick up her prescription glasses.²⁹

Given the huge gulf between Cosso, a well-educated urban Northerner who spoke the requisite “educated” Italian and the mother, a rural Southerner with little education and a regional dialect, Cosso’s effective intervention in this case cannot be attributed solely to the women’s shared Italian background. By this time, Cosso had visited 200 Italian and dozens of Portuguese households through the block-by-block home visits conducted during the project’s first

months,³⁰ and met yet more clients in the project's Branch Office. In the process, she had honed her skills. Her field notes indicate that, like other home visitors, she quickly applied distinguishing labels to the women she visited with such loaded phrases as "a typically southern peasant type" – as in "wearing a black handkerchief on her head" – or "a more educated" Calabrian or "better-educated northern type." She sized up clients with labels such as "uncommunicative" or "pleasant" as well as "messy house" or "newly repaired [house], clean inside and outside."³¹

Overall, however, the notes reveal that Cosso developed an effective professional style combining polite demeanour and firm diplomacy. Her notes on the block visits contain frequent references to the "friendly" or "very friendly reception" received from women (and a few men) who asked her to join them on the veranda or to come inside, and to visit again. She sometimes claimed that accepting such invitations kept her from meeting her daily quota of visits. As Cosso herself recognized, the women's reactions partially reflected their isolation and loneliness,³² but they also spoke to her ability to establish a rapport with them. The positive outcome achieved in the school referral just described generated more requests and the agreement with the school boards, resulting in a few dozen Italian and Portuguese children getting their eyes, ears, tonsils, and chests treated.

More illuminating is the case of Mario, a 6-year-old Italian boy. His teacher had initiated the process following the parents' failure to make appointments the school nurse had booked with a clinic. Mario, her report reads, "appears to be neglected physically as well as emotionally," adding: "he has crossed eyes [but] his parents refuse to have them fixed," a "speech defect that requires a doctor's observation or diagnosis," and a problem with daytime wetting. Noting that both parents "work long hours," she concludes, "I think because of this complete neglect it is impossible for Mario to learn."³³

Ferguson reported that Cosso was so instrumental in convincing Mario's initially hostile father to get him medical attention that she "had some difficulty refusing a gallon of wine, offered in gratitude" by the boy's mother, but left it at that. Cosso's field notes permit more telling observations. That she extracted far more information out of Mario's angry father than could the school nurse underscores her skills of persuasion. The details indicate that, contrary to the school's position, the father had not rejected their medical advice purely out of ignorance. He was initially hostile to Cosso and the nurse, reportedly repeating a rant delivered during an earlier visit about the teachers being preoccupied with "insignificant" matters. But he eventually explained that, as Cosso recorded it, "Mario, as a baby and toddler," had had serious problems, including "a nervous illness" and a severe seizure, but that, after spending "lots of money for doctors and specialists" in Naples, they were told he would grow up "completely normal."

The notes indicate, too, that Cosso persisted in efforts to persuade the father, who seemed better off financially than other clients, partly because she thought him overly concerned with saving money. "I had a hard time to convince Mr G. to have his son's eyes examined and then buy ... glasses," she writes, adding, he "is very stingy; has been in Canada for 5 years – never unemployed, wife working – a nice house and have rented the flat upstairs – have 3 sons between 14 and 5." Using the information extracted from the parents to convince the father to take the advice, Cosso persuaded him in stages, first coaxing him to have the child's eyes examined and then to buy the glasses. And then, in lieu of an eye operation on the impaired eye, which was diagnosed as a "lazy eye," she got him to agree to the doctor's plan "to place an eye-patch over the good eye, to force the lazy eye to work." As both parents worked full-time and spoke little English, Cosso arranged the appointments and accompanied the boy on his trips to the eye clinic attached to Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. In the end, she felt professionally bound to refuse the offer by the mother – whose role in the negotiations is murky but not her gratitude – of homemade wine, though another staffer might have accepted the gift. The notes are silent, however, on the daytime wetting and speech defect.³⁴

One of Montgomery's "successful" Portuguese cases also sheds light on the web of financial and health problems into which many of these families were ensnared. It involved an 8-year-old Portuguese boy who had returned to school after being a TB patient at the Gage Institute,³⁵ the downtown-based hospital and research centre of the National Sanatorium Association, but was attending only "very irregularly." When repeated notes to the parents, both of whom worked, "produced no results," the school nurse asked Branch staff for help. As Ferguson later informed her advisory committee, Montgomery quickly resolved the initial problem identified by convincing the mother, who had three other children in the same school and was pregnant with a fifth, to quit work so she could accompany her still recovering son to and from school. Like the concern over parental neglect due to a preoccupation with homeownership, a child's health trumped a mother's wage-earning.

Montgomery's entry into this household unveiled financial debts for what she critically described as the "new, expensive furniture and appliances" in the cramped flat as well as the father's frequent unemployment, medical debts owing to an inability to maintain hospital insurance payments – a common problem – and late family allowance cheques.³⁶ Her follow-up visits reveal, too, that the money and health problems were intertwined, and compounded by a failure to meet follow-up medical appointments. Ferguson attributed the positive outcomes to Montgomery's skills of observation and persuasion, and her ability to build trust with the woman through a series of incremental measures, each of which met a specific need. Montgomery, she reports, escorted mother and son to their appointment for a check-up and impressed upon the woman

“the importance of not missing any more check-ups” and of ensuring that her son took his medication.³⁷

We do not know whether the mother followed Montgomery’s advice, but the field notes track her observational skills and quick response rate. Noticing that the woman herself “urgently needed medical attention,” she arranged an appointment and escorted her to a pre-natal clinic soon after the boy’s check-up appointment. That she reportedly “promised” to call the clinic to verify that the woman attended it suggests as well that fieldworkers’ efforts at persuasion could include threats. Just days after the baby clinic appointment, Montgomery returned to the woman’s home with (used) children’s clothing from the Institute and a private charity. With some phone calls, she solved the mystery of the missing mother’s allowance cheques – the family had moved but not sent a forwarding address. Project staff attributed this problem, also a common one, to the precarious housing of these immigrants, who moved frequently in search of lower rents or, in the case of large families, more accommodating landlords, or as part of kin-linked home ownership strategies.

By providing support for an immigrant boy and his mother at moments of acute need, Montgomery gained the woman’s trust. No doubt, the shared language helped, but it alone could not have erased the complex dynamics shaping an exchange between a well-educated woman from Rio de Janeiro and a poorly educated Portuguese woman from the impoverished Azores. While Ferguson hoped that Montgomery’s Brazilian origins rendered her politically neutral to her Portuguese clients, she enjoyed a superior class position and more refined urban style than they did. However such factors played out, Montgomery crossed several divides in order to gain the woman’s confidence, with positive consequences for her sick son and other children. The result is significant even if Ferguson was right to suspect that the family needed long-term financial counselling.³⁸

Zelonka’s field notes further illuminate the staff’s liaison role, as well as the tangled web of financial and health problems uncovered. Several of her Italian cases underscore the well-documented observation that even when poverty does not directly “cause” ill health, it contributes to it and complicates treatment and recovery. One of them involved Carmella, an Italian girl whose guidance counsellor thought she was recovering far too slowly from an appendix operation: several months later, she still complained about frequent headaches. He requested a visit to Carmella’s family – described as “proud [but] poor” with a “poor” diet – partly, it appears, because he did not entirely believe the girl, about whom he wrote: “her head always hurts when the teacher gives her work to do.”³⁹ Zelonka’s comments on the first visit begin on a negative note: “the house is very poor and shows the need for repairing” [and] “is not neatly (sic) kept,” and the bedroom where the mother was dressing her three younger children “was smelling” (soiled diapers perhaps). But the tone turns decidedly

sympathetic as she relays her conversation with the woman, whom she describes as polite but anxious about her daughter's spiralling health problems. Carmella underwent an emergency operation to deal with an attack of appendicitis, but developed an infected peritoneum, a dangerous condition, which required a second operation. The second operation resulted in a hernia, also very painful.⁴⁰

In just one visit, this worker extracted critical medical information that school personnel failed to obtain despite having previously met the family. Clearly moved by the mother's own obviously poor health and her dire situation, Zelonka reported that Mrs S., at age 30, already had lost a child to ill health in Italy. In addition, she was struggling to raise six young children, including another daughter recovering from an operation (to remove her tonsils), on her husband's low wages and while carrying monthly mortgage payments. Social workers criticized parents who placed family finances over children's health (see [Chapter 6](#)). However, Zelonka interpreted the women's repeated requests for clothing, food, and a job at home sewing garments as the acts of a mother desperate to ensure her children's health even while she and her husband evidently placed the family in a financially risky situation by buying a house. Zelonka's notes record her efforts to meet the woman's requests, including monitoring the sick daughter, though we do not know whether she found the woman some paid work. An acculturated Eastern European woman of urban middle-class origins, Zelonka similarly crossed several divides to connect with this (and other) Southern European women of peasant origins who appreciated the material support and the concern shown towards their children's well-being.⁴¹

While a capacity for patience and persuasion combined with a strategy of "meeting immigrants at the point of need" could produce positive outcomes, other factors also mattered. One was the willingness of mothers to accept the advice or assistance offered. Historical analyses of working-class and immigrant women's interactions with dispensers of public health suggest that a shared concern over children's health explains why disadvantaged mothers wary of middle-class "intruders" could be receptive to health professionals without becoming passive targets of the medical establishment. The cases under scrutiny similarly suggest that poor immigrant mothers – and some fathers – were willing to tolerate some outside intrusion when a child's health was at stake.⁴² Anxious, exhausted, and repeatedly pregnant, the mothers of five, six, and even twelve children thus initiated additional contacts with a health project fieldworker who not only spoke their language and shared a national origin or immigrant status but provided concrete aid.⁴³

A referral to interpret for an Italian mother enrolling her daughter in a downtown "school for retarded children" suggests that serendipity could also play a role. Shortly after Cosso accompanied the "very nervous" mother to the school, she phoned about delivering some second-hand clothing. She reportedly found

the woman “distraught” over a call she had just received from the hospital to which she had been referred for “psychiatric treatment” telling her to come in that evening. Evidently seeking help for her mental anguish, the woman was in a panic because her husband was still at work and there was no one to watch the children. Cosso booked a worker with the Visiting Homemaker’s Association for that evening and the next day, and accompanied the woman to her hospital visits. As Ferguson noted, Cosso’s timely intervention happened by accident, but met a critical need (though we do not know about the treatments). It also underscored the value of follow-up calls and visits.⁴⁴

The art of persuasion could also mask more conspiratorial behaviour. A case in point involved a 14-year-old Italian boy admitted to the city’s psychiatric hospital on Queen Street. When the parents informed hospital authorities that they were pulling him out because he was “improving” and they were returning to Italy, the hospital called the Branch Office. Cosso informed the boy’s principal and visited the parents to try to convince them to have the boy tested in order to determine the state of his health. When the couple’s plan was delayed because the husband took ill, Cosso persuaded the wife to accompany her and the son to the hospital for tests. In summarizing the case in *Newcomers in Transition*, Ferguson wrote with approval that, at the time of Cosso’s last visit, the boy was at home “under the care of the family doctor and receiving what medication he needs.” But the parents had clearly been treated in a heavy-handed manner.⁴⁵

Also revealing are the cases that ended without a positive outcome. Immigrant parents could be wary of any school or Institute intervention, but the cases that failed to secure an intended outcome (28 per cent), as opposed to those that contain scant information (37 per cent), differed from the ones described above in two main respects. First, most were cases initiated by requests to investigate a child’s poor attendance or performance at school. School officials dealing with a truant or underperforming student required the visiting nurse to be more inquisitorial in her dealings with the parent(s), putting the interpreting fieldworker into the unenviable position of delivering the school’s stern warning. Cosso did as much to the parents of a boy who, it turned out, was missing a lot of school because the father, an injured construction worker, was using him as an interpreter in his dealings with medical and welfare officials. The parents’ plight might well have elicited some sympathy, but this couple’s reported failure to heed earlier warnings against taking the boy out of school prompted school authorities to threaten court action, with Cosso the messenger. The encounter did not go well, though she tried to soften the blow by telling the father, a repeat client whom she knew, to instead call her when he was “in difficulty.”⁴⁶ Montgomery and Zelonka issued similar warnings to parents, though, as in the case just described, the outcome is not recorded.⁴⁷

Second, a handful of “failed” cases involved fieldworkers tasked with persuading an “anxious” and “exhausted” mother to place an intellectually disabled child in a special school or institution usually located a few hours outside Toronto. A few mothers initially agreed to the advice, but all but one of these cases were unresolved. Significantly, the exception involved registering a girl in a city boarding school.⁴⁸

Occupational Training, 1964–8

The Institute’s special educational project (1964–6), like the related vocational-training pilot projects that preceded and followed it, reflected the premise that encouraging the “potential talent” in the “rural labour pool” through educational measures would meet two key objectives: filling Canada’s need for skilled workers and gaining better economic prospects for the immigrants. A concern over the vulnerability of low-skilled foreign workers, and the burden that mass unemployment would impose on the state, was fuelled as well by anxiety over growing automation. As liberal integrationists, Ferguson and colleagues also viewed skills-building as a means by which the “unskilled,” a category that was sometimes applied to semi-skilled and even skilled immigrants,⁴⁹ could become working-class citizens of worth.⁵⁰ In a more condescending fashion, Ferguson also described the goal as getting people for whom the “idea of overcoming unemployment by education and retraining is a foreign one” into English instruction and skills-upgrading courses.⁵¹

In targeting Greeks as well as Italians and Portuguese, the education project had a wide territorial reach that included the largest immigrant Greek community in the city’s east end and the smaller one in the west end. It also included the Italians living in northern suburbs and in the city’s east end, as well as in the largest community based in the west end, where most of the Portuguese lived. Besides the Institute and local schools that provided English classes for immigrants, the project drew on the provincial training institutes, adult training centres, and commercial high schools across the metropolitan area. The community in this community project, then, did not approximate an ethnic neighbourhood, but instead encompassed workers belonging to certain vulnerable immigrant communities and resources spread across a wide urban territory. Male workers were privileged on the grounds that, given existing inequities in wage rates, improving a man’s earnings proportionally produced the greatest benefit for the family.

Once again recruiting from the targeted communities, the Institute hired three male fieldworkers. Frank Colantonio was a Southern Italian, but no longer a peasant or greenhorn. In his fourteen years in Canada, he had amassed what Ferguson described as “considerable experience working with his fellow countrymen” in Toronto, first as a union organizer and then as director of the

Italian Immigrant Aid Society (IIAS), which supplied many of the Institute's Italian-speaking volunteers. As a carpenter, he had played a leadership role in the construction strikes of the early 1960s to organize the Italian-dominated residential construction sector. His IIAS post had given him practical experience in social service work, but he did not have any social work credentials. Colantonio was hired for his organizing and recruitment skills, but he was also expected to help with sorting out the confusing array of federal and provincial training programs and with lobbying the educational authorities.⁵²

At the time of his hiring, the Greek fieldworker Nicholas Georgakopoulos had been in Canada for only one year, but spoke good English. With a doctorate in international law, he differed markedly from his compatriots, but Ferguson thought his own experience with unemployment, in his case owing to Ontario's strict professional accreditation rules, sensitized him to the issues involved. She also described him as "very interested in this type of work."⁵³ It took longer to find a bilingual Portuguese worker, but Jorge Fernandes joined the staff a few weeks into the project, initially to conduct evening interviews and then as full-time staff. A four-year resident of Canada with a "business training" background, Fernandes likely hailed from mainland Portugal. Building trust with newcomers would again be essential, not least because determining eligibility for a program meant asking potentially embarrassing personal questions, and Fernandes' good command of English and reported "interest" in the Portuguese community got him hired. Because of the many Italian immigrants, the project also hired an Italian-speaking secretary, Cora Gentile, who doubled as an Italian interviewer in the Institute's Branch Office.⁵⁴ Ferguson again threw herself into the job and Gentile handled a large caseload, so the educational project also bore the imprint of women's pluralist activism.

Once again, Ferguson attributed the stated problem, which in this case was the rural immigrant's low occupational profile, to a combination of their "special cultural characteristics" and the factors blocking access to resources. But there was also a major twist. Instead of an emphasis on immigrant underuse of more or less adequate services, Ferguson's final report, *Newcomers and New Learning*, concluded that the immigrants, given the opportunity and some encouragement, showed a clear interest in improving their job skills, but that the facilities were wholly "inadequate" and utterly "unsuitable" to the demanding task at hand.⁵⁵

Although Ferguson and staffer Georgakopoulos interviewed Greek immigrants and "community contacts" (such as club presidents and journalists) for the project, *Newcomers and New Learning* offers few details about them beyond regional origins and residency patterns. Reiterating her group portrait of Southern Europeans, Ferguson stressed that in the Greek stream there was a preponderance of impoverished peasants with centuries-old habits and customs nurtured in rural villages that, apart from the recent introduction of electricity, were cut off from the modern world.⁵⁶ As with the Italians and Portuguese, the

family work ethic explained a lack of interest in the wider society. A similar obsession with achieving economic security through home ownership similarly increased indebtedness and sacrificed educational pathways to improved income earning. Among the few differences noted was that newly arrived Greeks, like Italians, were somewhat better off than their Portuguese counterparts because they could at least find jobs with entrepreneurial compatriots in the restaurant and construction industries, respectively. (No reference is made to exploitation.) In explaining the absence of education beyond elementary schooling as the predominant pattern among all three groups, Ferguson noted the absence of secondary schools in Southern Europe's remote rural villages and the family's inability to pay for boarding schools, but also an ingrained sense that education was the preserve of prominent people.⁵⁷ Only much later does she note that, while still in a minority, there was a larger number of skilled workers in the Greek as compared to the Italian and Portuguese streams.⁵⁸

Ferguson highlighted the sojourning mentality that led many young men to view vocational training as "a waste of time." Many a young Manuel, Giuseppe, and Constantinos, she wrote, was lured by the stories of home-owning relatives who return home bearing expensive gifts into embarking on a temporary sojourn in Canada. Finding themselves "exhilarated by the new experience of accumulating material possessions" and becoming "accustomed to modern conveniences," and seeing their children growing up Canadian and their relatives joining them, they end up remaining in Canada. But having taken "no interest" in learning English or "vocational skills" because they did not expect to stay, they found that by the time they decided to remain, as most did, they were forever stuck in exploitative jobs.⁵⁹

The argument was based in reality, though Ferguson and her Portuguese staffer Fernandes perhaps exaggerated the extent of the phenomenon. Many Southern Europeans were temporary guest workers in post-1945 Europe, but a majority of those who left their impoverished villages for North America intended to settle permanently. More specifically, while proportionally more Portuguese mainlanders may have possessed a sojourner mentality, including young couples, the Azoreans generally moved for good to North America, where they also had family ties. Fernandes may have overgeneralized from interviews with mainlanders. Ferguson probably had more contact with mainlanders, who dominated the secular organizations and who were more explicit about being "Portuguese." As Gilberto Fernandes notes, Azoreans were at this time on the margins of the so-called Portuguese community.⁶⁰

Front-Line Recruiters

Ferguson again applauded her staff as conscientious people who showed "understanding and good judgement" in the field, though the lack of archived

fieldwork notes for the education project makes an in-depth analysis difficult. Still, the related materials offer glimpses into the men's front-line activities, including their persistence in the face of indifferent officials. Particularly frustrating was the school board officials' initial resistance to increasing the number of state-subsidized English classes, particularly in the schools in the east end and suburbs, by holding nighttime classes during the spring and summer months when the schools normally closed down their nightly programs. Ferguson wrote that when officials were told about new arrivals keen to take classes in the spring and summer of 1964, they said the prospective students could simply wait until the fall and then learn English within a mere six months, a response she attributed to indifference and ignorance.⁶¹

Perseverance sometimes paid off, however. Two months of lobbying, for instance, convinced the Ontario Citizenship Division (OCD), which administered the English classes, to allow project staff to interview Portuguese and Italian men already enrolled in six-week accelerated ("crash") English courses being held in two west end high schools so as to assess the level of interest in trade-training. The staff would also determine the type of support needed (as in collecting documents and writing referral letters). Buoyed by the results that a majority of the 1,514 interviewed, most of them young men in low-skilled outdoor jobs and factories,⁶² were interested in skills training, project staff persuaded the Toronto School Board (TSB) to open additional summer classes in a number of downtown schools and community centres. The 3,600 students enrolled in classes during summer 1965 represented an increase of 125 per cent from the 1,600 enrolled in summer 1963, with Italians far outnumbering Portuguese and Greeks.⁶³ The east end remained poorly served, however, in part, claimed Ferguson, because of a failure to place English classes in a community centre located along the main thoroughfare of the Greek community on Danforth Avenue. Another sticking point – the shortage of teachers due to the TSB policy of requiring night-school teachers to come from the regular daytime teaching staff – took longer to address. Throughout the education project, field staff repeated a time-consuming strategy of convincing school authorities to offer a course on the condition of meeting a per-class quota and then recruiting the students.

The project's collaboration with COSTI, whose own motto was "integration through education," led to additional "crash" English courses being offered downtown and to their appearance in the suburbs. COSTI now operated from the west end mansion formerly owned by the Italian government, which set up offices for the delivery of certain services for immigrants and allowed COSTI to use the rest of the premises for free.⁶⁴ Colantonio initiated the alliance with COSTI in early summer 1964, after failing to sign up enough Italians (100) for a proposed English program. He passed on his list of 45 registrants to COSTI staff, who secured the permission to run a pilot experiment of ten-week "crash"

English courses for Portuguese as well as Italians. News of the courses spread and the final 140 recruits were divided into seven classes. The four Italian classes were held at COSTI and the three Portuguese ones, which included some Spanish students, at the Institute. Student interest remained strong, with average attendance estimated at almost 78 per cent, even as “work conditions,” such as shift work and seasonal hires, interrupted attendance. Suggesting the collaboration offered a model for further efforts, Ferguson attributed its success to several factors, including good-quality teachers and the special attention given the students. (The students were registered by staff and volunteers from their own ethnic group and received follow-up calls when they missed class.) She also noted the informal atmosphere of the classes (the immigrants being “intimidated” by public buildings), the four-night (rather than usual two-night) format, and classes devoted to one language group.⁶⁵

Colantonio now referred all Italian requests for downtown courses to COSTI while he focused on the suburbs. School administrators initially opposed creating classes for the growing number of suburban immigrants who could not make it to downtown night classes after work because they preferred the efficiency of holding several “grading” classes in the larger downtown schools, which also allowed for easier readjustment of classes when drop-outs occurred. Again, persistence paid off. After securing the approval of the Ontario Citizenship Division to recruit students for intensive English courses in North York during 1965, on the condition that teachers as well as students could be found, Colantonio persuaded the North York Board of Education to provide the classroom space at a local high school.

Working through clubs, schools, and worksites, Colantonio's recruitment efforts among Italians exceeded expectations, though the expected Greek recruits did not materialize. (The mistaken assumption that many Greeks had also moved into the area is perplexing.) At one point, the 147 mostly Italian students registered into four classes recorded “exceptionally good” retention rates considering the disruptions caused by shift work and summer holidays. Most students lived or worked nearby, including the restaurant dishwasher who played the accordion at the closing exercises. A few took advantage of the summer rule that let them bring their children to class, including the father of an attentive Italian girl whose mother was taking a power-sewing course (see below). Still later came what Ferguson considered a milestone, the first English classes for new Canadians held in North York during the spring term. Colantonio repeated these efforts in York Township, another area of growing Italian concentration, at one point registering some 300 students (90 per cent Italian) into classes held at a local school, again with good retention rates. All this represented modest but important inroads into immigrant suburbia, particularly North York, which was quickly becoming the municipality with the largest concentration of immigrants in Canada.⁶⁶

Ferguson concluded that “many more immigrants” (perhaps in the few thousands) were attending English classes as a result of the Institute education project. The Italians led, but more Portuguese and Greeks, who were still more concentrated in the city, were also taking English classes, though usually in downtown classes with more mixed populations.⁶⁷ Still, the recorded results, which, curiously, did not include some of the 1966 enrolments, were uneven and the numbers modest relative to immigrant totals. Even Ferguson spoke in terms of a constructive beginning rather than stellar results, and noted continuing challenges, such as the confusion caused by the grading systems. Welcoming the TSB’s decision to allow teachers other than their own to teach English as a second language (ESL), she argued that many educated people, including immigrants and housewives who were once teachers, could ably fill the role.⁶⁸

Trade Courses

The limited funds, confusing array of regulations, and continuing immigration from Southern Europe explain the education project’s poor results among “unskilled” men with little experience outside farming or fishing. The supporting legislation was Programme Five (P5) of the Federal-Provincial Technical and Vocational Agreement (FPTVA), which provided courses for retraining unemployed persons over sixteen years of age who had been out of school for at least one year. One had to be referred by the National Employment Service (NES), pass a health exam, and meet a residency requirement. There was a modest training allowance and some job counselling. The one-year course, which was meant to prepare students for a qualifying exam for entry into an apprenticeship program or for entry into one of the less demanding trades, consisted of two parts. The Phase I English course, which included some Canadian civics or citizenship content, was taught in several locales, while the Phase 2 course, on English trade terminology, took place at one of the adult education centres and certain technical schools.⁶⁹ Project staff welcomed the reduction in the Canadian residency requirement, from six months to one, that came midway through the project, but it did not improve the poor results, which were largely due to the low subsidies and the men’s need to earn money immediately. Also, those among the growing number of undocumented Portuguese arrivals after 1961 would have avoided contact with officialdom out of fear of being deported.⁷⁰

Branch staff did marginally better with an alternative program that offered short-term credit courses in such trades as welding, electronics, and machine shop as well as in bricklaying and carpentry. Colantonio referred interested Italians, many of whom were learning building-related trades informally on construction sites, to COSTI, which was already providing these courses. Italian recruitment for machine shop courses was disappointing, however,

especially in the east end.⁷¹ There were far fewer Portuguese than Greeks in the trades overall and fewer Portuguese than Italians with respect to the building trades. Like the later-arriving Portuguese, Italians faced hostile Canadian unions, but they also benefited from their larger numbers and recent organizing drives. Heavily disadvantaged, the Portuguese fieldworker Fernandes usually failed to secure enough Portuguese recruits to meet the quota required for a given trade course. A partial exception was welding, which Ferguson attributed to her misplaced sojourning thesis. She argued that because welding was one of the “simpler trades,” and one that drew the “highest reward for the least effort,” even some of the sojourning-oriented men could be convinced to take a welding course.

The education project’s best results occurred among Greek immigrant tradesmen who needed to pass the Ontario qualifying exam in order to legally practise their trade in Canada. Many of them could not meet the minimum entry requirements for an apprenticeship in the certified trades, which, in most cases, was Grade 10. A “skills upgrading” (or pre-licensing) course in English and a given trade was supposed to remedy the problem and prepare graduates for the exam. Those with trade certificates from home and documented work experience in their trade could opt to simply write the qualifying exam, which was in English, with the help of an interpreter so long as “he” was not in the trade. The use of relatives unfamiliar with the trade terminology or multiple-question format meant many failures, however, hence the emphasis on a skills-upgrading or pre-licensing course.⁷²

Following COSTT’s lead, project staff lobbied to hire a bilingual instructor for the courses they helped to establish. Under this initially controversial arrangement, the instructor taught the subject in English, but students could communicate with him in their own language. Most of the tradesmen who enrolled in the pre-licensing courses were Greeks, followed by Italians. The project records highlight the role of the Greek fieldworker Georgakopoulos. Having convinced the provincial institutes of trade to approve a number of short-term pre-licensing courses, he recruited a credentialed tradesman who qualified as the bilingual instructor. The training school paid his salary. The student registration fee of \$20 for the twenty-week course helped to cover the cost of teaching a machine-based course. The minimum quota for each class was twelve to fifteen students of the same language group. Upon completing the requisite course(s), the candidate was expected to sit the licensing exam and, if successful, fulfil the “Canadian experience” requirement of three years in order to attain the final certificate.⁷³

Georgakopoulos’ recruiting efforts were bolstered by a spike during 1963 in the number of Greek men arriving in Canada as open-placement (skilled) workers following a period of time spent working in Germany. In sixteen months, he registered 229 Greek men into fourteen classes, mainly for electricians and auto

mechanics. Some classes were composed entirely of secondary-school graduates. In several cases, however, he came up shy of the target.⁷⁴

Georgakopoulos' persistence in the face of limited classroom space and the continuing indifference of school officials is noteworthy. In February 1965, for example, he had signed up enough auto mechanics for a pre-licensing course, only to be told no space was available at the Provincial Institute of Automotive and Allied Trades. Since auto mechanics were reportedly in short supply, he hustled to find another space at Danforth Technical School in the east end, securing it until the end of March, when the night schools closed. He also found a "well-qualified" bilingual mechanic to teach the class. Then, when the school closed after five weeks, he turned to COSTI for space, but without funds to pay the instructor, they declined. When, six months later, space opened up at a provincial institute of trade, he called up the men. But only a few wanted to complete the course. Most of those contacted had tried but failed the exam and did not want to try again because they were busy working in order to support their families. A handful of the men had learned enough English to enrol in a unilingual (English) upgrading course, however, and they were expected to graduate soon after the project ended.⁷⁵

The school administrators' continuing unease over bypassing the regular English-speaking instructors for bilingual tradesmen also meant requests or requirements that the courses incorporate some regular English instruction.⁷⁶ The rule was not strictly followed, but Ferguson criticized the underlying assumption that instruction in "one's native language" delayed the English-learning process and perpetuated the existence of foreign-language groups whose presence endangered Canadian unity. She added that the economy could not wait for workers to first learn English and then upgrade their skills. Articulating a principle of adult education, that of building good citizenship, she noted, too, that those prompted to learn English for concrete reasons were more likely to learn faster and, as newly minted skilled workers, to make a greater contribution to Canadian society and be happier members and stronger supporters of its values.⁷⁷

Women Workers

The pilot projects aimed at improving women's occupational skills began while the health and welfare project was in effect and they involved both the permanent counsellors at the main Institute and the female field staff based at the Institute's Branch Office. The projects focused on industrial-sewing courses for Italians and Portuguese, and skills-upgrading (or pre-licensing) courses for Greek hairdressers. Ferguson did not lead but rather participated in one of these projects. Noteworthy is her insight into the high rates of workforce participation among these rural women: "Going out to work is a new experience

for most of them although many were accustomed to working in the fields at farm work.” Later, feminist historians would similarly argue that these women’s wage-earning, while “new,” reflected a transplanted family work ethic that required the labour of all its members.⁷⁸ But here, too, we find patronizing commentary.

The Institute described the 1962 pilot project to “upgrade” Italian and Portuguese women’s sewing skills through a ten-week P5 course providing instruction in English and power-sewing machines as “a pet project” of Mrs J.S. (Margaret) Hill. An IODE volunteer with the main Institute’s reception centre, Hill had joined the Institute board and would sit on the education project’s advisory committee. The pilot project also represented a victory for the Institute, which had lobbied city councillors and school officials to support the venture for more than a year. Ferguson and her staff became involved with the early recruitment and training.⁷⁹ A NES referral was required, but there were no educational or English requirements, and, initially, an interpreter was based in the classroom. One of the adult training centres agreed to teach classes of twenty-five students and oversee their placement in a factory. The modest daily stipend ranged from \$3 for single women living with parents to \$6 for married women whose husbands earned less than \$6 per week.⁸⁰

The course combined some citizenship training with aiding women familiar with hand-sewing and embroidery, including those who had worked in the “textile industries of Europe,” but whose unfamiliarity with “modern” power-sewing and buttonhole machines was “holding them back.” The course was also expected to facilitate an engagement with modernity, by introducing the women to Canadian (imperial) measurements, the Canadian Bill of Rights (1960), the Ontario minimum wage law, and “a little mathematics” as well as English instruction and the “different operations for making a complete garment.”⁸¹

The Institute’s “permanent” female counsellors assigned to the project recruited students through their client lists. The Branch Office female staff did so through their ethnic networks, but particularly through the churches rather than the male-dominated ethnic clubs and media outlets. Both groups escorted women to the NES office. Together, Branch Office staff, the Italian- and Portuguese-speaking permanent counsellors, and some reception centre volunteers ran the orientation session at the main Institute building. They interpreted for the “Anglo” female NES staff, assisted with the P5 applications, and explained the course materials translated by yet other volunteers. They escorted the students to the training centre for eight weeks of classroom instruction and then to the factory for a two-week placement. The six-hour class was divided between English-language and sewing instruction. The in-class interpreter was removed after a few weeks on the grounds that instruction could be given by demonstration. (In a patronizing manner, Ferguson enthused about the women learning

such basic phrases as “This is my foot. This is the treadle. I put my foot on the treadle.”) Night classes were later added to the daytime schedule, and the course was expanded to sixteen weeks, the last two still in a factory. The placements would have involved negotiations with the garment unions, but nothing is said about them beyond noting that NES staff quickly assumed from them the responsibility for overseeing the factory placement.⁸²

Ferguson claimed that the 1962 power-sewing project enabled the women to make a much smoother transition to paid work than would have otherwise been possible. Their experience as better-trained workers, she added, would make them “more independent, more self-confident and more capable of becoming self-supporting Canadian citizens” as well as more informed mothers of children growing up in Canada.⁸³ The claims, while exaggerated, were not untrue. The interim reports highlight the valuable liaison role that Branch fieldworker Montgomery played among the Portuguese women. Because Portuguese women found it more difficult than their Italian counterparts to access an Institute counsellor who spoke their language – several multilingual counsellors spoke Italian while fewer spoke Portuguese – they gravitated to Montgomery. In handling their requests, which included convincing husbands to let them attend evening classes, Montgomery, noted Ferguson, came “to know the women intimately.” The ties that she cultivated likely had some positive effect on the women.⁸⁴

Other details challenge Ferguson’s rosy portrait of the program even while underscoring her respect for immigrant women workers dismissed by many as transient wage-earners. The information gathered on about sixty of the (mostly married) women who were employed in some capacity a few months after completing the course revealed that one-third of them had left their sewing posts, mostly for “family” reasons (pregnancy, childcare), and then returned to low-paid jobs in factories or as cleaners in private homes and hospitals. Ferguson understood the garment industry’s reliance on the cheap labour of immigrant women. She also generally supported unions, though she rarely criticized the employers or encouraged union certification campaigns. Ferguson emphasized the need to improve the wage levels in these jobs on the (correct) grounds that many of these women would become lifelong workers with recurring interruptions due to family demands, but she basically instructed her staff to persuade the women to be patient and wait for increases as a result of improved work or union contracts.⁸⁵

The women, however, complained and protested with their feet. The first group of factory trainees complained about the hourly wage (65 cents, the minimum wage) being “considerably lower” than expected, and about a dozen of them left their placement despite promises of wage increases once their work improved. Some of them landed better-paying factory jobs or earned more money through the informal economy, whether at house-cleaning jobs, the

preferred choice, or stoop labour, picking worms or carrots. Ferguson attributed the better track record among the second group of recruits to the training instructors possessing a better understanding than the unions of the trainees' individual capabilities (to sew a whole garment or conduct a routine job). But the better wages offered as a result of the earlier walkouts and an increase in the minimum wage – which now ranged between 75 cents and \$1.10 per hour – also mattered. Even then, however, some women had left their posts. They included a former dressmaker from Italy, supporting an unemployed husband and teenagers, who landed a job in a canning factory that paid ten cents more than her sewing job, and urged others to join her. Others, like the woman who quit because the trouser-sewing machine was “too heavy,” protested the working conditions. That only one woman said she quit because of her husband's disapproval underscores the critical wage-earning role of Southern European women in postwar Toronto and Canada.⁸⁶

The recruitment rate improved with the reduction of the residency requirement in 1965, from six months to one, but problems with attendance and drop-outs and a lack of classroom space continued. Staff noted many repeat referrals to a course.⁸⁷ Having assumed full responsibility for the pilot project in 1963, the Institute's permanent counsellors continued to recruit for power-sewing courses until 1968. By then, perhaps a few hundred women had signed up for the course, though some of them would not have completed it. As their organizations would articulate beginning in the 1970s, working-class immigrant women wanted skills training that did not interfere with their family obligations in order to better contribute to their family's well-being. As the legal dependants of male sponsors (usually their husbands), many also wished to achieve a degree of economic independence, or recognition, as important wage-earners. The P5 program offered one of the few state-funded resources that they, as dependants, could tap. Still, a sober reminder that success did not eliminate financial worry is the handful of files in my Institute database of women who returned to the Institute after securing a garment job through the P5 program and still needed part-time work in order to augment a still-inadequate income.⁸⁸

Greek women dominated the final pilot project, in 1968, to provide skills-upgrading (pre-licensing) courses for immigrant hairdressers. Ferguson was gone by this point, but the project deserves attention as it was the only one to target skilled Southern European women. Its launch followed a similar project involving tradesmen mounted a year earlier in response to two related issues. The first was the high rate of failure on the qualifying exams. The second was the widespread practice among those who had earned their Provisional Certificate of Qualification (PCQ) upon completing a skills-upgrading course of putting off the qualifying exam indefinitely despite having met the three-year Canadian experience requirement.⁸⁹ Recruiting efforts focused not only on those

with soon-to-expire PCQ certificates (blue cards) who needed “to cram” for the exam, but also those with more time to study on the grounds that, unless pushed, they would keep postponing the exam. It was clear from early on that the women’s project was far more successful than the previous male program. The first two hairdressing courses offered in spring 1969 reportedly showed “excellent results.” The pass rate for the first class of thirteen students was 77 per cent with dropouts, not failures, accounting for the losses; the figure for the second class of nineteen was 84 per cent. The additional classes brought the total number of women enrolled in the course to about fifty.⁹⁰

Ferguson attributed the program’s general success to the fewer “traditional” restrictions placed on the public movement of Greek women as compared to their Italian and Portuguese counterparts. The assertion downplayed the former’s employment in family businesses with built-in chaperones (though that did not necessarily protect them from exploitation), and the factory and nighttime cleaning work performed by Italian and Portuguese women, respectively.⁹¹ Still, Greek women dominated the category of Southern European skilled women in my Institute database, and the one dozen cases created on those enrolled in a pre-licensing hairdressing course involved mainly young women, both single (4) and married (8), in their late twenties and early thirties with a highschool or technical school training in hairdressing. Some of them may have gone to the city to train while others may have lived in larger rural towns that allowed them to apprentice in the trade. The cases show counsellors carrying out their duties, which included making follow-up calls. When one course graduate could not write the exam because she fell “very sick,” her Greek female counsellor immediately provided the “official letter” of explanation required to arrange a new date. The client passed the exam and landed a position. Another positive outcome involved a single woman who registered in the course thinking her credentials (Grade 9 and one year of hairdressing school) were insufficient – the formal Ontario requirement was Grade 10 – but was told to try the exam anyway. She was exempted from the course on the strength of her test results and then awarded a licence because she already met the Canadian experience requirement. The negative outcomes involved women who lacked sufficient English to qualify for or to finish a course or whose training was disrupted by pregnancy or illness.⁹²

The Institute’s involvement with vocational training for immigrants ended in 1969, when a new Ontario Training Act shifted responsibility to George Brown College, a community college, and some technical schools. While its decidedly uneven efforts ultimately affected a tiny minority of the rural Southern European “labour pool” (perhaps a few thousand), Ferguson’s anecdotal references to formerly unskilled men and women who expressed pride in their new status as skilled worker suggests that, for the beneficiaries, the impact of the English and skills-training courses was significant, both psychologically and economically.

Despite the criticism often made about vocational education creating a preparation in second-class citizenship among young people,⁹³ Ferguson's positive assessment fits with recent analyses of occupational training among new adult immigrants, namely, that it can empower marginalized workers and improve their income. But qualifications are in order. The power-sewing courses aimed to modestly improve women's wages, not to liberate them from the exploitative garment sector. Also, as workers whose wage-earning trajectory was shaped in large part by family priorities, most women may not have enrolled in long-term courses.⁹⁴

Conclusion

As short-term community integration projects, the Institute's health and welfare project enjoyed comparatively more success than the education project. Both projects traded in rural stereotypes, though the profiles drawn contained some truth. Both also exposed the obstacles blocking access to resources, though as Ferguson noted, the adult vocational training sector of the educational system was particularly "derelict" in meeting its responsibility to provide educational opportunities for immigrants, who were taxpayers too.⁹⁵

More generally, the projects demonstrate the value of community-based pluralist strategies in which immigrants with some links to the communities being served played active roles on the front lines. Equally important was the gender match or near-match between staff and clients. During the health project, fieldworkers like Cosso exhibited a capacity for empathy, though some entries do have a whiff of head-shaking pity about them. They might use guilt-inducing tactics with mothers in order to get children medical help, but the positive outcomes also indicate the importance of the basic respect they showed parents. Generally, so too did Ferguson, who wrote that the findings revealed parents who "have the welfare of their children very much at heart," but who were too caught up in the struggle to survive, or too uninformed, to access resources. Even allowing for exaggeration, the field notes generally support Ferguson's claim that her female staff "possessed the qualities of understanding, sympathy and tact so necessary for dealing with people," and applied "good common sense to the problems presented." Curiously, she did not comment on their capacity for empathy, the trait considered critical to effective social work.⁹⁶ The (vocational) education project and the pilot projects in occupational training faced stiffer challenges than the health project, including intransigent school officials, long distances, and a longer investment of time. But the available evidence confirms the value of using front-line staff from the immigrants' own national, or ethnic and linguistic, group to increase immigrant utilization of social services and educational resources.

In this regard, the projects validate the Institute's bridge-building pluralism as well as Ferguson's recommendations, which included language training for

Canadian social service personnel (something the Institute began doing at this time) and large-scale recruitment of educated and capable immigrant women and men with the language skills and knowledge of “the background of the immigrants whom they serve.”⁹⁷ Applying the flexibility exhibited in the projects as well as support for professional women forced to retire upon marriage, Ferguson recommended hiring married women whose jobs had offered a training in “human relations,” such as teaching and nursing as well as social work, as front-line workers in the administration of health and welfare services to immigrants.

As for vocational training, Ferguson emphasized the necessity of placing the whole adult education system on a more professional standing with an expanded network of counselling services staffed by trained multilingual personnel. She called for an increase in the number of year-round training classes and P5 courses and in the number of bilingual tradesmen hired as instructors. In addition to higher stipends, she recommended that more of the qualifying exams be set in the student’s “native” language, and that more funds be directed to specialized teacher training in ESL. Meanwhile, the severe shortage of qualified ESL teachers could be met by hiring housewives who were former teachers and educated immigrants. (She noted that the best ESL teacher at present was an Iranian man, but did not elaborate.)⁹⁸ Appreciating the impossibility of ensuring that front-line workers always matched the cultural background of their immigrant clientele, Ferguson stressed the importance of striving towards that goal on several grounds, including the prospect that future immigrants “may come from cultures much more alien than those of European rural immigrants.”⁹⁹

All these recommendations generally align with today’s multicultural approaches to the provision of health and welfare services and English instruction and vocational training for immigrants. They call for counsellors to undertake “multicultural training” that will provide them with a knowledge of the immigrant clients’ cultural values and practices, and to possess the multilingual skills to communicate effectively with them. The contemporary social science literature rarely refers to past experiments using anything resembling such approaches in the city or nation being studied, including for Canada.¹⁰⁰ Research into the Institute’s community projects and pilot projects partly redresses this historical amnesia by documenting a longer history of community-building approaches to social services and education for immigrants.

The merits of the approach should not be exaggerated, however. For one thing, it took an enormous amount of staff time to carry out project duties, whether visiting homes, escorting children to clinics or women to the NES, or travelling to the suburbs to pitch English or training proposals to school officials. So much so that the Institute board wondered, particularly with the health project, whether the “support work” would eclipse the project’s research

mandate. A related concern about the projects creating unfair expectations within the immigrant communities that the main Institute's overworked counsellors would not be able to meet points to the difficulty of replicating the Branch, or neighbourhood office, model on a large scale.¹⁰¹ Also, as recent studies of immigrant children's health and occupational education for immigrants suggest, we cannot naively assume that past approaches that achieved some success will be applied to subsequent waves of migrants even when they exhibit similar challenges; rather, constant vigilance is required.¹⁰² The partial exception is COSTI: due in part to community chest and government funding, it evolved into a multicultural agency that now provides a range of social services and vocational training to immigrants of all backgrounds.¹⁰³ In any event, we should not ignore the many failed attempts, disruptions, or drop-outs caused by pregnancy, illness, family crises, or changing work shifts because such factors also affect today's immigrants.

Then, too, individual fieldworkers, or community-based social work practitioners, however well-intentioned, cannot overcome the basically intrusive nature of social work or the profession's tendency to equate "good citizenship" with conformity to dominant middle-class norms. The pluralist, or multicultural, approach of recruiting front-line workers acknowledged the importance of language, culture, and ethnicity, but privileged class, or professional, status. Like other liberal reforms, it also drew on a human capital theory framework in which the needs of industry for "a technically proficient labor force" is an overriding priority.¹⁰⁴ The racism that white Canadians, including Torontonians, unleashed on the South Asian and other racialized groups who began arriving in Canada in significant numbers in the 1970s also makes it foolhardy, even dangerous, to overstate the potential of such a strategy for addressing racial inequities. The Institute's efforts to reduce hostility to immigrants and improve their access to resources by trying to close the cultural gap between hostland community-service providers and marginalized immigrants also considered less-than-white deserves some credit. The Institute's financial and other crises precluded its launching similar projects in the 1970s among the rapidly growing South Asian and Caribbean immigrant communities, leaving us to wonder whether an enlarged Caribbean and South Asian staff would have produced equal or more mixed results.