Language and Race in Contemporary Canadian History Project

Interview Transcript

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Beginning: Work Group of Multicultural Programs

Eve 00:19
Thank you for fitting us. And I mean, we just want to, as you as I've said, we want to just capture this history. It's kind of interesting how not a lot has been written about the details of the emergence of the Heritage Languages Program. And so, we just want to know how these things emerged and your name, we came across when we were digging through documents, and your involvement with the multiculturalism programs working group. And so, I think in some ways that prehistory to the Heritage Language Programs is extremely important. And that really hit home to me when I was reading, in particular, the draft report [of the Work Group on Multicultural Programs], because I think it was a kind of interesting time where all these things were emerging, and in some ways anything was possible. So, I think maybe we'll start with how you came to be involved in that working group, what your role was, and then move on to some of the things that you saw and did and then how, the relationship of that then, the heritage, the emergence of Heritage Languages Programs. So how did you come to be involved with the working group?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 01:52
Well, it was it, it would have been around 1973, 74. I was not there when *The Bias of Culture* was written. It was written just before me. It was a seminal document for the workgroup. The work group was chaired by Dan Leckie. And Dan and I were undergraduate student politicians at the University of Toronto. And I knew he was working on this. And I learned, I don't know from who it might have been from him, that they were looking for somebody to help staff, the workgroup, and I said, “Well, I'm up for that. I'm looking for work.” So, I was hired by the school board to support the work group. There were two other staff people. One was a gentleman named Mel LaFontaine, who you may know, he was the author of *The Bias of Culture*. And Mel was a brilliant philosopher king. He taught, kept us on track, philosophically, politically, consistently. And the other person was Ed Kerr, who was a school principal, he was a school principal at Clinton Public School. So, he would have a school population, which should be very dynamic, changing and growing. Now, the precursor to all of this was that there had been a workgroup on inner city programs. It was chaired by Doug Barr. That's probably another document you might want to take a look at. But it was not (using gestures), and the context around all of this is that there was elected a group of reformed trustees. And the reform trustees decided to take on all of the issues around streaming, ghettoization. Particularly streaming was, of course, one of the big issues. The trustees set up a number of activities, where there were advisory committees to the board, there was a Black Advisory Committee, and Beverley Salmon was involved in that, as I recall is [Zanana] Akande would have been around and involved in some of that work. So, she's probably somebody who should be on your list. And this workgroup and multiculturalism … was the first time, to my recollection, and from what people have said, was that a group elected officials at the school board took on the issue of changing, reviewing, proposing school policy. All of that, of course, until then had come either from the Ministry, or from senior officials at the school board. So, what you have is a sort of a political context where the senior officials at the school board were benevolent. They wanted to do right. They wanted to make sure that the school system continued to be as responsive to the kids—it was not around—they were open, and I think they were smart, to know that this group of trustees is not going to go away. And as I said, they were benevolent educators, they were really concerned about the well-being of the kids.

The Director of Education was a gentleman named Duncan Green, who was remarkable. But the brains behind some of the administrative structures was the Associate Director of Education, who was Ned McKeown, who was the one who helped. He developed a lot of the funding formula for programming. He was the one who created community access to schools, secondary daycares and all of these schools, Ned was the guy who figured out how to do all of that—I admired him tremendously. He was an amazing educator, and eventually, he became director of the Toronto Board, and director of the Metropolitan Toronto School Board. So, he carried out many of the Toronto values across, you know. Ned was also a special ed. He came out of a special education background. So, he was also very interested in programs like Sunny View Public School, which is a school for handicap—that's the wrong word—but it's a school for kids who were challenged. So anyway, many of the superintendents were also very progressive. But then, there were some who weren't. I would have to say that—and the kind of responses that took place as we went across the city, and so on, really varied by neighborhood. And remember, we're talking about the Old City of Toronto, we're not talking about the expanded city of Toronto.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 08:12
The Bias of Culture was remarkable, as I said. I don't know if you had a chance to read it. But you know, it outlined a 10 set of issues that needed to be addressed, if we wanted to address the issue of immigrant kids in the school system. And there's a concept in that document, which has remained with me today, which is that, the notion that institutions cannot change by themselves, they have to be pushed externally by forces, which is why the role of parents in the schools became one of the issues. And it became one of the reasons why the School Community Relations Department was set up. And that was in part to, I'm sort of jumping ahead here, but that was sort of a way in which parents could actually become advocates, aided by this department of school community relations officers, so there were about 20 or so who were hired, three per area of the city. And their role was to work with parents and to be advocates. And what was interesting about the organizational placement of that department, was that it was placed in the curriculum department at the school board. It wasn't sidelined in student services or social work or psychology, or whatever, it was planted right in the middle of curriculum or because that was the core department of the school board. That was a very strategic kind of decision. But it came out of, the work, Mel Lafontaine's, his knowledge about how you had to get right to the core part of the institution. And that was not finance or human resources. It was curriculum. So, that was one of the big strategic decisions.

The other issues, that were talked about among those lists of 10, had to do with the funding relations between the provincial government and the school boards and how they set up that funding. It had to do with the teaching of languages. It had to do with the relationships with parents, and so on. And the use of the third language in the schools. What had become very clear, we also had a very remarkable research librarian and who was assigned to work with the workgroup, Lillian Ciamaga, and she had been in Boston for many years. And she was remarkable. And she would find research studies and reports and examples of other kinds of things. And she would present us with these treasures. And one of the things emerged out of the work was that the ability to learn a third language—if Chinese or Italian, or whatever was your first language—the most effective way of learning English had to be to utilize the first language. And that was sort of—emerged out of the research. And it emerged, and it guided the thinking of the workgroup, which is why I supported all those bilingual-bicultural approaches to various programs.

The other thing that was kind of remarkable about the work of the work group is that they listened, and went, they call them “listening in.” So, they would schedule meetings right across the city and invite parents to come. And they dumped, the parents just dumped. So, they listened. They weren't

interrogating these people. They were listening to what they had to say. You know, and the issue of race and racism emerged out of that. And then, they also invited briefs and submissions. Some of that was done, came in, before the draft report [of the Work Group on Multicultural Programs]. But the draft report, when it was released, galvanized a range of response (shaking the head from side to side) from hysteria, to we're undermining the school system, to support, you know, this is the way to go—

Responses to the Draft Report

Eve 13:43
For that response was from?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 13:45
From parents, teachers, different parts of the city, they were, sort of, very white parts of the city. It was the attitude of "if you come here, you have to learn the language, we're not going to call you, you've just got to fit in." And all of this other stuff, "You trustees are proposing, it's just coddling"—they didn't see it as being critical tools for integration and for becoming part of society. It was like, "You came here"—or it was also some of the more established immigrant groups, "We did it. Why do you need it?" And of course, many of the new immigrant groups were, of course, people of colour. So, you have this incredible divide between the long-established immigrant groups who did not have the kind of settlement supports, and they would say that if they did it, these groups could do it too. So, it was a very (pause) vigorous set of discussions: Some meetings were hostile, but everything was by and large conducted in a fairly respectful kind of manner. People heard what was said. And so, it was good to have put out a draft report and to get the feedback, so you'll see some modifications in the final report.

The Work Group's Approach

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 15:40
There was sort of a notion of a continuum of programming between "you got to change completely as individuals" to "the institution has to change." And the work group was very much of the approach that the institution had to change. I would have to say that most of the debate at the school board level was fairly unanimous in terms of its support. You had, Gord Cressy was chair of the School Board. So, he is a very charismatic person, he was able to make sure that the political support was there. And with Duncan and Ned, as senior administration, supporting this effort, I think they were a little bit taken aback by the fact that the trustees wanted to write board policy, and it wasn't coming from the bureaucracy. But you know, people chilled because it wasn't the first set of things that happened. There were all of these other workgroups to inner city programs and the streaming discussions, so this was going to happen sooner or later. So you have very—and the other person, staff person who is very central to this process was a man named Michael Cobden, who was a journalist. And Michael used to give the trustees training on media, and how to deal with the media. And one of the things that he did was he helped Gordon initiate a Chair's Newsletter, which went to all the parents in the school system. And that was a direct communication with the parents out there. And there would probably have been some newsletters written about this project. And I—so there is a whole thing about communications relating to parents, relating to getting the message out, how you communicate, which was really quite central to all of this work. It wasn't just the policy recommendations, but it was what else was going on? That's kind of—that's, I think, gives you a flavour. Yeah, of the approach and the attitude.

Eve 18:36

And so, I was curious when you said, I just wondered, when you said that when the draft report came out, it was like, wow. So, was that because the media covered it, like, was it widely circulated? Was it a thing of big, broad debate in, in community or—

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 18:59
There was a broad debate in the community. I do not remember what the media had to say. I think that the trustees are by and large, very focused on the parents and the teacher organizations.

I don't remember what the media had to say about this. You know, it might be interesting to go look at the *Star* archives for that period. Michael was a very experienced journalist who was hired by the board. He also even went to teachers college at one point. So, you know, Michael was somebody who was very—I mean, he then went on to be editor of the [*Kingston] Whig-Standard* and running the journalism department at Dalhousie University. So, you know, we've got somebody who was—and Michael came from South Africa. So, he understood he understood all of that stuff (laughing). So, we had, as I said, a number of players within the institution who were really willing to have this succeed.

Selling the Document: Multiculturalism

Eve 20:28
And where are they—I mean, 1971 is when multiculturalism emerges as a policy. So, it's not that many years later that we have this multiculturalism programs working group. And then you also mentioned that there were these other committees like the inner city committee, and so on. Were those committees that emerged spontaneously within the board, or from the trustees, or from the parents?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 21:05
Oh no, it came from the trustees, because there were progressive reform trustees who were elected. And they were on a mission because they came out of Cabbagetown; they came out of parts of the city where children were not succeeding. They were being streamed, whatever—so these people, these trustees, they really wanted to make a difference in terms of why they were elected. And I remember trustees are only part-time at this stage. So, you know, like, they were doing all of this in addition to their jobs. So, there was some real commitment on the part of these folks to have their own election be meaningful.

Eve 22:01
I mean, what do you think that the federal policy on multiculturalism influenced folks or made them think, “Okay, there's, here's a language and an opportunity for us?”

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 22:16
No, not really.

Eve 22:17
No. So this was very—

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 22:18
This was very organic. It was, you know—

Eve 22:22
I asked, because the report begins with a quote.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 22:28
Okay, you're trying to sell a document when you have the prime minister saying culture within the context of bilingualism—I mean, there are all of these other political—I mean, it was just a way to help sell the document, and sell the report. It wasn't necessarily because (gesture: bird hands/pecking, laughing).

Eve 22:54
Yeah. So the report, particularly the draft report, they have the section on transitional bilingualism and biculturalism and they make a really good argument. They draw on the research, particularly (inaudible) from the US at that time, and then the next put the part, they talk about the third language and, making space for third language programs and what's in the Education Act and so on. And then obviously, a lot of that impetus came from the meetings with communities, the ethnic group communities. So, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about those discussions, those meetings and the kinds of—maybe meeting with the parents or say, “No, we want to be able to maintain our language, our culture, those things are embedded,” and then how that kind of seeped up, as you said, it was organic kind of movement.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 24:03
Yeah, well, I think that what they were hearing from parents, first of all, was their inability: They couldn't understand what the school was saying to them about their kids, if the school is even communicating with them. When, you know, you have this kind of situation where the children were having to explain the school to the parents. And that's not appropriate either. And that was the reason why the School Community Relations Department was set up was so that the parents can have a direct engagement with the school facilitated by the institution itself. So, they didn't have to go—I think that I think that the parents, from what I recall, were, it wasn't so much, as I recall it, that the parents were demanding that heritage languages be in school or languages be in school. [It] is that they wanted their kids to have respect for their heritage and to value their heritage, and to be able to also communicate with their parents. And one of the ways of doing that was to offer these heritage language classes. And of course, I think teachers were among the ones to push back on that, which is why so many of those classes were offered outside of the regular school hours. So, there was sort of a lot of give and take and negotiations around how those programs were actually delivered. Often it was a compromise approach, just to get things happening. And my recollection was that the teaching unions were—this was sort of more an issue at the elementary level, rather than at the secondary level. And then there was this whole debate, you know, from the, which you may recall, in the Education Act, which talks about the subject of instruction, as opposed to the language of the instruction. And that's sort of like a fine kind of difference. And the language of instruction, which is why I said earlier, is using it as a language of instruction means that you actually have a greater chance of English being acquired. It's a more effective method of teaching than putting language into a box over here and say, we're going to teach it as a subject. One of the things was actually very clear to the trustees was that language is culture. And you cannot respect somebody's culture, unless you're also prepared to respect that language. You know, and I think that the people who were opposed to it also understood that too, that if you tried to obliterate the language, you're also trying, you're also forcing people to assimilate, which is what many people wanted was assimilation as opposed to—So there was a whole debate that went on about maintenance of culture, which is not what parents were asking for.

Who and What are Necessary to Transform the Institution

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 28:38
So, I believe there's discussion, I think, in the final report, more so than in the draft report, about distinctions between the maintenance of culture and the development of culture, within a different context, within a new context, because you're in a new culture. And, those are kind of, I think, groundbreaking concepts because nobody else is talking about those things. All of that. You know, all of that, as I said, we were just kind of making it up as we went along from what emerged as the guiding issues and issues that had to be addressed. And "Okay, so now that we've heard all of this. What do we do better? If we're serious about transforming the institution, and if we're serious about making sure that kids are successful in the schools, and making sure that parents were part of the institution?" Because, it was well known, that, even as a matter of research, that parents' role in the education of their children is really important for children's success. And if parents are not part of that discussion, as so many immigrant parents were, their kids would not be successful; they would get streamed; they would be dropped out; they were whatever.

One of the side issues, of course, that would come up occasionally was about the notion around, issues around girls' education. Because in some communities, of course, there was a notion that girls really didn't have to go to high school, they should just get married or whatever. So, you know, one of the things that we discussed certainly within the workgroup was that the principle of development of culture also meant that girls were educated within, so they could become successful. And even if—so they could even become successful parents, if that is something, that's where they were headed. And we had to sort of say all of those things without actually being disrespectful to those traditional, male-oriented patriarchal cultures. It was certainly one of the most interesting projects I've ever been involved with. I mean, I still think about that work, and I still think about all of the legacy issues since 1976, I guess, is when those recommendations are passed.

In 1976: Final Report Passed

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 31:57

You may or you may have seen that in the final report—or it may have been out of the draft report, I don't remember I haven't had a chance. As I said, all my documents have been shipped out to the UofT archives. Was that in I think it might have been in the draft report, or it might have been in a staff report on the process, was that we would separate out some of the recommendations, so that some initiatives and some recommendations were approved prior to the completion of the work. So, they proceeded—and one of those was the creation of the School Community Relations Department. So going forward, there was actually, within the system, a mechanism for actually getting that message and word out before the final set of recommendations were approved. So, they were approved in two phases that I can't remember what else was approved. But I remember that one specifically, because it was while I was there. They began the process of staffing up that department, which is where Angelo Delfino and John Piper, as I said, was head of that department. But he's got some major health issues. He wouldn't be somebody you'll talk to, but you could talk to Gordon, if Gordon remembers. So, I think that that was also really an important kind of strategic decision about how to proceed.

Eve 33:39
Interesting. I know that there was discussion on reports about what to do with children who were from, you know, children of immigrants or immigrant children, or from societies or cultures or countries where

they spoke English, right? So the examples they gave were like, Guyana, Pakistan, and so on and so forth. So—

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 34:11
And that's where the discussion of dialect came up. A recognition that there's standard English, and there's non-standard English, that those kids also needed support, but a different kind of support. I don't remember all the solutions around that. But that's sort of where the other kind of programming around curriculum and around information about the countries that these kids are coming from. Aside from heritage languages, but a revamping of the school curriculum to include other cultures. And I can't remember everything, I don't have, I didn't have a chance to go take a look at it.

How Various Discussions Emerged: Black Advisory Committee, Every Student Survey, the American Example

Eve 35:20
That's fine. I mean, we really just want to get a sense of the impression of the time. So, I mean, the report also mentions, you know, children of Black communities, and the kinds of gaps or the curriculum or the narrow representations. I'm wondering if you have—where those concerns were coming from, were they coming through the inner city committees? Or were they coming directly from the parents? Or what the discussions were?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 35:57
Both. It came from—you know, at the moment you begin a discussion, and it's being given credibility by the discussion being led by trustees who are committed to dealing with these issues, you're going to surface a whole lot of stuff that wouldn't, would just be under, would be hidden a little bit. But that it's being, that it's going on, that those issues—I was thinking of something and it's just sort of gone out of my head—and as I said, there were, and I can't remember when they began within the board's history, but the various advisory committees as Black advisory committees. And I think [Zanana] Akande, I think I mentioned Beverley Salmon, they were among the people who are in volved in it. And then Dr. Mavis Burke, I recall, she was hired to write a whole bunch of Black Heritage materials. I don't have in my head a complete timeline. All I know that all of these were—they connected to each other. Yeah, you know, and once you begin a discussion here, parallel discussions happening over here.

The one of the things I want to say about the school community relations department was that in setting it up, they were very conscious about hiring staff who were bilingual. So, you would have staff who had, who could speak Italian, or who might even have been Italian, Angelo, for example, was Italian. You have people who are Portuguese, so you have a whole bunch. So, they would have credibility in the school communities that they were working in, and they were assigned to work with families of schools, which had—so they did do that demographic. The other piece of work that happened at that time is that the school board used to do something called the Every Student Survey. And it was the 1971 Every Student Survey where they documented the backgrounds of all of the kids. There might even be—and that was the report, which surfaced a lot of the data about who the children were in the school system. It was called the Every Student Survey, and it was, not just census material, it was actually a survey of all the students in the school system. So, it was fairly— faced with this kind of data, you know, you had to pay attention to what it was telling you.

Eve 39:10

Fascinating—so that, how do you think it went from those discussions around, you know, who the students were, what the community was saying, who the trustees, or to the emergence of the idea that heritage language programs were a viable or necessary thing?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 39:45
Well, I think it was during the work group discussion itself that they understood the importance of language, and it's how do you look at the limitations of the Education Act, which talks about language of instruction? And how do you deal with that and adjust language within the schools. And this is sort of where bureaucrats like Ned McKeown and people like that had something to say because they were very, very creative. And they were used to working around the bullshit from the Ministry, and making things work for Toronto, and this is sort of before the time that the Ministry used to interfere in the operations of. The Toronto School Board, it was largely, ran itself, and was viewed as very much a leader in education. So, you also had educators, I mean, it was, it was in the days of Bill Davis and Tom Wells, and all of those people. So, they were *Progressive* Conservatives who understood that: If you really want people to be part of the society, you had to find ways of making it happen. I don't know how committed they were. I mean, they would have been some, I mean, Davis understood the importance of education. That's why he set up OISE. And it was sort of a recognition that if you don't want your society to blow up, you had to make the cha—I mean, there was the American experience of not having, you know, young Black people become part of the system, so to speak. So, I think it was sort of, you know, I remember Mel saying to us, “You know, we're just 20 years behind what’s happening in the States. You take a look at that and one, make sure that, you know, those are lessons that we do not want to follow.” I remember Mel saying, because he was an American, so he understood the importance of that kind of anthropological record of information. So, I think that all of those conservatives who supported these kinds of programs really had to do with the recognition that it was the civilized thing to do. If you wanted your society to be stable, you cannot separate yourself from what’s going on. You’ve got to make the kind of change that would make that be possible.

Eve 42:56
Are there any particular meetings or conversations or discussions that are super salient you think to these shifts or these discussions or even just memorable for you?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 43:14
It was an ongoing daily conversation about “How are we going to fix this?” It was just because we're a dedicated staff team. It was a dedicated workgroup. We had regular meetings. We were located— I remember the offices, our offices were on the second floor, down the hall from the chairman of the board and the director of education.

Eve 43:40
Where were the offices?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 43:41
It was at 155 College Street, before they sold it. And, you know, so there was a direct, regular face-to-face discussion. And I shared the office with Mel, it was a big room, and the three of us worked out of that room together. The other person you might need to talk to is Rosie da Silva. She was a secretary to Mel and eventually got another job.

Controversies around the Idea of Third Languages

Eve 45:24
The idea as you say, the Education Act, and so on and so forth, were these kinds of tempering structures on the idea of having a vibrant blossoming third languages, in the language of the report, program. But were there other kinds of detractors and controversies around that idea?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 45:57
Well, the school, they, I don't remember them. The teacher unions were not really, as I recall, supportive of this. And they may well have written briefs or letters, which is why those submissions are important to take a look at. They may all have been listed in the workgroup report because—but I do know that there are a lot of submissions, about 140 submissions at least. So, some of those things would be things to look at. I just had an impression that teachers in some of the schools who were not—took it—because maybe they were just fearful for their jobs, maybe they didn't quite understand (coughs).

Eve 47:02
Yeah, well, workload [of the teachers] I suppose.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 47:06
I don't remember workload being a thing, but it had to do with assimilation. Questions of assimilation and coddling versus this is a resource; it's important to our society; this is who these people are as human beings, you can't just obliterate their culture and where they come from, you have to be respectful.

Eve 47:39
I feel like this was a very successful working group.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 47:42
Oh man, we were just incredible. It was very, very successful. We bonded in a big way. One of the—as we were writing a final report I remember we went away to a lodge for a weekend, all of us, to begin that work together. So we spent three or four days—

Eve 48:12
How many of there were you?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 48:13
There were six trustees and three staff. So, we went away for three or four days and hammered out what was going to be in and what would be compromised and what would it be—(stopping the interview to get some water)

[Getting back to the memories about controversies after some chats]

Eve 57:43
Well, I'm glad we're getting the history from you of this HLP, I mean, obviously HLP was controversial, so as you said, the teachers and their unions, were there community groups that were not in favour?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 58:00
Well, I think there weren't community groups so much as there were parent groups, and usually in the north and in the wealthy parts of the city.

Eve 58:13
So, North being like Davisville and up?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 58:15
Yeah, up there. You know, Eglinton, Rosedale, those parts of the city. But you know, that's Gordon [Cressy]'s background. Gordon could actually speak to those people. His father was a banker. You may like Gordon. His profile, and his role, as chair of the school board at that time went a long way to selling this with the naysayers in the establishment. You know, this is where sort of the role of personalities in the role of individuals become really important and pushing controversial policy for it.

After the Final Report: If you were the Education Minister, what would you have done differently?

Eve 59:06
I mean, so, what, in 1976, the final report comes out, and then what?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 59:12
Well, I then, they proceeded with implementation. I mean, I then went off to graduate school. But I remain connected with some of those people, and the School Community Relations Department was in full bloom. And they used to have parents' conventions of over 1000 people, from all the schools in the city. So, there was like a real robust activism that went on.

Eve 59:45
Did you ever attend any of those? Or, this was kind of after?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 59:48
No, this is a bit after. I was doing my own thing, so being in this block, so—

Eve 59:58
I mean, do you— Okay, so if you were education minister or any at that time, what would you have done differently? This is a question we ask everybody. Or in one of these leadership, you know, bureaucratic leadership roles.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:00:20
I don't know that I would have done too much, you know, because I think we've managed to deliver during that early phase, everything that was possible to deliver. And you also have to remember that at that time, school boards had control of taxation, there was such a thing called local levy. So, they imposed local levy for all of the additional programs required for immigrant kids. That was one of the changes that Mike Harris made when he became premier was he stripped school boards and municipalities of their ability to do taxation. And that was one of the single biggest destructors of the Toronto school system, the elimination of local levy, in my view. Because they couldn't leverage the kind of money you needed for these programs. So all the music programs, all the other kinds of programs that are really an important part of a child growing up and having really robust learning opportunities

were—so now trustees have to make [inaudible], for example, outdoor education programs went, properties are sold off, the Boyne river site was leased off to the Bruce Trail people or somebody else, the Island Public School, which provided an opportunity for every grade five and six child to spend a week there, gone. It's now like maybe two or three days. So, things like that were really impacted much later on. But money was not a barrier when we were implementing these programs, in my recollection.

Eve 1:02:25
So, you could kind of miss it wasn't that important that in some ways?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:02:29
Well, it was important because they had to pay attention to the Education Act, right. But if you could pay for these programs that you want to, and you didn't have to go with your cap in hand, somebody to ask for it, you could actually do it. So, the important thing was to actually, you know, make your pedagogical arguments and just implement the programming that you need to implement.

Eve 1:03:00
So Mandy, I mean, you were saying, when you read these reports, you were so intrigued, because you had—so Mandy comes out of the, had worked at the school board in North York, so but you had said that there were lots of things that resonate for you. So I wondered if you had any questions, as well.

Mandy 1:03:18
Yeah, but yeah, first of all, like, I think, being an immigrant child here, like in the 90s. And like going through the system, even as a student, like as you were saying, oh yeah, I remember, you know, the ESL teacher, and you know, the streaming and all of some of those issues. And then I worked later on at York at a reception centre teacher, as an ESL teacher and curriculum consultant. And so some of the things that you said, had really hit home, like, the placement of the program within curriculum, like that's the power house, or that's where things get moved and trickle down. So, reading some of that was really like, it was really fascinating. Like, all of that comes with the history that I didn't really know when I was working at the time.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:04:11
But that was the Toronto School Board.

Mandy 1:04:13
No, I worked at York. York school board.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:04:17
Yeah, what I described was the Toronto School Board.

Mandy 1:04:21
Yes, but of course, like some of the same structures. Yes. Yeah. Because Toronto, everyone just needed to do what Toronto did. Yeah, so it was like maybe a little later on, but it was copied and pasted. And even some of the reception centre classes like some of those things were really neat, because I didn't realize when I was working, like maybe 2013, we were trying to put together some of these new reception classes again. And so having read what Toronto did in the 70s was like, “Wait a minute, these are not new ideas.”

But you said something about, like, the maintenance of culture and language and that some, like the parents weren't really asking for it. So, so then I guess I wanted to clarify with you like, who were the strongest advocates of the maintenance of culture and heritage language?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:05:24
Well, the parents wanted to be able to communicate to their kids, they understood the value of language. I think that was the leadership within the trustees who were actually pushing for these things. Because sometimes, because the trustees and the research, we have looked at sort of pointed towards the direction of where you have to go, if you were serious about changing the institution. So, you know, and so we had those robust conversations about maintenance of culture versus development. And so, heritage language was in part a compromise between the bilingual/bicultural because there was no way there would be acceptance to the third language being the subject being the sort of language of instruction versus subject of instruction. So, heritage language, was the nod to subject of instruction. So, you know, and it's those kinds of nuances that we had to work with, in order to keep things moving. And I am doing all this from memory, so I could be misinterpreting. But, that's my memory of, you know, the kind of debates that went on because this was a long time ago, like maybe 50 years ago.

Trustees' Backgrounds in Toronto Local

Eve 1:07:05
What else do you think we should know?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:07:12
Ah, you know, I mean, I've already described to you the passion and the commitment of those trustees. They were just—

Eve 1:07:21
And that's because they were from those communities, right? You describe like someone from Cabbagetown and—

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:07:25
Well, Gordon was from Cabbagetown, but he was a white guy from a privileged background. Dan Leckie was Irish background, but he's a white guy. Irene Atkinson had been a conservative. She was from Parkdale, but she was as white as they come. Sheila Carey Moore was from the Beach. She was as white as they come. Frank Nagle is pretty white. Alex Chumak, I think he was Polish, but he was not, he didn't have a major role in the work group. You mean the real movers and shakers were Dan, Sheila, Irene and Judith Major. And, you know, Judith was white. She lived in the Annex. Her husband was a well-known theatre producer. So, they didn't come out of your immigrant downtrodden background. They were committed to reforming the school system and to making education, making children be success. Yeah, Mel was an academic in the States. Ed Kerr was a white guy, principal at Clinton Street School, but he had underground experience with those Italian and Portuguese kids from his, from the school background. And he was a well-meaning guy. I don't know how Ed was identified. You know, and Mel was very much viewed as a thought leader within the school board. You know, people would go to him for his wisdom. And he would challenge them. He was a great guy. I learned so much working, working with him.

Do You See a Legacy of that Era in the Present?

Eve 1:09:18
Also, what do you think of the present in relation to that past that you are part of? Do you see a legacy that the present—

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:09:30
A legacy? I think everybody is just treading water. I think we're in a very sad times. And it's very much treading water. There's no money to pay for anything. There's no money to pay for the things that should be implemented. So, you know, I just worry about those kids. Kids from— and this is sort of where the role of parents become important. Kids who have rich families will do fine. Kids, there are kids going to school hungry, there are kids who don't have abilities to travel and experience world and do things or go to summer camps and stuff like that. So, you know, we're in very sad times. It doesn't have to be that way.

Eve 1:10:26
So, what is the legacy of that era? Of that working group, of that work? And those amazing folks?

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:10:34
Well, the legacy is, has been to show what's possible and what's necessary. It's the examples that are important, just as important. And there are people who have graduated out of that experience, who remember it. And who remained committed to a different kind of city, which is why I think, I mean, I would also say to that, it was the implementation of multiculturalism programs and discussions about multiculturalism, and diversity in all the schools across the city and their parents and their families that helped create a more welcoming, positive—because you've got over half the population of the city. You've got the kids, and you've got their parents, and you've got essentially, the city learning. It's not like City Hall, which is just picking up garbage, not interacting with people, you've actually got that kind of social transformation taking place within an institution and with the people. And I think that's the kind of legacy that is important, I think, to why the city is as welcoming as it is. But, because over half of the population of the city now is immigrant, they don't have that background. They don't have that experience. They don't have that kind of exposure to a welcoming institution, even though they try. They just don't have the same sense of history, which is why I think it's a very challenging time for everybody.

Eve 1:12:39
Well, thank you so much. Honestly, what a like, really what I feel like we've been floating above an era and really getting a good perspective on that. And it is, it's really special to be able to talk to someone who was there. You know, it's one thing to read the PDFs that we've made of these documents. And it's such a different thing to have them kind of come to life through your sharing of those times. So, I really want to thank you. First me, because I'm, I get to enjoy it, because I'm here, but also for the project. And of course, if there's anything you remember, or you think we should know about, please feel free to contact us. And yeah, is there anything, Mandy, that you wanted to add?

Mandy 1:13:33
Yeah, I guess just personally, in the last 20 years, figuring out with a school board and with others, other ESL teachers how to respond to international students. I feel like what your work has, has left a

legacy on that work on that responsiveness. And I guess I wish I had known more about it before, because I think it would have served as a good model of what's possible to even ask for.

Eve 1:14:10
Yeah, hopefully, because of this project, people will be able to know that. So, thank you. Thank you, honestly.

Ceta Ramkhalawansingh 1:14:16
Well, I'm glad I could help you with, have a greater appreciation of our past.

Eve 1:14:22
The amazing work that was done here in Toronto. Yeah. So, we will definitely follow up with you.

[End of transcript]