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Article

Critical Social Inclusion of Adult Migrant Language Learners in Working Life: Experiences From SFI and LINC Programs

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Abstract

How can integration education programs facilitate the more seamless inclusion of migrant newcomers into working life and civil society? Traditionally, integration policy and practice have been framed within a nation-state discourse in which views of migrant incorporation are grounded within a bordered nationalism embodying a native–migrant dichotomy that reifies the view of the “migrant other” as a subject defined by its “lack” in competence and agency. In our qualitative multiple case study, we explored the bridging potential of integration programs in facilitating the inclusion of migrant students within working life in Helsinki and Edmonton. We examined the “inclusion/sectionalities,” referring to the intersections of inclusion and exclusion that position adults enrolled in SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) and LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) language integration programs in the liminal spaces between belonging and othering. Guided by an understanding of critical social inclusion where migrants set the boundaries for interactions with authorities based upon their own needs and interests, we propose a transformational approach. Here migrant learners participate in a structural process where the fluid nature of social, political, and economic arrangements is consistently renegotiated on principles of egalitarianism and the full exercise of critical agency, herein envisioned as deliberate action resisting the social domination of racialized minorities by challenging and redefining institutional structures.

Keywords

adult migrant student; critical social inclusion; inclusion/sectionality; working life integration

Issue

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1. Introduction

A characteristic of both Canadian and Finnish social policy initiatives discussing integration regimes for newly arrived migrants is the rhetoric that state-sponsored integration programs should closely align with national economic needs (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2010; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in Finland, 2016). The prescribed settlement process requires that migrants participate fully in the labour market, within a nebulously defined broader objective of increasing their overall societal participation (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018; Saukkonen, 2017). According to the

2010 Finnish Integration Act, for example, migrant inclusion into society can be considered successful when they have secured employment (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016). As a result, the main thrust of both Finnish and Canadian integration education programs is on enhancing employability and accruing language competences. Failing that implies that one’s integration, conceived of in primarily individual terms, must be considered unsuccessful (Pöyhönen & Tarnanen, 2015). However, there is also a recognition that migrant skills and competences have been underutilized within working life and that their educational journeys are often long, convoluted, sometimes

truncated, and frequently frustrating (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016; OECD, 2018). A selection of research examining the obstacles to effective labour market inclusion of Finnish and Canadian migrants includes deficiencies in information and guidance, a lack of recognition of foreign credentials and previous work experience, employers' requirements for native working experience and language fluency, insufficient language skills, discrimination and institutional racism, and a lack of social support as well as employment networks (Alho, 2020; Ertorer et al., 2020; Kaushik & Drolet, 2018; Masoud et al., 2020; Nakhaie & Kazemipur, 2013; Pöyhönen & Tarnanen, 2015; Sakamoto et al., 2010). Consequently, integration programs such as SFI and LINC mirror wider changes in social policy within the welfare state, which promote market-oriented interventions and measurable outcomes by emphasizing the accrual of skills and competences that are defined according to labour market demands (Haque, 2017; Kärkkäinen, 2017). It remains a point of discussion if migrants are automatically construed as unemployed within these programs which thereby seek to ameliorate this perceived lack of employability through processes of deskilling, reskilling, and upskilling (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004). Although both Canada and Finland are nations where official bilingualism is constitutionally enshrined, practices vary according to how and where integration programs are offered in the minority languages of French (CAN) and Swedish (FIN). Regional factors such as the proportion of minority language speakers in a given locality, distinct local/provincial legislations, and a general willingness or predisposition to engage with minority concerns affect their availability.

In this article, we explore the bridging potential of integration programs in facilitating the inclusion of migrant students within working life at NorQuest College in Edmonton, Canada, and the Swedish Adult Education Institute (Arbis) in Helsinki, Finland, using a multiple case study approach. We examine the "inclusion/exclusion," referring to the intersections of inclusion and exclusion that position adult migrants enrolled in LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) and SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) language integration programs in the liminal spaces between belonging and othering (Pötzsch, 2020). Guided by an understanding of critical social inclusion where migrant learners renegotiate social, political, and economic arrangements with majorities based on principles of egalitarianism and the full exercise of critical agency, we propose a transformational approach. Here inclusion is not prescriptive but a dynamic, involving, and evolving process.

2. Integration vs. Critical Social Inclusion

2.1. Why Definitions Matter

National integration education programmes such as LINC and SFI have tended to adopt a "civic integra-

tionism" (Joppke, 2009) in which "good" migrants are reified by demonstrating language proficiency, filling labour market niches, and adopting canons of liberal values. However, and this constitutes the core of our article, such programs also prescribe how interactions between students and staff configure inclusion. They expose inclusion/exclusion as well as the attendant liminal spaces in which migrant students are subsequently positioned. Sometimes they can be both included and excluded within the same shifting zone (e.g., the labour market). How students are positioned depends greatly on who serves as an arbiter over which expressions of migrant diversity either "help" or "hinder" inclusion. Given the interdependence of inclusion/exclusion, describing the process of social inclusion in integration education programs matters, for as Ahmed (2012, p. 183) states, "the very promise of inclusion can be the concealment of exclusion." It is, therefore, imperative to explore where the concepts and attending practices of integration and critical social inclusion diverge as they are often employed synonymously or interchangeably. Given the static and often stigmatizing implication of the term "immigrant," in this article we have chosen to employ the more fluid and less pejorative description of "migrant" in referring to adult students in integration education programs while acknowledging that it too is a contested term.

2.2. Integration

Western integration policy has been criticized as a thinly veiled attempt to assimilate cultural and other differences into the essentialist narratives of homogenous national cultures (Favell, 2022; Schinkel, 2018). It targets integrating the "migrant other" within a largely static, uncritically depicted national home—not general societal transformation (Hage, 2000). The majority's underlying attitude of "we know what's best for immigrants" robs migrants of their critical engagement creating relationships of dependence on the receiving society for which they are later chastised (Goldberg, 2015). Another difficulty is that integration is often gauged as either a present state or an outcome. It is measured in labour market participation, language competence, educational diplomas, etc., and thereby obscures the link between outcomes and structural constraints (Crul & Schneider, 2012). A more ontological critique focuses on the social imaginary which informs our conceptions of integration. When integration refers to persons "outside of society," who need to be grafted in, society then becomes circumscribed as the myopic domain of entitled majorities who are given an exemption from such integration regimes. Society thus conceived has no integration problems. However, if it were posited that society includes all who move within its national/international domain then aiming integration measures solely at distinct individuals or groups of "migrant others" becomes problematic (Schinkel, 2019).

The interminable migration worries embedded in this exclusionary understanding of society may, in fact, mask fears of “real” integration (Beauzamy & Féron, 2012; Lentin & Titley, 2011). On the one hand, “we” must be seen to want to integrate “them” while paradoxically reaffirming the “truth” of their non-integrability in order to justify their illiberal treatment. In integration discourse, groups of migrant students are typically identified by what they lack, such as linguistic competences or work experience in the receiving country. Accordingly, migrant learners are expected to update or reform traditions and skills that are presupposed to impede their ability to integrate. In this way, integration programs become a medium for deskilling and re-skilling students predicated on assumptions of “the lack” (Kärkkäinen, 2017). Explanations for performance deficits are attributed to the observed characteristics of individuals or otherness of the group and are not placed at the door of the educational system in which they participate or which they subsequently leave (Hilt, 2015).

2.3. Critical Social Inclusion

By contrast, critical social inclusion shifts the adaption burden from migrants to society. This transpositional reimagining of inclusion forces majorities to turn their gaze from the migrant other onto themselves to interrogate how their taken-for-granted entitlements are reflected in and reproduced by society. This necessitates that civil institutions tackle inequalities based on class, gender, race, and religion as structural impediments to the effective exercise of political agency and confront hegemonies (Stewart, 2000). Recognizing that societal structures are vicissitudinous is a prerequisite for social transformation on this scale. Inclusion, so envisaged, is not based on integrationist responses that presume migrant subsumption into something as vaguely defined and static as “society.” It entails a clear recognition that inclusion’s egalitarianism goals are illusory if the assumptions and practices regulating everyday social and institutional life remain ethnically skewed and racially blinkered. Inherently, this implies a radical transformation of the aims and performance of inclusion. The boundaries of solidarity are redrawn, “not by transforming those on the outside to clones of insiders, but by valorizing the diversity that they bring with them” (Kivisto, 2015, p. 25).

In our definition of critical inclusion, migrants are egalitarian collaborators in renegotiating political, social, and economic arrangements with majorities on principles of social justice (Askonas & Stewart, 2000). How inclusion is practiced is not prescribed by majorities but is reciprocally negotiated and transacted with racialized minorities. Its means and schemes are mutable and adaptable to the singularities of social circumstances. Social inclusion in this sense is not seen as a more benign and less assimilationist version of integrating migrants into a pre-defined society but rather into a process of social imagining that is transformative, emanating from

migrants’ own needs and circumstances. When this happens, the boundaries of solidarity can expand (Atac & Rosenberger, 2013). Thus, the most crucial difference between integration and inclusion rests in the ideological and practical contents with which these are invested. The inclusion challenge is to embrace society as a dynamic, multitudinous construct within which social boundaries are defined and contested by diverse participants with unequal access to sources of power and avenues of persuasion; and to acknowledge this inequality as largely structural while attempting to alleviate it. As such, it must be recognized that all projects of inclusion potentially generate new forms of exclusion which are subject, in turn, to critique and democratic reform (Pöttsch, 2018).

2.4. Structural Research Examining LINC and SFI Integration Programs

Previous research that scrutinizes LINC and SFI from a structural perspective, by analysing the unconscious societal and institutional norms shaping pedagogy and integration regimes is generally sparse. However, there are notable exceptions. Among them, are those that have interrogated the ramifications of entrenching principles of neoliberalism and new public management, exemplified by a focus on migrant employability and self-sufficiency (see Carlson & Jacobson, 2019; Y. Guo, 2013; Haque, 2017; Paquet & Xhardez, 2020; Sandwall, 2013; Slade, 2015; Webb, 2017). Additionally, studies have critiqued the heavy focus on language acquisition in underlining that language proficiency alone is not a guarantor for social inclusion or socio-economic advancement (see Ennser-Kananen & Pettitt, 2017; Pöttsch, 2020; Rosén, 2014). Research has also problematized the “deficiency discourse” in which migrant learners are identified by what they lack in perceived language as well as cultural and employment competences (see Gibb, 2015; Hertzberg, 2015; Hilt, 2015). These studies pose the question of whether the policy goal—“full” inclusion in society—is at all realizable if exclusion processes are an internal part of inclusion processes. More generally, the concept of migrant employability defined through “individual responsibility” (Colliander et al., 2022; Ertorer et al., 2020; Fejes & Berglund, 2010; Lindblad & Lundahl, 2020) and “deskilling & reskilling” (Aydiner & Rider, 2022; S. Guo, 2015; Ortiga, 2021), as being equated with “successful” integration (Nakhaie & Kazemipur, 2013; Pöyhönen & Tarnanen, 2015) and as “creating liminalities” (Diedrich & Omanović, 2023; Kaushik & Drolet, 2018; Sakamoto et al., 2010; Yijälä & Nyman, 2017) is central to our discussion.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methods and Data

We examined how social inclusion was conceived, contested, and practically operationalized within LINC and

SFI curricular modules designed to enhance migrant employability and labour market participation. Research questions guiding our inquiry were: What is the bridging potential of SFI and LINC integration programs in facilitating the inclusion of adult migrant students within working life? What are the resulting inclusions in positioning adult migrant students created by these efforts at work-life inclusion?

Through both semi-structured and in-depth qualitative interviews, we foregrounded the experiences of staff, students, and employers. This study took inspiration from research designs that embody a collaborative, participant-centred approach (Brown & Strega, 2005). Accordingly, we spent extended fieldwork periods in Helsinki and Edmonton between the years of 2018–2019. We adopted a multiple case study research approach instead of a comparative case study approach to represent the experiences of contributors. The latter seeks similarities and differences among cases based on a few specified attributes. However, this focus on pre-described variables or topics for comparisons can obscure the situationality and complexity of cases and deliver more simplistic rather than “thick descriptions” (Stake, 2006, p. 82). By contrast, the aim of multiple case studies approaches is to elucidate new information about a broad pattern that holds across cases and analyze the commonalities that characterize them. Therefore, in presenting our findings we have not adopted the comparative approach by juxtaposing and separately contrasting NorQuest or Arbis cases but sought to highlight recurring patterns as well as strengths and weaknesses accompanied by the most representative illustrative quotes that connect our cross-case themes.

The material consists of 53 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers, administrators, students, support personnel, and representatives from working life (32 from Arbis and 21 from NorQuest). Interview transcripts and observation logs generated a multifaceted qualitative dataset, analyzed using ATLAS.ti aided inductive content analysis. This included stages of coding, categorization, and theming. In the coding stage, single codes including both emic and etic labels were inserted in the margins of collected data archive files representing the entirety of the fieldwork material. This stage was followed by categorization, i.e., labels were subsequently subsumed under code groups and later categories. In this grouping, although codes were taken from the entire database in ATLAS.ti, a tag was made next to each element of data to indicate which case narrative it originated from. Code groups represented intra-institutional factors such as curriculum structure, study choices, student and teacher participation, discrimination, etc., as well as extra-institutional factors including liaising, employer readiness, goal setting, practice experiences, and value bases among others. This initiated the sorting of codes into related categories depending on their contextual linkages and interrelations. Interview

guides helped to streamline the coding process as interviews followed a certain sequential rhythm. The flexible nature of the code family program in ATLAS.ti also allowed for a creative reordering and re-configuring of code groups and interlinkages in arriving at themes. Ostensibly, the theming stage in the study began rather early. During data collection and in the first stages of analysis, certain subjective truths embedded in the material began to emerge (i.e., the role of enabling and disabling structural factors). This cognitive readiness was refined during the mapping stages of subsequent fieldwork periods. The code family program served as the means for crystallizing the final themes. In making theme choices, the sheer frequency of particular codes did not necessarily dictate final theme selection. In fact, it was sometimes the atypical or marginal categories that encapsulated a particular poignancy in describing the phenomenon of work-life inclusion. Some considerations that helped in theming were thinking about how themes linked up with research questions and how they reflected the bordered reality of single cases. For example, is the chosen theme one which holds true for all case studies? Before making a final selection then, we revisited the NorQuest and Arbis material separately and compared the associations the themes had with the data. Ultimately, our analysis yielded the following final themes: “fitting in” and “background matters.”

In conducting interviews (45–90 min.), venues, times, and dates were adapted to the wishes and needs of the interviewees. Participants creatively challenged and personalized our dialogues on large thematic areas covering “self-reflexivity” (i.e., how informants reflected on their own understanding of and contribution to inclusion within working life), inclusion’s “performance” denoting how inclusive practices were practically operationalized within and beyond institutions, and the “structural factors” aiding or impeding its implementation. In interviews with migrant students, the policy of giving voice and choice dictated arrangements. SFI learners spoke either Swedish or English, the latter often being the preferred choice as most students’ competence in English exceeded their Swedish language proficiency. Unfortunately, our fieldwork at NorQuest was truncated by the Covid pandemic and thus LINC student interviews that were scheduled for 2020 could not be completed. This also accounts for the underrepresentation of LINC student voices in the analysis.

3.2. Ethical Considerations

We built a foundation of trust with study participants and relevant gatekeepers by establishing contacts in advance including preparatory visits to the schools. Gaining access to migrant student groups was aided by introductory information sessions where we solicited their participation by distributing formal letters of consent and explained the voluntary nature of participation as well as issues of confidentiality, privacy, and data

security. To ensure confidentiality, the identities of interviewees were protected by assigning pseudonyms and by the non-disclosure of identifying background information. When working with vulnerable participants such as migrant students, data access by whom and for what purposes is a recurring question. We therefore devised a data management plan that ensured that during and after the project, all data would be secured in a locked storage and saved on secure servers with each file protected by a password. We also had to submit a thorough ethical application before commencing the NorQuest College fieldwork. Separate ethical applications were not a requirement for the Finnish case studies.

3.3. Site Descriptions: NorQuest LINC and Arbis SFI

LINC is a federally funded program introduced by the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (part of CIC) in 1992 (Cervatiuc & Ricento, 2012). According to its mission statement, it aims to facilitate the integration of migrants into Canadian culture by providing language and settlement training and by extending possibilities to develop employment and social competences. In the province of Alberta, prerequisites for student eligibility include having permanent residence status and a preliminary Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) assessment (CIC, 2015). During the time of our fieldwork, NorQuest College's LINC program educated more than 1500 migrant students in integration classes ranging from CLB levels 3–8. Structured around portfolio-based learning assessments as the foundation for curricular development, it grouped students of the same educational background together according to their previous educational histories. In recognition of the varied life situations of students, NorQuest College's LINC offers a wide range of full and part-time studies, as well as specialized classes organised in flexible time schedules (Lefebvre, 2014).

In 2019, the program was in a phase of transition to meet the Canadian Federal Government's increasing employment focus for newly arrived migrants with all CLB levels now featuring in-class modules on employment including themes on CV-writing and job interview preparation (Paquet & Xhardez, 2020). In addition, the newly introduced, governmentally subsidized LincWorks program presented CLB 3–5 students with opportunities to engage in paid, entry-level job internships. Community service-learning modules provided migrant learners at CLB 6–7 levels with experiential learning components. Concomitantly, LINC provided employment certificate training in food safety, first aid, and occupational health to facilitate workplace entry. These modules were embedded within a comprehensive net of student support services including workplace-integrated learning (WIL) staff who liaised with work-life collaborators and matched learners with placements, social workers, employment counselors, and a career center that assisted in securing employment. Unlike the Finnish SFI

courses, however, obligatory work internship periods for all participating students were not an integral part of LINC.

The Swedish Arbis SFI represents an interesting case as it is embedded within a majority language (Finnish) environment offering integration education in the other official (and minority) language, Swedish. Arbis offers an SFI program originally conceived of as a pilot within the national integration project Participating in Finland (Tarnanen et al., 2013). Its curriculum is based on the guidelines laid down by the National Board of Education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2012) and on the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010) aimed at advancing migrant integration by facilitating their active participation in working life and civic activities. SFI is targeted at migrant newcomers with statutory integration support including an integration plan from the local employment services but can also be accessed as voluntary studies as part of *fria bildningen*, or the informal, state-subsidized adult education system. It comprises 20 hours/week of compulsory language learning in one of the official languages (Finnish or Swedish). According to Arbis' own mission statement (Helsingfors Arbis integrationsgrupp, 2012, p. 5), "the education aims to promote social justice and help migrants to adapt to and engage with Finnish society while simultaneously affirming their own cultural background." Participation is preceded by an entrance test focusing on reading, writing, and listening skills, grammar knowledge, as well as math and IT skills.

Arbis offers vocational components in four thematic areas: (a) working life skills; (b) knowledge of working life; (c) career choice; and (d) internships. The "working life skills" course provides practical skills relevant to the Finnish labour market, whereas the goal of the "knowledge of working life" course is that the students receive basic facts about working life practices as well as labor legislation. The students also become familiar with job search channels to enhance their employability in addition to participating in CV and job application workshops. During the "career choice" course, the students receive individual career supervision and create a career plan. The final part consists of an internship in a Swedish-speaking organization for six weeks. Important support that complements the work of language teachers are career supervisors and internship providers.

4. Findings

A consideration in representing our findings was that any identified theme(s) should inherently highlight recurring cross-case patterns in keeping within a multiple case study approach. We have therefore avoided separating cases into a Finnish/Canadian comparative dichotomy and chosen those quotes that most poignantly describe recurring patterns as well as strengths and weaknesses of working life inclusion present at NorQuest College LINC as well as Arbis SFI.

4.1. Fitting In

The following quote neatly encapsulates a recurring theme within our research, namely that the thrust and direction of curricular components targeting working life inclusion within LINC and SFI integration programs aimed largely at migrants “fitting in” to meet labour market and employer needs:

And then we talked about the Canadian workplace...how can you change and fit in, so it works for your employer. (LINCWorks curriculum planner)

Given the articulated priority that these programs align with social policy directives aimed at enhancing migrant employability in both Canada and Finland, a clear shift towards work-life integration was evident. LINC’s curricular employment modules at all CLB levels as well as SFI’s compulsory internships for all migrant learners attest to this. Some research participants testified that these had several inclusive outcomes including student empowerment:

One lady from Syria, her dream was to be in child-care, went through the job interview. It was not easy and she did amazing. They hired her and I swear for the next two days she smiled like....She was so happy and so it’s kind of like a dream coming true. (LINCWorks planner)

The job-matching endeavours undertaken by WIL staff who liaised with work-life collaborators pairing learners with placements after assessing student needs and wishes represented another constructive way in which LINC attempted to bridge the school-labour market divide. Integrated or subsidized work placements within also provided those migrant learners who seemed “stuck” repeating the same CLB levels multiple times, an opportunity for a fresh start, the chance to establish community contacts, and to practice other skills. Such programs supplemented an awareness of the importance of structural supports in facilitating migrant employment if governmental aims, as well as educational goals, were to be met. Similarly, in the Finnish context, successful internships could work as bridge builders to the labour market and the Swedish-speaking community at large in providing opportunities to SFI students to improve their language and organisational skills, and expand their social networks:

It is important for us to understand where they are going with a five-year interval, i.e., where this person wants to end up. And because we have so many work assignments, we take his background into account. One of the trainees worked with maintaining a register system, answered the phone, helped at events. Another has worked at a fair with market activities. My recommendation hits pretty high when I know

lots of people and have a massive network. The students have realized it themselves, when they see which people move around here and who they meet. (CEO of a Swedish-speaking association)

The employers’ commitment to devote their time to the students’ needs and to incorporate them into the work culture was of utmost importance for a successful internship. This was also emphasized by Arbis staff who provided employers with instructions:

Arbis advised us to give the student meaningful working tasks, but they also pointed out [that] the priority in the program was to provide the student with an opportunity to extend his social networks and be part of our coffee community. (Head of a Finnish-Swedish NGO)

Although finding internships for highly educated migrants proved difficult, the majority of the interviewed SFI students were satisfied with their practice placement even when these did not always match their previous education or work experience. The findings, however, also demonstrate that the curricular modules aiming at labour market inclusion generated their own unique inclusions. LINCWorks, for example, was a top-down initiative with a curriculum described by teachers as inflexible and prescriptive. It embodied a distinct focus on personal change by emphasizing competences such as “soft skills,” sweepingly defined as social and behavioural employment skills migrants seemingly lacked. Topics on discrimination and racism in working life, as well as how to confront and address these were conspicuous by their absence. A poignant example of the exclusionary outcomes of purportedly inclusionary measures was how students were selected for LINCWorks:

Students were put into those classes. So, they didn’t choose it, and there was some backlash, so we were instructed not to call it LINCWorks. Because students didn’t want to think that they were put into the LINCWorks class, as there was a bit of a stigma....They deserve to know, and that’s part of treating students with respect and not being so paternalistic. (LINCWorks teacher)

The “stigma” described above was rooted in students’ perceptions that a program funneling them into low-wage, entry-level work would stymie their language learning, deprive them of opportunities for advancement, and set them apart. Other concerns, however, were more fundamental in nature and questioned the neo-liberal ideology underpinning the increasing employment focus as potentially creating a migrant underclass:

One of my concerns is that we are creating this underclass. We are saying, oh, come to Canada, we’ll give you enough language that you can clean hotels for

the rest of your life. Students have aspirations beyond that, and I think we do them a disservice if we don't realize that and facilitate their fuller integration into Canada....I really struggle with this. Are we saying that [paid] work is the only way to be a successful participant in our culture, our society? What kind of work are we preparing students for? Is it just to fill in those low-wage jobs nobody wants to do? (LINC teacher)

4.2. Background Matters

Another perhaps unintended side effect of the preoccupation with primarily job-related skills was that it failed to recognize the heterogeneity of student backgrounds, occupational aspirations, and personal or educational choices, thus paradoxically removing choice:

How we approach work doesn't speak to a lot of women who've been working in traditional roles. It was very demotivating when we were talking about employment because in this class the women were either on the verge of becoming grandmothers who had worked hard to get their families here safe, or they were really young moms who are just like, yeah, I wanna work someday. Programs are focused on retail, cleaning, unskilled construction and none of those speak to where these groups of women are. (LINC teacher)

The above quote illustrates not only the exclusionary outcomes of the myopic focus on paid work which fails to validate the width and breadth of societal participation but also describes the liminal position of those migrant learners who do not fit the paid jobseeker profile. Lack of recognition of students' educational and social background was also characteristic of SFI classes. For example, an SFI teacher showed a list of "best jobs" based on open vacancies with an emphasis on low-skilled work. These were marketed as "easily accessible jobs" or "jobs to look for." Such rhetoric facilitates the devaluation of the existing skills, experiences, and diverse educational backgrounds of SFI students.

A tangential result of helping students "fit in" to meet labour market and employer needs was the discourse of "managing expectations" and "transferable skills" within working life-centred curricular modules. The subtext of exhorting students to adjust their expectations—to be "realistic"—in relation to future career plans and the choice of work internships sometimes served as a justification why their practice or employment wishes could not always be met:

We get a lot of [complaint] calls. In one example, we asked a student who normally works with our seniors on recreation to help sweep up leaves because our groundskeeper was short someone, and the student said no, that's not what he's here to do. But we also have to work on coaching them a bit if they want

that really good reference or move up in a career over time that they have to take on these additional responsibilities when asked. (LINC program planner)

What is interesting in the above quote is that instead of recognizing the student's agency in questioning the occupational boundaries of his job, the latter is essentially told to "go along to get along" because an employer's positive reference outweighs such concerns. Thus, those migrants who failed to "manage their expectations" following LINC and employer needs were consigned to the liminal position of being included within the labour market at the expense of their own initiative and aspirations. Also, in SFI internships, student needs were sometimes subordinated to those of employers by requiring migrant learners to work in jobs neither fitting their education nor motivation. For example, two SFI students worked alone in an archive during their entire internship, whereas another student with a background in law worked in a kindergarten. Interestingly though, employers stressed that they too lacked information about students' cultural, social, and political backgrounds. Given that some students had arrived as traumatized refugees from countries still plagued by war, this underlines the importance of majorities engaging with racialized minorities before subjecting them to fixed integration or employment regimes.

The rhetoric of "transferable skills" followed a similar logic. It essentially propagated the necessity of reskilling students by telling them that maintaining their previous careers may be difficult due to differing employment standards, but that their skillset could be readjusted to conform to related occupations where labour market shortages existed. Although staff attempted to meet students' wishes by matching them with working life partners, they also admitted to coaxing them to select related alternatives:

We try and help broaden that perspective and find ways for them to see that, "[if] I wanna be an administrative assistant so I'm gonna go volunteer at a non-profit and work at the reception desk." Maybe your title is not administrative assistant, but obviously you're getting experience on your resume to help you get there. We struggle a lot with students, for them to understand the concept of transferable skills and the fact that if you work in an office here, it'll help get you skills that will eventually lead to the career you want. (LINC planner)

These poignant examples from the LINC program reveal once again the impact of inclusionarities and their resulting liminal positioning of migrant learners. While the predominant discourses of Western immigration regimes position employed migrants as successfully integrated—as included—it becomes apparent how migrant voices and competences are easily devalued and excluded within this narrative.

5. Discussion

To build an understanding of how LINC and SFI integration education facilitates the work-life inclusion of adult migrant learners, our study revealed a number of inclusions and the attendant liminal spaces which situated students between belonging and othering. The theme of migrants “fitting in” to meet labour market needs, for example, illustrates the paradoxical nature of the double gestures of inclusion and exclusion (Popkewitz, 2009). While the pedagogical shift from predominantly language competence accrual to employability signals a recognition that social inclusion demanded more from integration programs, how employability was operationalized in neo-liberal terms simultaneously delimited migrant participation and agency.

Given the resource capacity, extensive institutional supports, and breadth of curricular choice within NorQuest LINC, it became apparent that organising working life modules was easier for larger programs than those in resource and personnel-strapped community-based educational providers like Arbis. NorQuest LINC’s network of employers, social workers, counselors, and other career planning initiatives was unmatched and attested to social inclusion being seen as a multi-sectorial societal concern (Lindblad & Lundahl, 2020). The job-matching and labour market liaising done by WIL staff as well as a preparedness among employers extended empowering opportunities to students who were, for various reasons, not best served by classroom-based, language-centered pedagogies. At the same time, by framing employability within a narrative of personal responsibility and change, migrants both individually and as a group became the objects of specific efforts to ameliorate the “immigrant condition” (Hertzberg, 2015), thereby excluding their aspirations in order to “fit them into” the labour market (Hilt, 2015). Prescriptive curricula stressed adaptation while omitting discussions on discrimination, gender inequality, and occupational rights in presenting an idealized universal workplace culture (Y. Guo, 2013; Slade, 2015). The recruitment processes in LINCWorks where students were enrolled without their knowledge to conceal the course’s “low-wage job funneling” stigma illustrated another exclusionary outcome of top-down employability schemes and the liminal position in which it placed migrant learners. SFI students could also benefit from a more targeted coordination of internships which fully involve them in the planning and implementation of their practice periods and reciprocally connect internship learning more closely to language and cultural study modules in class. Crucially, employers must extend students’ greater opportunities to exercise their language skills and familiarize themselves with working cultures, while involving them in Swedish-speaking community networks.

Within the “fitting in to fill the domestic skills gap” discourse that included an emphasis on transferrable

skills, managing expectations, and de-skilling there is a danger that employability goals become hegemonic tales in which migrants’ prior work skills and qualifications are devalued (Webb, 2017). These fears are encapsulated in the LINC instructor’s quote on the creation of an ethnic underclass as an inclusionary outcome of work-life integration modules where migrant subjectivities are constructed through their ability to negotiate and survive the “vicious cycle of skilling” (Masoud et al., 2020, p. 116). This cycle becomes a disempowering reskilling treadmill where, in order to meet labour market demands, students are compelled to interminably “re-educate” themselves while relinquishing their own career aspirations. Aydiner and Rider (2022) argue that the insecurities in the various stages of the migration and settlement process have the cumulative effect of compounding migrant vulnerabilities. There is also evidence that collaborations between employers and public organizations in providing internships followed the “fitting in” script (Diedrich & Omanović, 2023). At an elementary level, the LINC teacher’s query if the only value students have is that of a worker for certain pre-selected occupations represents a crucial commentary on labour market inclusion efforts which equate successful integration with securing any sort of employment. This employability rhetoric was further pedagogically defined in the preeminence given to components in working life modules that positioned migrant students as neoliberal subjects who must become flexible lifelong learners and entrepreneurial subjects made responsible for their own employment outcomes (Haque, 2017, p. 107). These sustained a deficiency discourse while tacitly enabling discrimination by employers (Ertorer et al., 2020; Sakamoto et al., 2010). Moreover, it entrenched power hierarchies by exempting majorities from interrogating their own assumptions embedded in current labour market policies and integration regimes (Pöttsch, 2020).

Our findings are in line with previous studies showing that migrants’ multiple subjectivities are often not taken into consideration in “pragmatic” curricular discourses around labour market participation. There is a danger that if student-centered, participatory approaches are replaced with a number of prescribed skills and normative behaviours migrants are to “perform” in occupational settings, one imposes not only whose knowledge is valued, but also nullifies the reciprocal bridging potential of such programs (Ennser-Kananen & Pettitt, 2017; Gibb, 2015; Sandwall, 2013; Webb, 2017). Evidence from NorQuest LINC’s new labour market initiatives suggests that this was precisely what was happening under mounting governmental and administrative pressures to find employment for LINC learners. While labour market integration modules idealized employed migrants as successfully integrated—as included—it became apparent how migrant voices and competences are easily devalued and excluded within this narrative.

6. Conclusions

In our study, we explored the bridging potential of integration programs in facilitating the inclusion of adult migrant students within working life in Canada and Finland while highlighting the resulting inclusions of such initiatives. It posits that despite the inclusive aims of shifting the education's integration focus from language competence to working life skills, the neo-liberal framing of employability within LINC and SFI buttressed myopic nationalisms. While providing learners with opportunities for work-life engagement, labour market training modules also reinforced a native-migrant dichotomy that reified the view of the migrant other and simultaneously delimited their participation and agency. In the cycle of deskilling and reskilling that discourses of "fitting in" and "background matters" set in motion, it was expected that learners, as rational subjects, would accept the choices that had been made for them. This contradicts conceptualizations of critical social inclusion where migrants reconfigure the boundaries for social interactions with majorities based upon their own needs and interests. A transformational approach must therefore target both the policy and practice of labour market initiatives for adult migrants to foreground plural ways of belonging. It must engage migrant learners in educational partnerships starting at the curriculum planning stage premised upon promoting their existing skills in negotiations with work-life collaborators while unpacking the prevailing attitudes that lie at the root of deficiency discourses. This necessitates educating employers and program planners by alternatively exposing them to the "integration spotlight" where integration regimes make reciprocal demands on them. S. Guo (2015) advocates the creation of spaces for transformative learning where the qualifications, experiences, and transnational networks of migrants are validated by educators and employers. To achieve this, work-life participation's neo-liberal premises must be interrogated in a process of joint political agency where all program participants reimagine structures within and beyond institutions. After all, are you "integrated" as soon as you cross a poverty subsistence line? Attain an average wage? When you are no longer a visible social "problem" (as a group)? (Favell, 2019, pp. 5–6). An impediment to a transformative approach on this scale, however, lies in the very nature of integration education programs. These typically emphasize more apolitical incarnations of language and cultural learning aimed at the uncritical adoption of societal norms. As such, they extend limited opportunities for teachers and students to collectively utilize their critical agency in challenging the civic integrationist core of neo-liberal labour market measures.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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