

Empowering Immigrant Women Through Continuing Education: A Conceptual Analysis of Integration in Quebec's Early Childhood Sector

Fatma Abuareaf, Champlain College Saint-Lambert, Canada

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines how immigrant women navigate integration within Quebec's early childhood sector by analyzing the structural forces that shape their linguistic, vocational, and professional trajectories. Situated within a province where French proficiency functions as both a symbolic and institutional requirement, the paper explores how language policy, credential recognition, and workplace norms intersect to regulate access to stable employment. Drawing on theoretical lenses including linguistic capital, integration regimes, interculturalism, gendered labour, and continuing education, the analysis highlights how immigrant women rebuild professional identities while negotiating institutional expectations that both enable and constrain their mobility. Despite Quebec's reliance on immigrant labour to address chronic staffing shortages, policy–practice gaps persist: linguistic thresholds, regulatory norms, and institutional cultures often delay or limit full participation. Continuing education emerges as a dual site—one that empowers women through training and recognition, yet simultaneously reproduces the structural expectations governing entry into the sector. By synthesizing these dynamics, the paper offers a conceptual framework that clarifies how integration is produced at the intersection of language, regulation, gender, and institutional discourse, contributing to broader discussions on equity and structural inclusion in Quebec's early childhood system.

Keywords: immigrant women, early childhood sector, linguistic capital, continuing education, integration regimes

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Introduction

Quebec's early childhood sector is undergoing significant transformation driven by persistent labour shortages, evolving linguistic regulations, and shifting institutional expectations. National and provincial reports consistently describe the sector as facing a "chronic labour shortage," with early childhood centres, private daycares, and home-based services struggling to recruit and retain qualified educators. This structural pressure has intensified Quebec's reliance on immigrant women, who now represent a substantial portion of the workforce and are increasingly viewed as essential to sustaining the system's operational capacity. Yet, despite this reliance, immigrant women encounter an integration landscape shaped by linguistic, regulatory, and institutional forces that influence their professional trajectories.

Central to this landscape is Quebec's linguistic regime, which positions French proficiency as a prerequisite for legitimacy, recognition, and access to regulated professional spaces. Under policies such as Law 14, language becomes not only a communication tool but a form of institutional capital that determines who is authorized to advance within the sector. For immigrant women—many of whom arrive with prior experience, credentials, and professional identities—this creates a dual challenge: rebuilding linguistic capital while navigating institutional structures that may undervalue their existing expertise. These dynamics reveal a broader tension within Quebec's intercultural model, where public discourse emphasizes inclusion while institutional practices impose restrictive pathways that delay or limit full participation.

Continuing education plays a pivotal role in shaping these trajectories. It offers immigrant women access to training, credential recognition, and professional development, enabling them to acquire the linguistic and pedagogical competencies required for employment. At the same time, it reproduces the structural expectations embedded in Quebec's regulatory framework, positioning immigrant women as perpetual learners who must continually demonstrate readiness for the sector.

This paper examines how language policy, institutional structures, and gendered labour dynamics intersect to shape immigrant women's integration within Quebec's early childhood system. By drawing on conceptual lenses such as linguistic capital, integration regimes, interculturalism, and gendered labour, the paper clarifies the structural conditions that both enable and constrain immigrant women's participation in the sector.

Background

The integration of immigrant women into Quebec's early childhood sector unfolds within a structural landscape shaped by linguistic regulation, labour shortages, and institutional expectations. Quebec's intercultural model places the French language at the centre of social cohesion, positioning linguistic proficiency as both a symbolic marker of belonging and a formal requirement for access to regulated professional environments. In practice, this means that immigrant women enter a sector where language is not simply a tool for communication but a condition for legitimacy, recognition, and advancement.

At the same time, the sector's chronic labour shortages have intensified reliance on immigrant women to sustain daily operations across CPEs, private daycares, and home-based childcare services. Yet this reliance coexists with regulatory pathways that require newcomers to navigate multiple layers of assessment, credential recognition, and linguistic evaluation before

accessing stable roles. This tension—between the system’s dependence on immigrant labour and the structural barriers that delay full participation—reveals a central paradox shaping integration trajectories.

Language policy further complicates these pathways. Under the Charter of the French Language and amendments such as Law 14, French proficiency becomes institutional capital that determines who is authorized to graduate, to work, and to advance. For many immigrant women, this creates a dual process: acquiring new linguistic competencies while simultaneously rebuilding professional identity in a context that may undervalue prior expertise, multilingualism, or international credentials.

Credential recognition adds another layer to this landscape. Women who arrive with degrees, diplomas, or years of experience often find themselves required to repeat training, complete bridging programs, or undergo additional evaluations. This dynamic produces what scholars describe as “institutional displacement,” where newcomers are positioned as learners regardless of their previous professional standing. The process reshapes identity and reinforces hierarchies that privilege locally recognized knowledge.

Workplace culture also plays a decisive role. Early childhood settings in Quebec operate within specific pedagogical traditions and relational norms that may differ from those in newcomers’ countries of origin. Integration therefore requires navigating implicit expectations—how to communicate with colleagues, how to interact with families, how to embody pedagogical values that are deeply tied to Quebec’s linguistic and cultural context. These everyday negotiations reveal how inclusion is enacted, or constrained, within professional environments.

Within this broader landscape, continuing education emerges as both a pathway and a filter. It provides access to training, linguistic development, and credential recognition, enabling immigrant women to enter the sector. Yet it also reproduces the institutional expectations embedded in Quebec’s regulatory framework, positioning immigrant women as individuals who must continually demonstrate readiness and alignment with local norms.

Literature Review

Research on the integration of immigrant women in Quebec highlights how linguistic regimes, gendered labour structures, and institutional expectations shape their professional trajectories. Scholars examining Quebec’s sociopolitical context emphasize that integration cannot be understood without considering the centrality of French as both a symbolic and institutional requirement. Gauthier (2024) and Potvin (2017) argue that Quebec’s intercultural model places the burden of adaptation on newcomers, particularly women whose professional identities are reshaped by linguistic and institutional norms. Their work underscores that integration is not simply a matter of individual motivation but is structured by the expectations embedded in Quebec’s public institutions.

Language policy forms a major theme in the literature. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of linguistic capital, researchers show how language functions as a form of symbolic power that regulates access to employment, recognition, and belonging. Quebec’s Charter of the French Language and amendments such as Law 14 institutionalize French proficiency as a prerequisite for legitimacy within regulated professions. Joppke’s (2007, 2017) work on integration regimes further clarifies how states combine inclusive rhetoric with restrictive mechanisms—an observation that aligns closely with Quebec’s linguistic expectations. Studies

by the Office québécois de la langue française (2020) document how standardized assessments often undervalue multilingual competencies, shaping newcomers' access to stable employment.

The literature on gendered labour provides another layer of insight. Scholars such as Folbre (2006) and Arat-Koç (2018) highlight how care work is historically feminized and undervalued, shaped by assumptions about women's "natural" caregiving abilities. In Quebec, these dynamics intersect with linguistic regulation, producing layered inequalities: immigrant women are recruited to address labour shortages yet face structural constraints that limit their mobility within the sector. Bakan and Stasiulis (2012) note that migrant women often occupy precarious care roles due to intersecting pressures of gender, migration, and labour market segmentation.

Research on continuing education and credential recognition further illuminates the challenges immigrant women face in rebuilding professional identities. Guo (2009) and Nohl et al. (2014) describe how foreign credentials are frequently devalued within Canadian institutions, producing "institutional displacement" in which highly skilled migrants must reconstruct professional capital to align with local expectations. In Quebec, continuing education programs serve as both pathways to integration and sites where institutional norms are reinforced. Rubenson (2011) argues that adult learning environments reflect broader sociopolitical priorities, including linguistic requirements that shape access to regulated professions.

Taken together, the literature reveals significant gaps: few studies examine the early childhood sector specifically, and limited research explores how linguistic regulation interacts with gendered labour within this context. There is a clear need for conceptual analyses that integrate linguistic capital, interculturalism, gendered labour, and continuing education to clarify the structural conditions shaping immigrant women's integration in Quebec's early childhood system. This paper addresses these gaps by synthesizing these intersecting dimensions and situating them within the lived realities of immigrant women navigating the sector.

Conceptual Framework

This paper draws on a set of interconnected theoretical lenses to analyze how immigrant women navigate integration within Quebec's early childhood sector. These lenses—linguistic capital, integration regimes, interculturalism, gendered labour, and continuing education—provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how institutional structures shape opportunity, constraint, and professional identity. Together, they illuminate the structural conditions that regulate immigrant women's access to recognition, mobility, and belonging.

Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Power

Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital offers a critical lens for understanding how language functions as a form of symbolic and institutional authority in Quebec. Within the early childhood sector, French proficiency is not merely a communicative skill but a marker of legitimacy that determines access to regulated roles, credential recognition, and professional advancement. Linguistic expectations embedded in policies such as the Charter of the French Language and Law 14 position French as a prerequisite for belonging, shaping immigrant women's trajectories as they rebuild linguistic capital while navigating institutional norms. This framework clarifies why language operates simultaneously as a pathway to integration and a mechanism of exclusion.

Integration Regimes and Structural Expectations

Integration regimes highlight how states construct expectations around adaptation, participation, and belonging. Joppke's work is particularly relevant to Quebec, where inclusive discourse coexists with restrictive mechanisms that regulate newcomers' access to professional spaces. Quebec's integration model combines strong linguistic obligations with economic dependence on immigrant labour, creating a system in which immigrant women are welcomed as a solution to staffing shortages yet required to meet accelerated linguistic and institutional expectations. This tension reveals how integration is shaped not by individual motivation but by structural conditions that define who is authorized to advance.

Interculturalism as Quebec's Model of Diversity

Quebec's intercultural model differs from Canada's multicultural framework by placing the French language and Quebec's cultural heritage at the centre of social cohesion. Diversity is recognized, but it is expected to unfold within a linguistic and cultural framework that prioritizes the preservation of the francophone majority. Michel Seymour's work deepens this understanding by conceptualizing nations as linguistic and political communities composed of majority and minority groups who share a common institutional context. Within this model, French proficiency becomes a marker of legitimacy, shaping how immigrant women are positioned within institutional structures. This lens helps explain why linguistic nationalism can coexist with pluralism while still generating tensions for newcomers navigating integration pathways.

Gendered Labour and the Feminization of Care Work

The early childhood sector is shaped by gendered expectations that position care work as naturalized women's labour. Scholars such as Folbre and Arat-Koç highlight how care work is historically undervalued, feminized, and often assigned to migrant women within global care chains. In Quebec, these dynamics intersect with linguistic regulation to create layered forms of inequality: immigrant women are recruited to address labour shortages yet face structural constraints that limit their mobility within the sector. This framework clarifies how gendered expectations and linguistic norms jointly shape immigrant women's professional identities and opportunities.

Continuing Education and the Reconstruction of Professional Identity

Continuing education plays a dual role in immigrant women's integration. It provides access to training, credential recognition, and linguistic development, enabling women to acquire the competencies required for employment. At the same time, it reproduces institutional expectations that position immigrant women as perpetual learners who must continually demonstrate readiness for the sector. Research on adult education and credential recognition shows how foreign qualifications are often undervalued, producing "institutional displacement" in which newcomers must rebuild professional capital within local frameworks. This lens highlights how continuing education functions both as a pathway to empowerment and a site where structural inequalities are reproduced.

Synthesis

Together, these theoretical lenses reveal that integration is not an individual process but a structural one shaped by language policy, institutional norms, gendered labour expectations, and credential recognition. This framework provides the analytical foundation for examining how immigrant women navigate the early childhood sector and clarifies the mechanisms that both enable and constrain their participation.

Analysis and Discussion

The integration trajectories of immigrant women in Quebec's early childhood sector emerge from the intersection of linguistic regulation, institutional structures, gendered labour expectations, and the sociopolitical priorities embedded in Quebec's intercultural model. This section analyzes how these forces interact to shape opportunity, constraint, and professional identity, demonstrating that integration is not an individual process but a structural one governed by institutional logic.

Linguistic Regulation as Structural Gatekeeping

French proficiency functions as the primary gatekeeping mechanism regulating access to stable employment within the early childhood sector. While language is framed as a tool for communication and social cohesion, its institutionalization through policies such as the Charter of the French Language and Law 14 transforms it into a form of symbolic authority. Immigrant women entering the sector must therefore acquire linguistic capital that aligns with institutional expectations, regardless of their prior professional experience or multilingual competencies. This dynamic reveals a structural contradiction: Quebec relies on immigrant women to address chronic labour shortages, yet linguistic thresholds delay or restrict their mobility within the sector.

The emphasis on standardized assessments further reinforces this tension. Linguistic proficiency is evaluated through formal benchmarks that may not reflect the communicative realities of early childhood settings, where relational competence, cultural sensitivity, and pedagogical skills are equally essential. As a result, immigrant women may find themselves positioned as "not yet ready" despite possessing the practical skills required for the role. This disconnect between institutional evaluation and workplace realities illustrates how linguistic regulation reproduces structural inequalities.

Credential Recognition and Institutional Displacement

Credential recognition processes further shape immigrant women's trajectories by determining how prior experience and qualifications are valued within Quebec's institutional framework. Many immigrant women arrive with degrees, diplomas, or years of experience in early childhood education, yet institutional processes often require them to undergo additional training, bridging programs, or evaluations before their credentials are recognized. This dynamic produces what scholars describe as "institutional displacement," where newcomers are positioned as learners regardless of their prior expertise.

This displacement is not merely administrative; it reshapes professional identity and reinforces structural hierarchies that privilege locally recognized credentials. Immigrant women must navigate a system that simultaneously depends on their labour and questions their legitimacy.

The requirement to rebuild professional capital within local frameworks highlights how institutional norms regulate access to recognition and mobility.

Workplace Culture and Everyday Negotiation

Integration is also negotiated within the micro-level interactions that shape workplace culture. Early childhood settings in Quebec operate within specific pedagogical traditions, communication norms, and relational expectations that may differ significantly from those in newcomers' countries of origin. Immigrant women must therefore navigate implicit norms that govern daily practice, including expectations around communication with colleagues, interactions with families, and adherence to pedagogical frameworks.

These everyday encounters reveal how inclusion is enacted—or constrained—within professional environments. For some immigrant women, supportive colleagues and inclusive workplace cultures facilitate integration by providing opportunities for learning, collaboration, and recognition. For others, workplace dynamics may reinforce feelings of marginalization, particularly when linguistic or cultural differences are interpreted as deficits rather than assets. This variability underscores the importance of examining integration not only through policy and institutional structures but also through the lived experiences of immigrant women within workplace settings.

Continuing Education as Pathway and Filter

Continuing education plays a dual role in shaping integration trajectories. On one hand, it provides immigrant women with access to training, credential recognition, and linguistic development, enabling them to acquire the competencies required for employment. It offers a structured pathway for rebuilding professional identity and gaining institutional recognition. On the other hand, continuing education also reproduces the structural expectations embedded in Quebec's regulatory framework. Immigrant women are often required to complete multiple courses, certifications, and assessments, reinforcing the idea that they must continually demonstrate readiness for the sector.

This duality positions continuing education as both a site of empowerment and a site where structural inequalities are reproduced. While it offers opportunities for growth and recognition, it also reinforces institutional norms that privilege certain forms of knowledge and linguistic competence. The requirement to continually prove oneself reflects broader patterns within integration regimes, where newcomers are expected to adapt rapidly to institutional expectations while navigating structural barriers.

Interculturalism and the Politics of Belonging

Quebec's intercultural model shapes the broader sociopolitical context within which immigrant women navigate integration. By positioning the French language and Quebec's cultural heritage at the centre of social cohesion, interculturalism establishes the standards newcomers must meet to be recognized as legitimate participants in the labour market. This model reflects a commitment to linguistic preservation but also creates tensions for immigrant women who must navigate expectations around cultural adaptation and linguistic conformity.

These tensions become particularly visible in the early childhood sector, where educators are expected to embody and transmit Quebec's linguistic and cultural values. Immigrant women

must therefore negotiate their own identities while aligning with institutional expectations that may not fully recognize their multilingual and multicultural competencies. This negotiation highlights the complex interplay between belonging, recognition, and institutional power.

Synthesis

The analysis demonstrates that immigrant women's integration trajectories are shaped by structural forces that operate across multiple levels: linguistic regulation, credential recognition, workplace culture, continuing education, and intercultural expectations. These forces interact to produce a landscape that is both enabling and restrictive, offering pathways to participation while simultaneously imposing barriers that regulate mobility and recognition. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing policies and practices that support equitable integration within Quebec's early childhood sector.

Implications and Recommendations

The analysis of immigrant women's integration within Quebec's early childhood sector reveals structural tensions that require coordinated responses at the policy, institutional, and pedagogical levels. While immigrant women play an essential role in sustaining the sector amid chronic labour shortages, their trajectories are shaped by linguistic regulation, credential recognition processes, and workplace norms that influence access to stable employment and professional mobility. This section outlines key implications and offers recommendations aimed at strengthening equity, recognition, and institutional responsiveness.

Policy Implications: Aligning Linguistic Expectations With Labour Realities

The central role of French proficiency in Quebec's integration regime underscores the need for policies that balance linguistic preservation with equitable access to employment. Current linguistic thresholds—while aligned with Quebec's sociopolitical priorities—may inadvertently delay the integration of qualified immigrant women who possess strong pedagogical skills but require additional time to develop formal linguistic competencies. Policymakers should consider adopting more flexible linguistic pathways that recognize the communicative realities of early childhood settings, where relational competence and cultural sensitivity are as essential as standardized language benchmarks.

One potential approach is the implementation of staged linguistic requirements that allow immigrant women to enter the workforce in supervised or transitional roles while continuing to develop linguistic proficiency. This model would address labour shortages without compromising linguistic objectives and would support immigrant women in building confidence and professional identity within real workplace environments.

Institutional Implications: Rethinking Credential Recognition and Program Design

Institutions responsible for credential recognition and continuing education play a pivotal role in shaping immigrant women's integration trajectories. Current processes often reproduce structural hierarchies by privileging locally recognized credentials and positioning immigrant women as perpetual learners. To address this, institutions should adopt more holistic evaluation frameworks that consider prior experience, multilingual competencies, and pedagogical expertise alongside formal documentation.

Bridging programs should be redesigned to reduce redundancy and ensure that training aligns with the actual demands of early childhood settings. This includes integrating workplace-based learning opportunities, mentorship programs, and collaborative assessment models that value experiential knowledge. Institutions should also strengthen partnerships with early childhood centres to create smoother transitions between training and employment, ensuring that immigrant women receive consistent support across educational and professional environments.

Workplace Implications: Building Inclusive Professional Cultures

Workplace culture significantly influences immigrant women's sense of belonging and professional identity. Early childhood centres should adopt inclusive practices that recognize the diverse linguistic and cultural competencies immigrant women bring to the sector. This includes providing structured onboarding processes, peer mentorship, and opportunities for collaborative learning that facilitate integration into pedagogical and relational norms.

Supervisors and colleagues play a critical role in shaping daily experiences. Training on intercultural communication, implicit bias, and inclusive leadership can help create environments where immigrant women feel valued and supported. Recognizing multilingualism as an asset—rather than a deficit—can also enhance communication with diverse families and strengthen the cultural responsiveness of early childhood programs.

Educational Implications: Strengthening Continuing Education as a Site of Empowerment

Continuing education programs must balance their dual role as pathways to integration and sites where institutional expectations are reproduced. To enhance their empowering potential, programs should adopt pedagogical approaches that validate immigrant women's prior knowledge and professional identities. This includes incorporating reflective practice, peer learning, and opportunities for students to draw on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds as resources for teaching and learning.

Language training should be integrated into professional coursework rather than treated as a separate requirement. Embedding linguistic development within pedagogical contexts allows immigrant women to acquire the specific vocabulary, communication strategies, and relational competencies required in early childhood settings. This approach also reduces the burden of navigating multiple parallel requirements.

Sector-Wide Implications: Toward a More Equitable Integration Model

The findings highlight the need for a sector-wide shift toward an integration model that recognizes immigrant women as essential contributors rather than conditional participants. This requires coordinated action across policy, education, and workplace settings to ensure that linguistic expectations, credential recognition processes, and professional cultures support—not hinder—immigrant women's participation.

A more equitable integration model would acknowledge the structural nature of the challenges immigrant women face and prioritize institutional responsibility over individual adaptation. By aligning linguistic policies with labour realities, redesigning credential recognition frameworks, fostering inclusive workplace cultures, and strengthening continuing education,

Quebec can create pathways that support immigrant women's full participation in the early childhood sector.

Conclusion

The integration of immigrant women into Quebec's early childhood sector is shaped by a complex interplay of linguistic regulation, institutional structures, gendered labour expectations, and the sociopolitical priorities embedded in Quebec's intercultural model. This paper has demonstrated that integration is not an individual or linear process but a structural one, governed by institutional norms that regulate access to recognition, mobility, and belonging. While immigrant women play an essential role in sustaining the sector amid chronic labour shortages, their trajectories are shaped by mechanisms that both enable and constrain their participation.

The analysis reveals that French proficiency functions as a central gatekeeping mechanism that determines who is authorized to advance within the sector. Linguistic expectations embedded in policies such as the Charter of the French Language and Law 14 position French as a prerequisite for legitimacy, shaping immigrant women's access to regulated roles and credential recognition. These expectations, while aligned with Quebec's commitment to linguistic preservation, may inadvertently delay the integration of qualified women who possess strong pedagogical skills but require additional time to develop formal linguistic competencies.

Credential recognition processes further complicate integration by privileging locally recognized qualifications and positioning immigrant women as perpetual learners. Despite arriving with extensive experience or advanced training, many women must undergo additional evaluations, bridging programs, or coursework before their expertise is acknowledged. This dynamic produces institutional displacement, reshaping professional identity and reinforcing structural hierarchies that undervalue foreign credentials.

Workplace culture also plays a significant role in shaping daily experiences of inclusion or exclusion. Early childhood settings operate within specific pedagogical and relational norms that may differ from those in newcomers' countries of origin. Immigrant women must navigate these expectations while negotiating their own identities and competencies. Supportive workplace environments can facilitate integration, while rigid or exclusionary cultures may reinforce barriers.

Continuing education emerges as both a pathway and a filter. It provides essential access to training, linguistic development, and credential recognition, enabling immigrant women to rebuild professional capital. Yet it also reproduces institutional expectations that require women to continually demonstrate readiness for the sector. This duality highlights the need for educational programs that validate prior knowledge and integrate linguistic development within pedagogical contexts.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for a more equitable integration model—one that recognizes immigrant women as essential contributors rather than conditional participants. Aligning linguistic policies with labour realities, redesigning credential recognition frameworks, fostering inclusive workplace cultures, and strengthening continuing education can collectively support immigrant women's full participation in the early childhood sector.

By synthesizing these structural dynamics, this paper contributes to broader discussions on equity, recognition, and institutional responsibility. Understanding how integration is produced at the intersection of language, regulation, gender, and institutional discourse is essential for developing policies and practices that support meaningful and sustainable inclusion within Quebec's early childhood system.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author used generative AI tools only to improve the language and readability of this paper. The conceptualization, analysis, and arguments are entirely the author's own.

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