



Educational Psychology in Practice

theory, research and practice in educational psychology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cepp20>

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James Gilsenan & Frances Lee

To cite this article: James Gilsenan & Frances Lee (2021): Exploring the experiences of recently arrived Latin American migrant parents regarding their children's education, Educational Psychology in Practice, DOI: [10.1080/02667363.2021.1875993](https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2021.1875993)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2021.1875993>



Published online: 03 Feb 2021.



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Exploring the experiences of recently arrived Latin American migrant parents regarding their children's education

James Gilsenan^a and Frances Lee^b

^aLewisham Borough Council, London, UK; ^bDepartment of Psychology and Human Development, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of recently arrived Latin American parents to the UK related to their children's education, to highlight how these experiences can inform educational practice. A small-scale qualitative design employed semi-structured interviews to give voice to five parents who had each arrived in London after time spent living in Spain. Thematic analysis led to four key themes: ambition, sacrifice and the high value placed on education; language difficulties; feelings of powerlessness; and cultural adaptation. The implications emerging from this study centre on how educational psychologists (EPs) can act as a bridge between schools and a local migrant community by drawing on their knowledge of both second language development and the psychological experience of migration. There is also a role for EPs in advocating for the practical needs of recently arrived parents and responding to power imbalances to ensure their inclusion within the school community.

KEYWORDS

Migrant parents; Latin American; home-school relationship; educational inclusion; social exclusion

Introduction

National and local context

The Latin American community in the UK is a significantly sized population, of at least 250,000 people, that is geographically concentrated in South London (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2016). The population has increased rapidly in London since the year 2000, growing nearly four-fold between the 2001 and 2011 census (Linnekar & McIlwaine, 2011), making it one of the fastest growing migrant groups in London. In this study, Latin Americans are defined as those who trace their heritage to Spanish and Portuguese-speaking Central and South American countries, as well as Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba.

McIlwaine et al. (2011), in a wide-ranging study called *No Longer Invisible*, provide an image of poverty, discrimination and social exclusion in London's Latin American community and call for more research, to build a more holistic picture of the needs of the community. The majority of Latin Americans move to the UK for economic reasons, after time spent in Spain (McIlwaine & Bunge, 2016), meaning that for parents, their move to the UK is generally the second major migration of their lives, with their children often being born in Spain.

CONTACT James Gilsenan  jamesgilsenan@gmail.com  Department of Psychology and Human Development, UCL Institute of Education, 25 Woburn Square, London WC1H0AA UK

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Although a body of research exists on the experiences of migrant children in the UK (for example, Ryan et al., 2010), very little of this is focused on the experience of parents, and none on the Latin American community. As such, this study aimed to conduct a broad exploration of the experiences of Latin American parents in relation to their children entering the UK education system. It aimed to generate insights relevant to this community, and implications which may also inform practice related to other newly arrived groups. It was conducted with the support of The Indoamerican Refugee Migrant Organisation (IRMO), who provided contextual information and assisted in the recruitment of research participants. IRMO is a migrant-led community group with a primary aim of upholding the rights of Latin Americans, empowering them to establish themselves and build a life in London. Findings from this research also contributed to informing IRMO's understanding of how to target support to parents around education.

Literature review

Key contextual factors

Research conducted by Pharoah et al. (2010) found that within a South London borough's Latin American community, many migrant people were unclear about their entitlements to seek health and social care services. Latin Americans also felt that they were largely ignored by local government and that skills within the community were under-recognised. Overcrowded housing was also found to be common, with people moving often due to substandard living conditions, fear of detection and to secure low rents. This study was made up of a combination of ethnographic exploration and observation, focus groups and a community survey.

McIlwaine et al.'s (2011) study found that although Latin Americans are employed in all areas of London's workforce, many are employed in difficult, potentially exploitative conditions. Latin Americans were often found to work long hours, combining multiple part-time jobs in areas such as cleaning. Almost 70% of over 1000 respondents in this study perceived discrimination to be an issue for them, with many feeling distanced from wider society. This was an extensive study made up of analysis of both primary and secondary data sources, but did not include a dedicated section on education or accessing the views of parents regarding their children's education.

Key issues impacting upon Latin American children and families

Research highlights numerous issues which influence the education and social inclusion of Latin American migrant children and young people, with the vast majority of these studies based in North America, where a much larger Latin American population is present. A US based study conducted by Hansen-Thomas and Sourdout (2015) highlights language acquisition as a key barrier to achievement, although this study relied heavily on data from teachers, rather than parents and children. Gándara and Contreras (2009), in a review of research and policy, highlight the impact of the mix of poverty and language, stressing that it is not only language acquisition which holds Latin American children back, but a multitude of contextual factors, primarily related to poverty. Drawing on a wide range of national quantitative and qualitative data, they found that many low-income Latin

American parents believe that they cannot support their children academically because of their lack of formal education and English-language skills. In their eagerness for their children to learn English, it was found that many parents decided not to teach their children to read in Spanish, thinking that this would impact negatively on their English learning.

This contradicts a large body of existing research that provides evidence that maintaining and developing a child's home language does not have any negative impact on the acquisition of a second language (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). Cummins (2001) also highlights how individuals learning an additional language typically acquire conversational fluency to a functional level within about two years of initial exposure to the second language and take at least five years to catch up to native speakers in academic aspects of the second language. Peltola (2009), in a study conducted in Finland, found that the most constructive and harmonious parent-child relationships were present in families in which the children retained aspects such as the values and language of their parents' cultures of origin.

McIlwaine (2015) found that social invisibility practices allow undocumented Latin Americans, those unable to prove legal status in the UK, to move around London without being detected, but they also have a strong impact on people's emotional well-being. Anxiety was found to be common, as well as feelings of disempowerment in working in menial jobs in the black economy, despite holding post second-level qualifications. Parental wellbeing, and particularly anxiety, are issues which may also have a strong impact on children and their education.

Scope and aims of the current study

The inclusion of migrant children and families into UK society requires reliable and trustworthy evidence to inform educational practice. Ainscow et al.'s (2006) definition of inclusion is concerned with all children and young people in schools, focusing on presence, participation and achievement. These are areas in which educational psychologists (EPs) can play a key role, using research to promote inclusion within schools and colleges by raising the profile of issues experienced by vulnerable social groups and working to ensure equality of access to services.

The current study focuses on the experiences of newly arrived migrants; those who have arrived in the UK in the previous 18 months and applied for a school place for their children for the first time within the previous year. Parents are a critical part of their children's lives and education, and the first point of contact with the English education system after arriving in London. As such, they are well placed to reflect on their experiences in order to identify areas of challenge and opportunity within the current system. Much prior research has highlighted the value of positive parent-school relationships and active parental participation in education (for example, Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). The primary aim of this study is to access the parental voice, to inform how EPs can promote the inclusion of Latin American families and develop good practices and partnerships between schools and migrant parents.

Research question

What are the experiences of recently arrived Latin American parents, in relation to their children entering the UK education system?

Methods

This study adopts a small-scale qualitative design composed of five extended semi-structured interviews, conducted with parents who had at least one child attending a local mainstream school. Participants were identified and recruited by IRMO, a local charity, and interviews were conducted at their offices. This is a space that occupies a central location in the borough and hosts regular classes and drop-in advice sessions for members of the Latin American community. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, as this was the native language of each research participant.

An opportunity sampling approach was taken, based on accepting participants who fit the criteria of having applied for a school place for their child in the previous year. A semi-structured interview guide was developed for use during the interviews, focused around the exploratory research question and topics that emerged from the literature. After gaining contextual information and developing rapport, the interview focused on expectations and attitudes around their child's education, experiences of London schools and aspirations and hopes for the future. A table of participants has been included below in [Table 1](#), with all names anonymised.

Interview approach and data collection

A semi-structured qualitative interview approach was chosen. Semi-structured interviews seek to elicit participant views in their own words, without undue influence from the researcher. They are often preceded by observation or informal interviews to allow researchers to initially develop their understanding of the topic of interest (Stuckley, 2013). In place of this stage, information gathered during the literature review and discussions held with IRMO staff were used to ensure that the questions asked were relevant and meaningful to participants. The interviews lasted between 32 and 63 minutes.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) encourage qualitative researchers to engage in a process of member checking in order to enhance rigour. In their view, "the member check ... is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). After each interview, all participants indicated their availability for a member-check phone call 4–6 weeks later. However, participants did not respond to the researcher's later request to arrange a phone-call, so this stage did not occur. During the initial interview process, multiple interviews were cancelled at short notice and rescheduled multiple times, and participants later described that the late confirmation of their work rosters made planning and prioritising difficult, which may have contributed to the low level of response around

Table 1. Participant details.

Participant	Name	Time in the UK	Home Country	Children of school age	Type of school attended (and duration)
Participant 1	Natalia	12 months	Peru	1 secondary aged child	Maintained Secondary (6 months)
Participant 2	Ramón	18 months	Bolivia	1 primary aged child	Maintained Primary (one month)
Participant 3	Rosa	8 months	Bolivia	1 primary and one secondary aged child	Roman Catholic Comprehensive (5 months)
Participant 4	Mauricio	18 months	Bolivia	2 primary aged children	Maintained Primary (6 months)
Participant 5	José	8 months	Ecuador	2 secondary aged children	Church of England (6 months)

member-checking. In place of this stage, feedback on initial themes was gained during a collaborative meeting with selected IRMO staff.

Data analysis

An inductive iterative analysis was undertaken, based on carrying out a coding of the data without trying to fit it into any pre-existing framework or theory. The transcripts were annotated using the qualitative research software Atlas.ti and codes and then themes evolved from the data. The six step approach to thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed to ensure a transparent analysis process. This process involves the researcher familiarising themselves with the data through reading transcripts numerous times, the generation of initial codes from the data, looking for themes and finally reviewing these themes. Each participant's data was analysed separately and then group themes were identified. Reflective notes were taken throughout this process, identifying emerging impressions of the data.

Epistemological stance

The epistemological assumption taken in this study is that knowledge is constructed by each of the individuals involved in the research and that the researcher's role is to interpret this, through the lens of their own personal values. This reflects Smith's (1983) position that the researcher takes a "subject-subject" (p. 8) posture where both personal values and facts are seen as linked. Thus, since the researcher cannot be separated from their findings, the research is value-bound. This is a constructivist approach, with the view taken that individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other (Kim, 2006). Ponterotto (2005, p. 129) puts forward that constructivists take a relativist perspective, assuming "multiple, apprehendable and equally valid realities."

The researcher identifies as White Irish, and at the time of the interviews, was a trainee educational psychologist, who had previously spent time living in a number of Latin American countries and spoke Spanish at an advanced level. After being placed in the London borough with the highest number of pupils of Latin American heritage, the researcher began taking on cases involving Latin American children and focusing on issues affecting this community. Upon beginning a search for research on this group, a lack of published material was found, which prompted the consideration of the experiences of Latin American migrants in London as a topic for academic investigation.

Findings

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis of the five parent interviews. 62 codes were initially identified, and these were clustered into four themes and 22 sub-themes. Each of the four themes (Figure 1), described below, drew on subthemes from all five participants. A peer audit was undertaken for the purpose of consensus replication. A summary of each of these four themes is discussed below.



Figure 1. Four themes identified through the process of thematic analysis.

Theme 1: language and communication difficulties

None of the participants in this study spoke English beyond a basic level. All referenced their lack of English-language ability as the main contributor to difficulties they faced related to their children's education, in relationship building with school staff and in general life. Participants arrived without speaking English and all experienced difficulty to varying degrees in terms of navigating the school application process and gaining a school place for their children.

All five parents had a strong desire to be kept informed about the educational progress of their children. They all had one point of contact within the school, generally a bilingual tutor or teaching assistant and received updates and information through this individual. Parents were glad to have this person available and it met their wish to find out how their children were doing in broad terms. However, it meant that most information was received second-hand and, as such, some were dissatisfied with their inability to access class teachers directly.

I was very worried about my daughter ... So I went to the school myself, but they didn't understand me. Rosa

It's not the same only speaking to their Spanish-speaking tutor compared to the person who knows. José

The school has some Latino staff. Her tutor is Chilean and helps her a lot. Rosa

Theme 2: personal sacrifice, ambition, and the value of education

This theme is linked to the extremely high value all participants placed on education as a route to social progress for their children, to provide them either directly with wealth, or the ability to make their own choices in their lives. All parents consistently placed a high value on the role of education in facilitating the social mobility of their children. This was often framed as the payoff for the sacrifices they themselves had made in moving to the UK.

We motivate them. Me? I'm a cleaner. I pick up the rubbish. I tell them if they don't study, they will be like me. Mauricio

I tell him that he has to make the most out of it. There are so many children in Peru that, because they don't have money, cannot study. Natalia

Those with children in secondary school also reported that their children held professional ambitions, prioritising either personal wealth or helping professions. Parents were positive about the English education system, as well as the general experience of their children within London schools, once the difficulties of the application process were overcome. They particularly noted the breadth of the UK curriculum including topics like cookery, design and drama, although it was discussed that their children sometimes missed out on extracurricular activities after school, as they attended homework clubs because parents struggled to support them with this at home.

There are things I would like her to learn, like the violin, drama ... but now she can't do it because she has to go to homework club. Because I can't help her at home. Rosa

I liked that school because it had a football pitch. It could give him other activities so he has plenty to do, not only studying. Natalia

There are more opportunities here. Because the schools here provide more support. Rosa

Moving to the UK was seen as a sacrifice by all participants, something necessary in order to provide economically for their family. For four families, the move to the UK meant dividing the family unit, either on a temporary or more permanent basis, which was referenced as a traumatic experience.

Coming here was brutal. Changing from living in an apartment (in Spain) to sharing a single room with my whole family. José

It's been a bit traumatic, especially for my partner, to leave our other two children over there (in Spain). Ramón

Theme 3: cultural and social adaptation

This theme relates to the process of adapting to life in London. Participants all grew up in Latin America, but had been living in Spain for 8–10 years prior to moving to London. All families arrived without a social network but one participant mentioned already having family members elsewhere in the UK, which made the process of finding accommodation and completing administrative tasks easier for them. Parents referenced isolation and loneliness as issues they frequently contended with. Some participants spoke about the idea of Latin Americans as adventurers, moving from South America, first to Spain and

now London with a degree of optimism and hope for the future. There was a sense that having adapted to one new country, that they could adapt to another. Only one participant mentioned continuing their children's learning in Spanish literacy at a Spanish-language church after they began attending school in London. This did not appear to be a priority for other participants.

We don't have friends here, and it's worse for my daughters, there's no one. It's the four of us. So, yes, we all feel alone. Mauricio

At church on Sundays, they learn to write and read in Spanish and do things like painting. We try to make them learn things through Spanish. Mauricio

Within families, different self-identified nationalities were evident between parents and children, with families now adapting to life in a third country. This led to a perception of uncertain child and adolescent identity, which concerned some parents.

When she arrived at the school, everybody hugged her and asked her where she was from. She didn't know if she should say Bolivia or Spain! Rosa

He is Peruvian, but now he says he is Spanish! Natalia

Four participants also mentioned issues around adapting to British culture, where they saw a greater emphasis placed on politeness and courtesy, and tensions that exist within the Latin American community in London, where they had experienced a reluctance to support newer arrivals.

Like, courtesy is a big thing here. We don't really do it, but we have to learn, to educate ourselves. Mauricio

Let's say they have already been here for a year and are working. And I ask them for something, they tell me, there is nothing - go look somewhere else. It's selfishness. Rosa

Theme 4: feelings of powerlessness

The school application process was an area of difficulty for most participants. A minority completed a paper application and were successful in being offered a place within 1–2 months. Others waited significantly longer, and one participant felt the need to bypass formal systems entirely, going directly to individual schools in order to gain a place for their child. IRMO played a key role in a range of areas; from providing English lessons, to support with gaining a school place and assistance in accessing services such as health care. Housing, however, remained a key difficulty for participants, and was an area where it was difficult for support services to bring about improvement. Mothers often expressed greater contentedness with their life in London, referencing greater freedom to choose to work or not. Fathers, on the other hand, sometimes appeared to find their position as support-seekers more difficult to align with traditional, patriarchal values. One father spoke in depth about his feelings of discomfort in accepting help in adapting to life in the UK.

All parents spoke positively about the role of their formal or informal point of contact within their children's schools, either a language teacher or teaching assistant who shared their home language, allowing for communication between themselves and the school. It

was apparent that parents were at a point where they felt appreciative of services offered to them, often combined with a sense of frustration and confusion in certain areas, where language was a barrier.

With the language ... we couldn't demand or complain about anything. Ramón

Because they are very busy at the council. The applicant that is lucky will get a quick reply, the one that is not ... who knows. Rosa

I can't believe that a child has to wait for so long, for example, siblings that we expect to be put together, why do they have to be separated? José

I personally went to the school to get my daughter accepted. Because there are many children that don't attend school for a whole year! Rosa

Discussion

This section focuses on how the findings from this research link to the research question and how this compares with existing research literature around migrant families. Overall, despite experiencing numerous challenges, there was a general positivity towards life in London, and parents saw their move as either indefinite or permanent, leading to a sense of wanting to invest in their future life here, in terms of language-learning and general social participation. Parents demonstrated a high level of aspiration for their children and motivation to be actively involved in their educational lives. Within this area of London, a relatively large Latin American community is present, as well as community-specific support-groups. This is combined with a generally diverse social make-up, which means that migrant communities may be able to integrate and develop a sense of political and social influence more easily than in a less culturally or linguistically diverse area.

In terms of challenges, there appears to be a low level of language proficiency among recently arrived parents, based on both the interview experiences and discussions with IRMO, who have close contact with large numbers of recently arrived migrants. This results in difficulty supporting their children's education and communicating and building relationships with school staff beyond their one bilingual point of contact. However, language is not the only barrier, and parents showed a need for support in understanding the English education system, as well as how to access services, such as housing. They also commonly experienced feelings of isolation, and all families experienced periods of separation and often changes in family structure, something also found in a study by Ayika et al. (2018) on migration to Australia. That study also demonstrated that the children of migrants were able to integrate more quickly and easily into Australian culture than their parents. This is highly likely to be the case for Latin Americans in London, particularly as parents, as highlighted by McIlwaine et al. (2011), often work in roles that provide limited opportunities for social interaction.

Parents held high expectations of their children and an aspiration that they will succeed for the benefit of their family and to repay the sacrifices they have made in moving to London. Although this is a positive, it could potentially lead to children and young people experiencing a debilitating level of pressure to succeed for the benefit of their family, which has the potential to lead to relationship difficulties within families. Guo et al. (2016) discuss how immigration disrupts the bonding process within families, something which was implied by participants in

the current study when describing the periods of separation and decline in quality of life they have experienced since moving to London.

Strengths and limitations of this study

The research was exploratory and was conducted in the participants' native language of Spanish. The choice to conduct the interviews in the researcher's second language and participants' native language was made in order to ensure that their voice was represented faithfully and in order to help in establishing rapport and attunement during the interviews themselves by allowing the researcher to ask questions directly, rather than using a native-speaking interpreter as an intermediary. Murray and Wynne (2001) have previously commented on how interviews conducted through interpreters can be lacking in the depth of expression found in 1–1 interviews.

The sample for this qualitative study was small and opportunity-based and located in one London Local Authority. This has implications for wider generalisation. The study also did not access the voice of children and young people due to the real world research issues of being conducted within two academic terms during the first year of the researcher's training as an EP. Separate further research, as yet unpublished, was conducted on the experiences of adolescent migrants, focusing particularly on the influence of migration on their identity formation.

A limitation of this study is the lack of collection of information on participants' race and the exploration of this as a factor in their interactions with schools and the education system. The term Latin American is an ethnicity label, which encompasses people from a large geographical area, but as Block (2008) described, Latin Americans identify with a wide variety of different racial categories due to different combinations of African, European and American heritages. Block (2008) highlights how the invisibility of Latin Americans in the UK arises from their multiracialism, with many community organisations calling for the recognition of Latin American as a broad ethnic category in the UK census, as described by McIlwaine and Bunge (2016).

Implications for EP practice

Parents in this study found it difficult to advocate for themselves and their children within an educational context. EPs have a role in ensuring equality of access to specialist services, through being a voice for marginalised groups while also ensuring that referrals of individual children are not disproportionate to the level of need within the school community as a whole, and that migrant groups within the school community are not either over or underrepresented. Planning meetings will be the key time to do this, and it is important for EPs and schools to gather information on migrant pupils and their progress over time. The Bell Foundation provides an assessment framework for English language learners that is available free of charge to all schools in the UK. It is also critical that interpreters are present, when necessary, for EP consultations within schools, in order to ensure that the parental voice is captured, and to ensure better communication between parents and teachers. Parents had a strong desire to hear progress updates about their children from each of their class teachers and to be involved directly in conversations and decisions. Paperwork should also be requested from children's home countries when referrals are made to EP Services, in order to ensure that the EP understands the full life story of a child. All EP reports should be translated

into the parents' home language, so that they can be fully accessed, allowing parents to act as partners, and contribute actively to the Plan, Do, Review cycle at subsequent meetings.

All parents found it easiest to build a relationship with a member of staff who spoke their native language. It is important for EPs to both raise the importance of, and support schools in valuing and promoting, staff linguistic and cultural diversity, in order allow relationships with newly arrived parents to be built more easily and effectively across the organisational structure of the school. This should be as part of the EP's role in consultation with schools on inclusive practice at a systemic level. Another possibility could be in supporting schools to allocate specific times during staff meetings or EP visits to speak about issues or incidents involving migrant students and the hiring of parent advocates from particular communities to help others negotiate the school and education system, as discussed by Lee (2019).

In terms of training, EPs can use their knowledge of theoretical frameworks such as the Cummins Framework (Cummins, 2001) to help schools and parents to better understand the trajectory of second language acquisition, to ensure that expectations are reasonable, and to develop best-practice in basic social language development and then cognitive and academic language proficiency; highlighting the importance of parents continuing to speak to their children in their native, fluent language. As a result of this study, the researcher ran a workshop on second language acquisition for migrant parents, with space allowed for parents to discuss and ask questions about their own children's development within a supportive context. During this workshop, it emerged that the pressure that parents placed on their children to succeed academically in the UK within a short time period, was often far out of step with Cummins' (2001) research on the 5–7 years it takes to achieve academic fluency in English, and the wide variety of likely trajectories depending on age of arrival.

As applied psychologists, EPs possess knowledge of research and psychological concepts which can be applied to inform their home-school consultations, where it would be useful to conduct an exploration of issues such as attachment among families that have experienced periods of separation, as well as family narratives around migration, as these may differ significantly between parents and children. It is important to ensure that both parent and pupil views are gained during any piece of casework, and ideally, that these can be brought together to form a shared family narrative around their migration. EPs can also play a role in highlighting the psychological experience of migration and its impact, particularly on older children. This could draw on research by psychologists such as Berry (2003, 1997) on acculturation, and take the form of training for school staff and parents, and work with schools on the transition processes for newly arrived students from other countries, to ensure some continuity is provided for them in the form of sports, art and other hobbies that are not heavily language dependent. For adolescents struggling with identity formation, EPs may be able to work with school pastoral staff in supporting these young people with identity exploration. Approaches such as the Tree of Life and genograms could be drawn upon here, with EPs working in a training capacity.

The current research also highlights the need for schools to recognise the unstable and precarious nature of recently arrived migrant parents' employment situations when planning contact time with them and attempt to harness their motivation and aspirations, while demonstrating empathy for the sacrifices that they have made up to this point and the lack of control they have over their current work lives. Parents' work rosters often tended to be confirmed only days in advance, making it difficult for them to commit to attending meetings weeks ahead of time, which is often the norm within schools. Greater

flexibility on this would likely be welcomed by parents and allow them to develop stronger relationships with school staff. EPs can also act to challenge assumptions within schools around parental engagement, by highlighting the multiple reasons that could result in a parent being unable to attend regular meetings at specific times.

The researcher, as a result of this study, began offering monthly voluntary community based drop-in consultations for migrant parents to discuss concerns they had about either their children's educational, social or emotional development, which were open to parents whose children had started school, and those who had not yet been offered a place. These were positively evaluated by parents, and there is the potential for EPs to work in this way within community, school or Early Years settings in order to open access to the EP service to parents within the community on a limited basis, while retaining the dominant traded model of service delivery.

Conclusion

The four themes identified in this study provide an insight into Latin American parents' values, beliefs, challenges and positive experiences in relation to accessing the UK education system for their children. Despite parents facing numerous socioeconomic and linguistic barriers, many positives were identified to build upon. EPs can be involved in acting as a bridge between schools and local migrant communities, fostering inclusion by ensuring their views are heard, and working with schools on a systemic and individual level to develop best practice. Future research could explore the experiences of children, adolescents, school staff and EPs in this area.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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