



BRIDGING THE GAP:

The Educational Experiences of Latin American Migrant Youth in England

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Executive summary

Latin Americans are one of the fastest-growing yet least visible migrant groups in the UK. There are over 450,000 Latin Americans nationwide, with over half living in London. Despite this, they remain unrecognised as a distinct ethnic category in national statistics, and there is a lack of policy and academic research exploring the experience of young Latin Americans in education.

This report summarises research which was developed in partnership with IRMO for a Master's dissertation in Social Justice and Education at UCL. It aims to centre the voices of young Latin Americans, documenting the barriers encountered in entering and navigating the English education system, and the crucial role played by community organisations in supporting them.

The findings are based on a focus group with seven young Latin Americans aged 12 to 18, as well as interviews with IRMO staff who support migrant families with education issues. Their accounts shed light on the structural inequalities embedded in the education system and how these are felt in the everyday lives of young people.

Key findings:

- **Delays in school access:** Many young people face long waits before being allocated a school place, sometimes of several months. The problem is particularly acute for those arriving in Years 10 and 11, when schools are reluctant to accept new pupils.
- **Language barriers:** Instead of recognising the value of multilingualism, the use of the label “EAL” (English as an Additional Language) homogenises migrant youth from a range of backgrounds, and focuses narrowly on deficits. Funding for language support is short-term and inconsistently applied, as is support from teachers.
- **Patchy provision:** Support varies dramatically between schools and local authorities. In some, teachers go out of their way to welcome new arrivals; in others, little effort is made to adapt teaching or provide language support. Outcomes for pupils depend more on luck than on what they are entitled to.
- **Discrimination and exclusion:** Many migrant youth experience bullying, racist remarks, and exclusion from peers. This is fuelled by wider anti-immigrant discourse in politics and media, which filters into schools.
- **Mental health and special educational needs:** Bullying and exclusion can take a heavy toll on mental health. Access to support services such as CAMHS is limited, and there is a lack of trauma-informed care in schools. For migrant pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), there can be overlapping failures to appropriately meet these needs and their needs as migrant youth.

- **Third-sector provision:** Community organisations like IRMO play a vital role. They provide English classes, advocacy with school applications, youth activities, and, most importantly, safe spaces of care and belonging. These services not only plug gaps in the system but add value by creating opportunities for young people to develop and become culturally and politically empowered.

Recommendations:

- **For government and local authorities:** Enforce targets for timely placement into mainstream school for all pupils, including those in Years 10 and 11; extend and ringfence EAL funding; reinstate national programmes and guidance for new arrivals; and recognise Latin Americans as a distinct ethnic group in the census and education data.
- **For schools:** Train staff to provide a culturally sustaining, trauma-informed practice to migrant youth; ensure adequate interpretation in parent and carer communications.
- **For funders and civil society:** Provide sustainable, long-term funding for community organisations.
- **For third-sector organisations:** Continue to prioritise and invest in high-quality, impactful activities including family advocacy, ESOL classes, and youth empowerment activities.

The barriers described in this report are not inevitable. They are the result of political choices, underfunded services, and systemic inequalities. By addressing these issues, schools and policymakers can turn education into a genuine bridge to opportunity for Latin American young people.

Introduction

1.1. Background

Over the past two decades, the Latin American community in the UK has grown rapidly. Today, it is estimated at 450,000 people nationwide, which is likely an underestimate. The largest numbers are in London, particularly in the boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark, Islington, and Hackney. For adults, research has shown a consistent picture of disadvantage. Latin American migrants are disproportionately employed in low-paid, insecure jobs, particularly in cleaning, catering, and hospitality. Many families experience overcrowded housing, exploitative landlords, and precarious immigration statuses. This economic precarity has direct consequences for children, shaping the environments in which they live and the resources available to them.

For young people, education is often described by parents as the key motivation for migration. Families move to the UK hoping to secure better futures for their children. Yet in practice, many children encounter significant barriers as soon as they arrive. Some wait months before securing a school place. Others are placed onto educational pathways that do not match their abilities or aspirations. Many face bullying, racism, and indifference once they are in school.

Rather than recognising the assets that migrant youth might possess - such as resilience, adaptability or multilingualism - they are often viewed in terms of their perceived deficits. This report documents these experiences, drawing directly on the voices of young people and those who work with them. It highlights the barriers faced by Latin American youth in the English education system, the systemic issues underpinning those barriers, and the vital role played by community organisations like IRMO in supporting them.

1.2. Methods

The findings in this report are based on qualitative research carried out between May and June 2025 as part of a Master's dissertation at UCL, in partnership with IRMO. The research was designed to centre young people's voices while also drawing on the expertise of practitioners who support them.

Focus group with young people

- A focus group was held with seven young people aged 12–18.
- Participants came from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Paraguay, and Peru.
- Research was conducted during IRMO's youth empowerment programme, a series of monthly workshops on skills, rights, and leadership.
- Open discussion was combined with participatory activities. Mentimeter, an interactive tool, allowed young people to submit anonymous responses via their phones. For some questions, participants were invited to write down on Post-It notes what they liked about school, what they disliked, and what they would change.

- These approaches were intended to create a supportive atmosphere, encouraging participation from all.

Key informant interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with IRMO staff:

- One with a team member leading advocacy and campaigning work, including for young people.
- Another with an education caseworker who supports families with school applications, bullying cases, and special educational needs.

Notes on ethics and limitations

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental consent for under-16s.
- Sessions were conducted in Spanish, with IRMO staff providing interpretation where needed.
- All names used in this report are pseudonyms, to protect participants' privacy.
- Ethical approval was obtained from the Lambeth Community Research Network, a network of locally rooted organisations with expertise in community-based research.
- The small scale of the study, and the fact that all participants were young people engaged in IRMO's activities, means that findings certainly cannot be generalised to all Latin American youth in England. Instead, they provide rich, qualitative insights into lived experiences, which could be used as exploratory indications for future research.

1.3 Literature Review

Latin Americans in the UK

Research on Latin Americans in the UK has expanded over the last 15 years. This work largely sits within the field of geography and documents precarious work and housing, including long hours, low pay and exposure to exploitation in sectors such as cleaning.² Education-specific studies are relatively limited in volume, but explore the experience of education from Latin American parents' perspectives, highlighting anxiety, low English proficiency, and difficulties advocating in schools.³ Elsewhere, work on young Latin Americans has explored identity formation and the flexible use of ethnic identities, although only tangentially focusing on education.⁴

Migrant and refugee education

Earlier strands of research in the late 1990s to mid 2000s predominantly focused on "best practice" and how practitioners could support migrant youth.⁵ Subsequent academic research has brought a more systemic, justice-oriented lens to the matter. For example, scholars have used Nancy Fraser's framework of social justice to interpret the barriers experienced by migrant and refugee youth along the dimensions of economic, cultural, political and emotional injustice.⁶ Methodologically, the field has often relied on adult or practitioner perspectives, in part because of ethical and practical challenges in researching young people in vulnerable situations. However, if these challenges are not sensitively addressed, then youth perspectives can be excluded.

Key challenges in education

This section summarises key challenges and barriers which emerged from the research.

2.1 Long waiting times

Young people described delays in securing a school place after arrival. A Mentimeter response stated:

“It was very hard, because no schools had space and it was very complicated, and I had to wait for almost seven months to be able to start.”

In the group discussion, Lorena, aged 14, reported waiting three months before starting school. Interviews with IRMO staff indicated that “late arrivals” are the “hardest to place” with schools demonstrating a particular reluctance to accept students at Years 10 and 11. This aligns with existing research into migrant education, which has linked delays to placement for students in Years 10 and 11 to the fact that these are key exam years leading up to GCSEs. IRMO staff note that, as these are key exam years, some schools appear more hesitant to admit new students whom they believe may not be able to complete the full GCSE programme. This hesitation also reflects schools' concerns about maintaining overall attainment levels in GCSEs.

Given the absence of ringfenced EAL or new arrivals funding, schools have little economic incentive to take on what they perceive to be ‘difficult’ students who might distract from their focus on results in exam years. Wait times can be exacerbated by the barriers that some Latin American migrant parents face in completing school application forms - barriers which are tied to their economic precarity. The proof of address documentation required when registering for school can be difficult for some migrant families to provide.

Families without secure housing or those subletting may lack standard documents such as council tax bills. In some cases, families have had to obtain sworn affidavits from solicitors to meet these requirements, creating an additional and unexpected financial burden.

Beyond long wait times for placements, IRMO staff report that some young people are directed towards college or ESOL classes rather than being supported to access A Levels or other academic routes. This can lead to extended periods out of education, or diversion into alternative provision. For many families, such pathways can feel misaligned with their aspirations and hopes for their children’s future. Migrant families’ hopes for a better future can be undermined when young people are placed onto educational routes that do not match aspirations.



² See ‘Further resources’ for full links to additional reading. Key research includes McLwaine (2007); McLwaine (2011); Mas Giralt and Granada (2014); Turcatti (2023).

³ Mas Granada and Granada (2014); Gilsenan and Lee (2021).

⁴ Mas Giralt (2014); Gilsenan (2018); Turcatti (2023).

⁵ For example see Rutter (2003); Hek (2005).

⁶ Fraser (2003); McIntyre and Abrams (2021); Miri (2024).

Manuel, aged 17:

“Just because [the application process] is easy and fast doesn’t mean it is good... they might direct you to a certain course or a certain subject, but it’s not something that’s going to help you. It was simply the quickest thing they could find... they don’t know how to start talking to you, what bridge to build with you.”

IRMO staff also highlighted the emotional and developmental impact of prolonged periods out of education, noting that extended disruption to learning can be highly detrimental to young people’s wellbeing and overall development. This said, the accounts varied. Two of the seven participants described the application process as “easy,” and some younger participants were less involved because adults handled paperwork. Differences of this kind indicate uneven access and processes rather than a single uniform experience.

2.2 Language barriers

The difficulties arising from not speaking much or any English were consistently referenced by the young people. Issues around language skills formed immediate, visceral, and obvious barriers for many of them and shaped their experience of education. One student identified that what they don’t like about school is that “the majority of the teachers don’t care about the idea that I don’t speak English”. Daniela, aged 16, related how “when I started at school, I tried to make friends with some people but nobody wanted to be my friend because I didn’t speak English.”

On first starting at school, the pace of lessons was hard to follow: one young person wrote “everything follows a fixed rhythm and I can’t adapt”. Classroom adaptation recurred as a theme in the focus group, with Manuel stating that “the teachers don’t know how to adapt you [to] the different systems of qualifications and learning in the U.K.”. IRMO staff observed that these difficulties can contribute to lower confidence and a reduced sense of self-efficacy among some migrant students, particularly when progress feels slow. They also noted that unrealistic expectations about how quickly newly arrived pupils should learn English can place additional pressure on both students and teachers, sometimes affecting relationships in the classroom.

2.3 Patchy provision

Throughout the discussions, it was clear that provision of appropriate language support was possible, but inconsistent. Some students had received significant support from Spanish-speaking teachers or school staff in their first months at school, but others had been left without. IRMO staff observed that some schools made efforts to provide interpreters for meetings with parents and carers, particularly when addressing issues such as bullying or additional needs, whereas others offered limited translation or communication support. Overall, language provision appeared to vary widely, reflecting a broad spectrum of practices and levels of support across schools.



Staff with migrant backgrounds sometimes acted as advocates, going above and beyond to arrange additional support for young people. However, shared backgrounds were not a guarantee. Alejandro, 17, recalled that although a support worker was “also originally from Colombia,” they “were not chill” and the student did not feel able to relate to them. Taken together, this points to a patchwork of support: good practice exists, but access to translation, tailored teaching, and advocacy depends heavily on the school’s approach and resources rather than consistent system-wide expectations.

2.4 Discourses of immigration and difference

Beyond language barriers, the young people’s experience of difference on the basis of ethnicity was also a common theme. One wrote: “I don’t like how some English people sometimes criticise Latinos.”

The increasingly hostile environment towards migrants, refugees and asylum seekers shapes both policy and everyday experiences. Frequent changes in migration and housing policy can disrupt children’s education, as families who are relocated often have to restart the process of securing a school place. Within this context, some parents feel nervous or singled out when trying to access their rights or engage with schools and local authorities, which can make it harder for them to advocate for their children’s educational needs and entitlements.

Key informants linked these wider public narratives about migration to the experiences shared by young people. Negative political and cultural discourses can contribute to feelings of exclusion and hostility within schools, where some pupils face discrimination or bullying from peers or, at times, experience a lack of understanding from staff.

2.5 Bullying, violence and mental health

The prevalence of bullying and violence at school was frequently highlighted. Describing what she didn’t like about school, Carla, aged 14, wrote “they bully you without a reason, just because of a mistake, everyone gets angry with me”. Beatriz, also 14, wrote that “most students are very badly behaved, and in break-times there are usually fights”. Maria, 16, also wrote that “there are many fights, a lot of bullying [...] so there should be assemblies and meetings to help them and to understand one another”.

Key informants linked some of the bullying to the broader hostility towards migrants and currents of racism outlined, but also to the wider crisis in young people’s mental health. They noted that many young people’s mental health has deteriorated over time, and that schools often appear unable to provide consistent psychological support. Some reported that exclusions or temporary suspensions are used as responses to behavioural issues, rather than addressing underlying emotional or wellbeing needs. They also highlighted the strain on mental health services, with waiting lists for specialist support such as CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) often exceeding a year.

IRMO staff further emphasised the intersection between the needs of migrant students and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This overlap can



sometimes lead to confusion or misidentification, with English as an Additional Language (EAL) needs being mistaken for SEND, and vice versa. One example discussed involved a young person struggling to secure a secondary school place due to their needs being misrepresented in their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). As with mental health support, this dimension of young migrants' experience can be linked to a broader maldistribution of SEND resources within the English school system.

Interpreting the Barriers: Dimensions of Social Justice

These challenges are not inevitable, but the reflection of systemic inequalities. Building on academic frameworks of social justice, this section explores how four interconnected dimensions of injustice can be used to understand these challenges: economic, cultural, political and emotional.

1. Economic maldistribution

Funding and resources are unequally distributed in the English education system. Where funds are scarce and schools face pressures tied to exam performance, this can drive reluctance to admit migrant pupils and result in long wait times, as well as reduce the availability of appropriate language support.

2. Cultural misrecognition

Migrant young people's languages, identities, and experiences are not always recognised and valued. Pupils subsumed under the 'EAL' or 'new arrival' label are defined instead by what they lack. The lack of a system-wide approach to meaningfully embed cultural recognition means that students' experiences are inconsistent and reliant on luck. A broader social hostility towards migrants drives discriminatory experiences in school such as racist bullying or exclusion.

3. Political misrepresentation

Migrant youth experience a system-level policy invisibility, given the lack of national guidance or programmes to support this group. An increasingly negative and inflammatory public discourse about migration drives the cultural hostility outlined above, shaping young people's experiences in school.

4. Inequalities in care

The distribution of care and support for young people's emotional wellbeing is also unequal. Young people's accounts repeatedly referenced care - how much or little of it they were afforded at school. A lack of care is fuelled by all the factors above - school staff in financially-stretched institutions, impacted by political and cultural hostility towards migrants, are often not willing, or not able, to treat young people with adequate care to develop their wellbeing.

Of course, these dimensions are intertwined rather than separate issues. Variability in support across schools reflects differences in resources, recognition, political attitudes and care; these are all driven by the absence of a system-level approach to migrant and refugee education. Addressing these themes together is key to more consistent, fair experiences for Latin American young people.

“It’s Like a Big Bridge”: The Role of Third-Sector Provision

Alongside the challenges described above, the research highlighted the role of third-sector organisations such as IRMO in supporting the young people. Support includes helping families navigate admissions, providing English classes across ages, and creating additional educational and civic opportunities.

4.1 Plugging the gaps

Third-sector organisations can ‘plug the gap’, both providing support and advocacy to access school, as well as addressing curricular needs which are not met in existing schools.

Admissions and advocacy: Three of the seven young people said their parents had come to IRMO for help with the school application. The key informants described how IRMO provides advocacy that supports families to access school, for example support with finding schools, completing applications, and securing Zip Oysters for travel for school. ESOL provision. Organisations also provide English classes for young people; IRMO offers lessons from ages 5 to 19. This creates some educational provision for young people waiting to access school, as well as a valuable extracurricular offer for those who do not receive adequate language support in school time. The Baytree Centre has designed a school-readiness programme for new arrivals to simulate a school timetable while they await a place.

4.2 Creating Opportunities

Not only do such organisations redress the impacts of injustice by ‘plugging the gap’. They provide additive value to young people’s education, above and beyond the experiences they are lacking through unequal access to the mainstream education system.

Learning and skills. Young people described additional activities accessed through IRMO. One participant said: “I took a cooking class one week here at IRMO. There was also a three-week course of workshops on oratory, like public speaking”. Describing ESOL classes led in part by volunteer university students, another participant explained: “They also give us certain bits of advice in the educational field [...] it’s like a big bridge, not only between Spanish and English, because while we’re learning English, we’re also learning many other things.”

Access to experiences that carry costs. Interviewees also pointed to activities such as after-school clubs and family day trips, noting that for families with limited means “going on a day trip somewhere is impossible otherwise.”

Civic development. Through activities such as the youth empowerment programme, organisations like IRMO can contribute to young people’s overall political and civic development. For example, during the research, colleagues at IRMO collected young people’s input on a youth organising toolkit under development, as well as advertising an upcoming visit to Parliament, supporting young people with political decision-making and their own agency.

Care and belonging. From observations of the youth activities organised by IRMO, it was clear that love, care and solidarity were the bedrock on which they rested. Staff cultivated a conversational, inclusive atmosphere, for example opening and closing sessions with “check-ins” and “check-outs” where young people selected a meme image that matched how they felt and explained why. They had strong rapport both with regular attendees, for example checking in on progress in their exams - and also with new faces, who were greeted warmly at the start of sessions.

Of course, this research focused on those engaging with such third-sector activities, and future research should engage young people who do not attend these activities to compare experiences. However, it was clear that for the young people who participated, third sector organisations provide a rich, valuable and more socially just component to their educational experience.

Recommendations

A. Government and Local Authorities

- Enforce targets for timely placement (incl. Years 10-11) of migrant youth in mainstream schools.
 - Schools should adhere to Fair Access Protocol (FAP) timelines: allocate a place within 20 school days, and schools to reply within 7 days. Compliance data should be published.
 - Issue specific guidance that FAP applies to late arrivals in Years 10-11 and monitor LEA/school adherence.
- Extend and ringfence EAL funding.
- Reinstate national programmes and guidance for new arrivals.
 - Schools should be provided with clear training and best guidance practice about supporting new arrivals and migrant youth, avoiding homogenising statements and reflecting the diversity of ‘new arrivals’ experiences.
 - Supplement with specific guidance about interactions with SEND and mental health needs, to ensure a holistic view of migrant youth’s wellbeing.
 - Accessible, community-language materials should be produced by the DfE or commissioned from third-sector organisations to support new arrivals and their families.
 - The DfE should consider launching a dedicated programme to support new arrivals’ achievement, on the model of the ‘New Arrivals Excellence Programme’.
- Recognise Latin Americans as a distinct ethnic group in census and education data.

B. Schools

- Train staff to provide a culturally sustaining, trauma-informed practice to migrant youth.
 - Use established practitioner guidance (e.g., Bell Foundation) for staff CPD. Training should include an awareness of how migrant youth’s prior experiences can impact experience in school, and best practice for supporting their wellbeing.
 - Integrate EAL and SEND supports rather than treating language as a barrier to provision.
 - Set up clear internal pathways for FAP, EHCP support and LEA escalation to prevent delays.
- Ensure adequate interpretation in parent and carer communications.
 - Use independent professional interpreters for reviews/EHCPs, not staff/family members.
 - Provide community-language, easy to understand information for key meetings and decisions.
- Actively counter narratives of hostility and division around migration, acknowledging the values and contributions of migrant youth and their families.

C. Funders

- Provide sustainable, long-term funding for community organisations.
 - Offer multi-year core grants for impactful activities including advocacy, ESOL classes, and youth empowerment work.
 - Resource co-produced, community-language materials and outreach.

D. Third-Sector Organisations

- Continue to prioritise and invest in high-quality, impactful activities including family advocacy, ESOL classes, and youth empowerment activities.
 - Where possible, develop strategies to widen access to this work, for example through school referral partnerships or community outreach.



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