Manuela is seven and is finishing year one. She was born in Spain of Peruvian parents, who migrated to Australia about three years ago. Manuela says she likes Spain best although she has almost no memories of it, and hasn’t been back. She can speak some English and is doing fine at school, although she still has problems making friends. There are some other migrant children in her classroom but she is the only Spanish-speaking one. Now that she can speak English her mother says Manuela feels responsible for the wellbeing of her mother and grandmother who cannot speak the language. Manuela teaches her mother English, and helps her communicate whenever they go out together. She also makes sure that her two younger siblings who were born in Australia make an effort to talk to their grandmother in Spanish since she does not understand a single word of English. “She has a big sense of responsibility,” her mother says. Manuela, as millions of other migrant children, mediates between different cultural environments. Her life unfolds between Spanish and English, between images of Spain, Peru and Australia, between her Latin American home and her Australian school, and she mediates between her Peruvian family and their—still unfamiliar—new homeland. This article will delve into the lives of recently arrived migrant Spanish speaking children and their families as they start primary school in Australia.

Keywords: migrant children, Hispanics, school, identity, liminality, Australia

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Hispanics in Australia

Spanish speaking migrants have been settling in Australia from the mid 1880s. López (2005) identifies four successive immigration waves: a first one consisting of Catalán migrants between the mid 1880s to 1933, a second larger one of Spanish migrants during the 60s and 70s, a third one from South America during the 70s and...
early 80s, and a fourth one from Central America during the 80s to early 90s. The vast majority of these migrants came to Australia for either economic or political reasons. During the last decade, however, there has been a fifth wave of Spanish speaking migrants, predominantly from Latin America, who, in turn, are highly skilled and recount coming to Australia looking for a safer and more promising environment for themselves but especially for their children. They choose Australia for its skilled migration scheme that enables certain professionals within a specific age range, and with a good command of the English language to apply for permanent residency. Argentineans, Chileans, Colombians, Peruvians, and Venezuelans are the larger groups. Most of them are middle class, hold one or more university degrees, and had a good standard of living in their home countries.

First and second generation children of migrants comprise a large proportion of children in Australia. The 2006 Australian Household Census showed that 35% (or 1.5 million) of children in Australia live in migrant families, with about half of the total children living in migrant families being under 9 years of age, and within that group about half a million having been born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Figures from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training also reflect this large child migrant population. A 2010 report shows that almost 30% of total enrolments in government schools were of students of language background other than English (Department of Education and Training, 2010). Children of Spanish speaking background were identified as the seventh largest group in New South Wales public schools. Despite Australia’s history as a country of immigrants, the slow but steady increase in the new arrivals population each year, as well as its increasing diversity in terms of origin, socioeconomic background and settlement patterns, has meant that many schools that had remained mostly culturally homogenous, are experiencing significant cultural variety in their student population (Santoro, 2009). The literature that has focused on migration and acculturation – the cultural changes derived from intercultural contact — has paid less attention to women and children and family dynamics than it has to men (Sam, 2006). Also, although studies of cultural diversity in schools have been significant in the US and European contexts, they are still scarce in Australia (A few recent studies are Dockett & Perry, 2005; Guo, 2005; Sanagavarapu & Perry, 2005; Santoro, 2009). The literature on first generation migrant children’s school experiences in the new country – in Australia and overseas – is limited, and tends to concentrate on refugees (e.g. Matthews, 2008). Finally, research that has looked specifically at the mutual influences that schools and first generation migrant children and their families exert on each other is rather incipient. Some works have marginally touched on these issues (Adams & Kirova, 2007; Beraldi, 2006; Devine, 2007, 2009; Sanagavarapu, 2010) but the field is mostly unexplored and children’s voices mostly absent. This article aims at contributing towards our understanding of children’s experiences of migration in Australia by exploring the interplay between children’s school and family lives, and the processes of adjustment involved.

Conceptual Background

There is an array of issues involved in the lives of migrant children as they start school in an unfamiliar culture. Primarily, children embark on a transition process through which they are progressively integrated to the new cultural world through school. This process is, however, by no means linear. They are continually referred back to the original cultural system prevailing in their families at home. The transition process seems to be embedded in sets of binary opposites children confront recurrently through their daily immersion in the domains of home and school. The data gathered for this study suggests that issues of approval/disapproval, sameness/difference, inclusion/exclusion, expansion/confinement permeate migrant children’s lives and require adjustment strategies from them. A few analytical concepts