

IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT IN THE FIRST POST-MIGRATION YEAR¹

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ABSTRACT

This research was designed to address the school adjustment of newly immigrant elementary, middle, and high school students in their first post-migration year. Students (N = 638) originated in Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, or English-speaking Caribbean nations and they had been in the United States for less than one year. School adjustment indicators were academic grade average (GPA) and school attitudes. Significant predictors of both GPA and attitudes included prior achievement, grade level, English language proficiency, and parental support. Ecological risk predicted GPA, especially for younger students. Students experiencing more immigration stress had less positive school attitudes. Experiences accompanying immigration affect initial school adjustment and may have long term consequences for school engagement.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

The number of immigrant children and adolescents in U. S. schools is substantial and growing. Immigration is a profound life transition demanding extensive adaptation (Laosa, 1997; Rumbaut, 1997). Adults experience difficulties with this transition, but information on child immigrants is scant and inconsistent. Many are successful, but drop-out rates are high, and school success for minority students appear to decline with length of time in the U. S. There is a crucial need to study the impact of immigration on children at different age levels. The focus of this report is on the initial school adjustment of newly immigrant children and adolescents.

We anticipated that school adjustment would be related to a number of factors, including the student's prior achievement, the level of ecological risk surrounding the student, the specific stresses accompanying migration, the student's English language proficiency, and the extent to which the student receives parental support. We assessed both main effects of support and interactive effects, as support is often found to moderate the impact of stressful events on personal outcomes. As the experience of immigration is likely to differ for students at different age/grade levels, we also tested for interactive effects of grade level with other major predictors.

METHOD

Sample

Participants included 134 students from Argentina, 132 from Colombia, 140 from Cuba, 135 from Haiti, and 95 from Jamaica or other English-speaking Caribbean countries. The sample was evenly divided by gender. Students were in grades 3-4, 6-7, or 9 of public schools in a Southeastern metropolitan area. They had been in the U. S. for less than a year.

Procedure

Personal interviews were conducted at the student's school in a private location. Interviews were conducted in the participant's native language and dialect. Academic grades were obtained at the end of the school year from centralized school records.

Measures

Criterion measures were grade point average (GPA) and school attitudes. GPA was the mean of the student's end-of-year grades in language arts and math courses. The school attitude index was adapted from a scale used by Estrada with ethnic minority students.

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Predictors were prior achievement, grade level, risk, immigration stress, English language proficiency, and parental support. To index prior achievement, students were asked whether their past school performance was above average, average, or below average. The risk index was an aggregate measure including two markers of economic hardship (free lunch eligibility and self report of family inability to pay for essential needs), a high number of stressful life events (death of family member, etc.), poor neighborhood conditions, and parental absence from the home. To assess immigration stress, students were asked to indicate how difficult various common aspects of migration had been for them (leaving friends and family, school problems, family conflict, language difficulties, etc.). English proficiency was assessed by the schools upon the students' entry. Parental support was the number of emotional and instrumental support functions provided by parents.

RESULTS

Multiple regression analyses were used to assess the relation of the predictors to each criterion. Main effects were entered first, followed by multiplicative terms representing interactions of grade level and parental support by risk, immigration stress, and English proficiency. The results can be seen in Table 1. In general, these results indicate that the hypothesized factors were related to the students' school adjustment, although risk was significant only for GPA and immigration stress only for school attitudes. As expected, some effects varied by grade level and parental support.

EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

This research provides a much-needed window on the initial adaptation of children and adolescents traversing the abrupt, often involuntary, transition that immigration entails. The results suggest that several aspects of the immigration experience are associated with the student's initial school adjustment. Effects were modest, perhaps because academic grades are not particularly reliable indicators for newly immigrant students. Planned follow-ups should be more revealing about the academic progress of these students. The strongest effects were for the relation of immigration stress and English proficiency to school attitudes. Students with higher levels of proficiency and more negative immigration experiences had significantly less positive attitudes toward school. These factors may be precursors to later disengagement and school drop-out.

REFERENCES

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Table 1
Predictors of School Achievement and Attitudes in Newly Immigrant Children

<i>Predictors</i>	Grade Point Average		School Attitudes	
	<i>b</i>	<i>r</i> ²	<i>b</i>	<i>r</i> ²
Prior Achievement	.08*	.01	.10**	.01
Grade Level	-.15***	.02	-.12**	.02
Risk	-.15***	.02	.07	.00
Immigration Stress	-.08	.01	-.22***	.04
English Proficiency	.09*	.01	-.23***	.05
Parent Support	.12**	.01	.09*	.01
<i>Significant Interactions</i>				
Risk x Grade Level	.30**	.01		
Risk x Parent Support	-.21*	.01	-.19*	.01
English Prof. x Grade Level	.35	.01		

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001 or less.