

Effects of a Family Move on the Academic Adjustment of Children and Adolescents

Thomas J. Berndt & Melissa A. McCandless

Department of Psychological Sciences, Purdue University



ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine how a family's move to a new community affects children's and adolescents' academic adjustment to a new school. Third, sixth, eighth, eleventh, and twelfth graders ($N = 1,137$) answered questions about their academic competence and classroom involvement in the fall and spring of a school year. Teachers also provided reports on the students' academic competence, and the students' report-card grades were obtained from school records. Students new to their school district showed poorer academic adjustment than did students who had been in their school district for a longer time. The differences between new students and other students were similar in the fall and the spring, indicating that new students had poorer academic adjustment throughout their first year in a new school. The implications of the findings for educators and parents are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Moving is a common experience for U.S. families (Schachter, 2004). After a family moves, a key task facing children and adolescents is adapting to a new school. Although some research has linked frequent family moves to lower academic achievement and more school-related difficulties (Adam, 2004), other research has not replicated these findings (Heinlein & Shin, 2000). Moreover, the previous research is difficult to interpret because families that move frequently may differ from more stable families in characteristics associated with academic achievement (e.g., SES).

The sample for this study included children and adolescents with a parent in the Armed Forces. Military personnel of all ranks move often, so the findings for this sample should show the effects of moving more clearly than research with civilian samples has. In addition, this study was designed to assess the immediate effects of a recent move rather than the long-term correlates of a high frequency of family moves.

More specifically, the goal of the study was to examine how relocation affects students' academic adjustment by comparing the adjustment of students new to a school district with that of students who had been in the school district in previous years. The basic assumption of this study was that a move to a new community and school is a stressful event for students of all ages. Specifically, the stress associated with having to make new friends and adjust to teachers and peers in a new school was expected to have a negative impact on students' academic performance. Thus, the primary hypothesis was that new students would display poorer academic adjustment than those who had been in the school district for a longer time.

METHOD

The study included 1,137 children and adolescents (506 boys and 631 girls) who had a parent in one branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. The students were in the third ($n = 331$), sixth ($n = 286$), eighth ($n = 256$), or eleventh and twelfth ($n = 264$) grades. Most students were European American (52%), but many were Hispanic (17%), African American (14%), or Asian American (5%).

In the fall semester of the school year, students were asked how long they had been in their current school district. They were considered as new students if they had been in their district for 0-3 months. Ten percent of the students gave this response. Other students said that they had been in their district for 4-12 months (22%), for 1-2 years (21%), or for more than 2 years (47%).

In both the fall and the spring, multiple measures of the students' academic adjustment were obtained. Students reported their perceptions of their academic competence by responding to the relevant items on Harter's (1985) Self-Perception Profile for Children. For example, they read statements such as, "Some kids feel that they are very good at their school work but other kids worry about whether they can do the school work assigned to them" and then indicated on a 4-point scale which of the statements was true for them and how sure they were that it was true for them. The internal consistency of this measure was high (fall $\alpha = .78$; spring $\alpha = .82$). In addition, students completed the items for Berndt and Miller's (1990) measure of positive involvement in the classroom by rating on a 5-point scale the frequency of certain types of interactions at school (e.g., "How often do you take part in class discussions or activities?"). This measure was also high in internal consistency (fall $\alpha = .79$; spring $\alpha = .82$). In addition, teachers completed the ratings of academic competence that are part of the Social Skills Rating System (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). A sample item is, "Compared with the other children in my classroom, the overall academic performance of this child is [Excellent, Very Good, etc.]" These ratings were also on a 5-point scale (fall $\alpha = .96$; spring $\alpha = .95$). Finally, academic achievement was judged from students' report-card grades (i.e., their GPAs) for the most recent grading period.

RESULTS

Repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with grade, sex, and time in the school district as between subjects factors and semester (fall vs. spring) as a within subject factor were done with the measures of adjustment as dependent variables. As predicted, self-perceptions of academic competence differed for students who had been in the school district for different amounts of time, $F(3, 1062) = 7.06, p < .001$. New students perceived their academic competence as poorer than did students had been in the school district for 4-12 months or for more than 2 years (see Table 1). The mean scores shown in Table 1 are averaged across the fall and the spring assessments because the differences between groups of students who had been in the district for different amounts of time did not change significantly during the school year. In other words, the interaction of semester with the variable for the time students had been in the school district was nonsignificant. The comparable interactions in the ANOVAs for the other measures of academic adjustment were also nonsignificant.

Just as for students' self-perceptions, teachers' ratings of students' academic competence varied with the time the students had been in the district, $F(3, 992) = 6.18, p < .001$. Again, teachers rated the academic competence of new students as poorer than that of other students who had been in the district longer (see Table 1).

Students' reports of positive involvement in academic work differed significantly with the time students had been in the district, $F(3, 1070) = 3.48, p < .05$. Involvement was lower for new students and for students in the district for 4-12 months than for students who had been in the district for more than 2 years (see Table 1).

The ANOVA for report-card grades also yielded a significant effect of time in the school district, $F(3, 935) = 3.36, p < .02$. New students received lower report-card grades than the other groups of students did (see Table 1). Finally, worth noting is that the interactions of grade and sex with the variable for the time students had been in the school district were nonsignificant in all the ANOVAs. These nonsignificant results suggest that the time course of adjustment to a new school was similar for students of both sexes and for students in all grades.

Table 1

Mean Scores across the Fall and Spring Assessments for the Academic Adjustment of Students Who Had Been in the School District for Different Amounts of Time

Time in the Current School District	Adjustment Measure			
	Self-Perceived Academic Competence	Teacher-Rated Academic Competence	Positive Involvement	GPA
0-3 months	2.81 _a	3.37 _a	3.33 _a	2.77 _a
4-12 months	3.00 _{bc}	3.78 _a	3.37 _a	3.02 _b
1-2 years	2.94 _{ab}	3.78 _a	3.43 _{ab}	3.02 _b
More than 2 Years	3.05 _c	3.81 _a	3.46 _b	3.03 _b

Note. Means in the same column that do not share subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

The academic adjustment of new students was poorer than that of their classmates throughout their first year in a new school district. Thus, some circumstances associated with family relocation and the transition to a new school appear to have a significant impact on children's and adolescents' academic adjustment to school. Moreover, the lack of significant improvements in new students' adjustment between the fall and the spring of their first year in a new school is noteworthy. It implies that students' adjustment to the academic work and routines of a new school is not completed in a matter of weeks or months. Apparently, many students need a full school year to adapt to the academic environment of a new school.

By contrast, the data from teachers' reports of students' academic competence and from students' report-card grades suggest that the academic adjustment of students in their second year in a new school is similar to that of students who had been in a school for more than two years. However, the mean scores for positive classroom involvement in school qualify this conclusion. The scores for involvement suggest that students' adaptation after a school transition may continue into a second year.

Another finding that should be mentioned explicitly is that the negative effects of a family move on students' academic adjustment varied little with age or sex. In other words, the period of adaptation to a new school was roughly comparable for boys and girls and for students varying greatly in their grade level. This conclusion can be drawn with a high degree of confidence because the sample for this study was large, giving substantial power to the statistical tests performed.

Taken together, these findings imply that new students would benefit from extra help throughout their first year in a new school. Most educators apparently are unaware of how long the usual period of adaptation is, so they focus on short-term orientation programs lasting a few weeks or months. These programs may be valuable, but they are not likely to provide new students with all the academic support that they need. Both educators and parents should instead work to implement programs and policies that provide support and help to new students for at least an entire school year. Such programs and policies have the greatest chance of ensuring that these students adjust successfully to a new school after a family move.

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