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Emotional, Social, and Educational Adjustment as Predictors of Self-Esteem among Secondary School Students in Bilaspur District, India: A Hierarchical Regression Study

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study examined whether emotional, social, and educational maladjustment were associated with global self-esteem among 530 secondary students in Bilaspur District, India (270 male, 260 female) and whether adjustment explained variance beyond gender. Item-level responses were scored using the manuals; higher Adjustment Inventory for School Students (AISS) scores indicate greater adjustment difficulty and higher Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) scores indicate higher self-esteem. Internal consistency was $\alpha = .69$-$.70$ for AISS domains and $\alpha = .89$ for the RSES. All three maladjustment domains correlated negatively with self-esteem ($r_s = -.32$ to $-.37$, $ps < .001$). In hierarchical regression, the adjustment block explained additional variance beyond gender, $\Delta R^2 = .148$, $F(3, 525) = 31.02$, $p < .001$. Educational maladjustment had a significant unique association ($B = -0.40$, $\beta = -.24$, $p < .001$); emotional maladjustment was not significant, and the social coefficient was not robust to HC3 standard errors. The cross-sectional design precludes causal conclusions. Convenience-influenced school selection limits generalization, and modest AISS reliability warrants cautious interpretation.

Keywords: adolescence, emotional adjustment, educational adjustment, hierarchical regression, self-esteem, social adjustment

Self-Esteem in Adolescence and School Contexts

Global self-esteem refers to a person's overall evaluation of personal worth, rather than a judgment of competence in one particular domain (Rosenberg, 1965; Rosenberg et al., 1995). The distinction matters because academic self-concept and global self-esteem are related but not interchangeable constructs (Harter, 2012; Marsh, 1990). Self-esteem is developmentally meaningful but not fixed: longitudinal evidence indicates continuity as well as change across adolescence and later life (Robins et al., 2002; Orth et al., 2012; Orth & Robins, 2014; Orth et al., 2018; Zimmerman et al., 1997). Self-esteem is relevant to educational research because school is a major setting in which young people encounter evaluation, belonging, achievement demands, and relationships with adults and peers (Eccles & Roeser, 2011;

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Roeser et al., 2000). An ecological account also locates such experiences within linked family, school, peer, and community settings rather than treating students in isolation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These experiences may inform adolescents' appraisals of whether they are accepted, capable, and valued.

Theoretical accounts offer complementary explanations for this association. In sociometer theory, self-esteem functions partly as an indicator of perceived relational inclusion and acceptance (Leary et al., 1995). Developmental accounts emphasize that self-evaluations draw on feedback and competence experiences in salient contexts, including school and peer groups (Erikson, 1968; Harter, 2012). Theories of contingent self-worth further caution that self-evaluation may depend on which domains an adolescent treats as personally consequential (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001), while longitudinal cohort evidence links low adolescent self-esteem with later life risks (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Global and domain-specific self-esteem can also relate differently to outcomes, reinforcing the need to state clearly that the present outcome is global self-esteem (Rosenberg et al., 1995). These perspectives do not imply that self-esteem is simply a consequence of adjustment. Evidence on the RSES across cultures and on its positive- and negative-worded items also cautions that total-score interpretation depends on scoring direction and measurement properties (Marsh, 1996; Schmitt & Allik, 2005). A longitudinal meta-analysis found small reciprocal prospective links between social relationships and self-esteem, suggesting that relationships may shape self-regard while self-regard can also influence later relationships (Harris & Orth, 2020). Therefore, cross-sectional associations should not be interpreted as causal effects.

Adjustment as a Multidimensional Construct

School adjustment is not a single trait. It includes how students manage emotional demands, participate in social relationships, and engage with the academic and co-curricular environment. The Adjustment Inventory for School Students (AISS) operationalizes these domains separately as emotional, social, and educational adjustment (Sinha & Singh, 2005). The instrument's manual defines higher scores as indicators of greater difficulty or lack of adjustment. This scoring direction is important: a negative association between an AISS score and self-esteem means that greater reported adjustment difficulty covaries with lower self-esteem; it does not mean that better adjustment predicts lower self-esteem.

Emotional functioning may be relevant because persistent difficulty managing feelings can undermine a young person's sense of efficacy and worth. Social functioning may matter through acceptance, rejection, and the quality of peer interactions. The longitudinal evidence on reciprocal social relationships and self-esteem supports the salience of this domain, although it also cautions against assuming one-way influence (Harris & Orth, 2020). Educational adjustment concerns students' experiences of curricular and co-curricular demands. School structures, instructional practices, and interpersonal climate can correspond with self-evaluation trajectories over time (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Morin et al., 2013). Research on school transitions and teacher-child relationships likewise illustrates that adjustment is situated in relationships and changing school ecologies, although early-childhood findings should not be transferred directly to secondary students (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ladd, 1996). The role of relationships with parents, teachers, and peers in students' motivation and engagement has also been documented in school-based research (Wang & Eccles, 2012; Wentzel, 1998). These domains are related, yet analytically distinct; examining them together can show whether any domain has a unique statistical association after accounting for overlap among adjustment scores.

Evidence and Research Gap

Prior research supports the broader proposition that self-esteem and psychosocial functioning are connected, but it does not justify a simple causal story. Reviews of self-esteem research distinguish its association with desirable outcomes from the stronger claim that raising self-esteem alone causes those outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2003; Orth & Robins, 2014). Longitudinal findings likewise show reciprocal links between self-esteem and social relationships and between school experiences and self-evaluation (Harris & Orth, 2020; Morin et al., 2013). In India, studies using school-adjustment instruments have described adolescent adjustment patterns, but study populations, measures, and analytical strategies vary. For example, work in Chhattisgarh has applied the AISS to social adjustment among higher-secondary students, while not addressing global self-esteem as the outcome (Verma, 2015). This makes local estimates useful when their measurement, sampling, and limitations are made explicit.

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A focused review of the literature suggests a practical analytical gap: the three AISS domains are often discussed as a broad adjustment construct, whereas their simultaneous associations with global self-esteem are less often separated into zero-order and unique contributions in a single district-level secondary-school sample. The present study addresses this question using hierarchical regression, entering gender first and the three AISS domains as a second block. The analysis is predictive in the statistical sense only; the design cannot establish temporal prediction or causality.

Study Purpose and Hypotheses

The study examined (a) the bivariate associations of emotional, social, and educational adjustment scores with self-esteem and (b) the additional variance in self-esteem explained by the three adjustment domains after accounting for gender. Because the AISS is scored so that higher values indicate greater maladjustment and the RSES is scored so that higher values indicate greater self-esteem, negative associations were expected.

H1: Higher emotional maladjustment scores are negatively associated with self-esteem.
H2: Higher social maladjustment scores are negatively associated with self-esteem.
H3: Higher educational maladjustment scores are negatively associated with self-esteem.
H4: Emotional, social, and educational maladjustment scores collectively account for significant incremental variance in self-esteem beyond gender.

The unique regression coefficients were examined without directional claims because shared variance among the adjustment domains may alter their conditional associations.

Method

Participants and sampling

The study used a cross-sectional correlational design. The analytic sample comprised 530 students aged 14-16 years ($M = 14.80$, $SD = 0.40$), enrolled in Classes IX and X during the 2026-2027 academic session. It included 270 male students (50.9%) and 260 female students (49.1%) from seven CGBSE-affiliated schools in Bilaspur District: five government and two private schools. The sampling frame consisted of a list of eligible CGBSE schools in Bilaspur and the enrolment registers of the seven selected schools. School selection included a random-selection step, but proximity to Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (GGV) and the corresponding author's local connection also influenced school choice; therefore, school selection was partly convenience-based, and the sample should not be described as fully random or representative. Within the selected schools, students were randomly selected from each grade and gender group in proportion to enrolment. Eligible students were aged 14-18 years and were regular candidates enrolled in Class IX or X, had attendance above 75%, were present during data collection, and had parent/guardian consent and student assent. Students not meeting these criteria, absent during data collection, or lacking consent/assent were ineligible; questionnaires with insufficient information were excluded. Of the 565 students approached, 530 provided usable data; 35 records were excluded for insufficient information, yielding a usable response rate of 93.8%. Data were collected during August and September 2026.

Ethical considerations

No separate review or approval by a formally constituted Institutional Ethics Committee was obtained. Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the principal and school management committee of each participating school. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians, along with age-appropriate assent from students. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that they could decline or withdraw without penalty. Responses were recorded using coded identification numbers; names were not included in the analysis dataset. Paper records were kept in locked storage, and electronic data were password-protected, with access limited to the research team. No personally identifying information is reported. School and consent permissions covered the use and publication of anonymized findings.

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Measures

Adjustment Inventory for School Students

Emotional, social, and educational adjustment were measured with the 60-item AISS developed by Sinha and Singh (2005). The manual describes the inventory for school students, with 20 dichotomous items assigned to each domain. Responses are scored using the manual's item key: a keyed response indicating lack of adjustment receives 1, and the alternative receives 0. Higher domain scores therefore indicate more adjustment difficulty; each domain has a theoretical range of 0-20. The manual also cautions that higher social-domain scores have a particular interpretation in terms of submissive/retiring tendencies, so the scale should not be treated as a broad measure of social competence. The item-level responses in the workbook were rescored against the manual's key, and the resulting domain scores exactly matched the workbook's subscale scores. In this sample, internal consistency was $\alpha = .70$ for emotional, $\alpha = .70$ for social, and $\alpha = .69$ for educational adjustment. These estimates are reported as sample-specific reliability evidence and are lower than the coefficients reported in the original manual.

The AISS manual describes the inventory as intended for Hindi-knowing school students aged 14-18 years. The National Psychological Corporation consumable booklet is labeled AISS-SS (English version), and the inventory was administered in English. Participants were 14-16 years old, within the manual's stated age range. The study therefore used the publisher-supplied English version with participants in the stated age band.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

Global self-esteem was assessed with the 10-item RSES (Rosenberg, 1965). The scoring sheet uses four response options coded 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). To orient the composite so that higher scores consistently indicate higher self-esteem, positively worded items (1, 3, 4, 7, and 10) were reverse-scored as 5 minus the recorded response; negatively worded items were retained. The corrected sum ranges from 10 to 40. Cronbach's alpha for the corrected total in this sample was .89. The English-language version was administered.

Data Analysis

Data screening confirmed 530 complete records for the study variables. The AISS domains were scored according to the manual. The RSES total was recomputed from item-level data with reverse scoring of positively worded items, because the workbook's total column did not account for item direction. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, and Pearson correlations were calculated. Hierarchical ordinary least squares regression was conducted with gender entered in Step 1 (female = 0, male = 1) and all three AISS domains entered simultaneously in Step 2. The adjustment block's incremental contribution was evaluated using change in R^2 and an F-change test. Coefficients are reported as unstandardized B and standardized β with 95% confidence intervals. Variance inflation factors were examined. HC3 heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors were used as a sensitivity check for the final model. Analyses were reproduced in Python 3.12.14 using pandas, NumPy, and SciPy. All tests were two-sided with $\alpha = .05$; p values for individual coefficients are interpreted cautiously given the correlated predictors and the sensitivity analysis.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

The mean AISS scores were 9.55 (SD = 3.86) for emotional maladjustment, 9.43 (SD = 3.84) for social maladjustment, and 9.38 (SD = 3.81) for educational maladjustment. The recalculated RSES score had a mean of 25.02 (SD = 6.41), with observed scores ranging from 10 to 40. Internal-consistency estimates ranged from .69 to .70 across AISS domains and were .89 for the RSES. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and correlations.

The three adjustment domains were positively intercorrelated (rs = .66-.69), consistent with related but nonidentical dimensions. Each domain had a negative bivariate association with self-esteem: emotional maladjustment, r (528) = -

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.32, $p < .001$; social maladjustment, $r(528) = -.33$, $p < .001$; and educational maladjustment, $r(528) = -.37$, $p < .001$. Thus, higher reported difficulty in each domain covaried with lower global self-esteem.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Internal Consistency, and Zero-Order Correlations

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4
1. Emotional	9.55	3.86	.70				
2. Social	9.43	3.84	.70	.69**			
3. Educational	9.38	3.81	.69	.68**	.66**		
4. Self-esteem	25.02	6.41	.89	-.32**	-.33**	-.37**	

Note. N = 530. The first three variables are AISS = Adjustment Inventory for School Students domains. AISS domain scores range from 0 to 20; higher scores indicate greater adjustment difficulty. RSES scores range from 10 to 40; higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. Values are Pearson's r. **$p < .001$.

Hierarchical Regression

Gender accounted for 1.5% of the variance in self-esteem at Step 1, $R^2 = .015$, $F(1, 528) = 8.09$, $p = .005$. Adding the three adjustment domains at Step 2 increased explained variance by 14.8 percentage points, $\Delta R^2 = .148$, F-change$(3, 525) = 31.02$, $p < .001$. The final model explained 16.3% of the variance, $R^2 = .163$, adjusted $R^2 = .157$, $F(4, 525) = 25.63$, $p < .001$.

Controlling for gender and the other adjustment scores, educational maladjustment was negatively associated with self-esteem, B = -0.40, SE = 0.10, β = -.24, 95% CI [-0.60, -0.21], $p < .001$. The social maladjustment coefficient was smaller, B = -0.20, SE = 0.10, β = -.12, 95% CI [-0.40, -0.01], $p = .041$; however, its HC3 robust test was not statistically significant ($p = .066$), so this unique association is not robust to the variance estimator. Emotional maladjustment was not a statistically significant unique correlate in the joint model, B = -0.11, SE = 0.10, β = -.07, 95% CI [-0.31, 0.09], $p = .269$. VIFs for the predictors ranged from 2.16 to 2.33 (gender VIF = 1.00), with no indication of severe multicollinearity. Table 2 reports coefficients.

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Self-Esteem

Predictor	B	SE B	β	95% CI for B; p
Step 1: Gender				
Male gender	-1.57	0.55	-.12	-2.66 to -0.49; p = .005
Step 2: Adjustment block				
Male gender	-1.45	0.51	-.11	-2.46 to -0.44; p = .005
Emotional AISS	-0.11	0.10	-.07	-0.31 to 0.09; p = .269
Social AISS	-0.20	0.10	-.12	-0.40 to -0.01; p = .041*
Educational AISS	-0.40	0.10	-.24	-0.60 to -0.21; p < .001

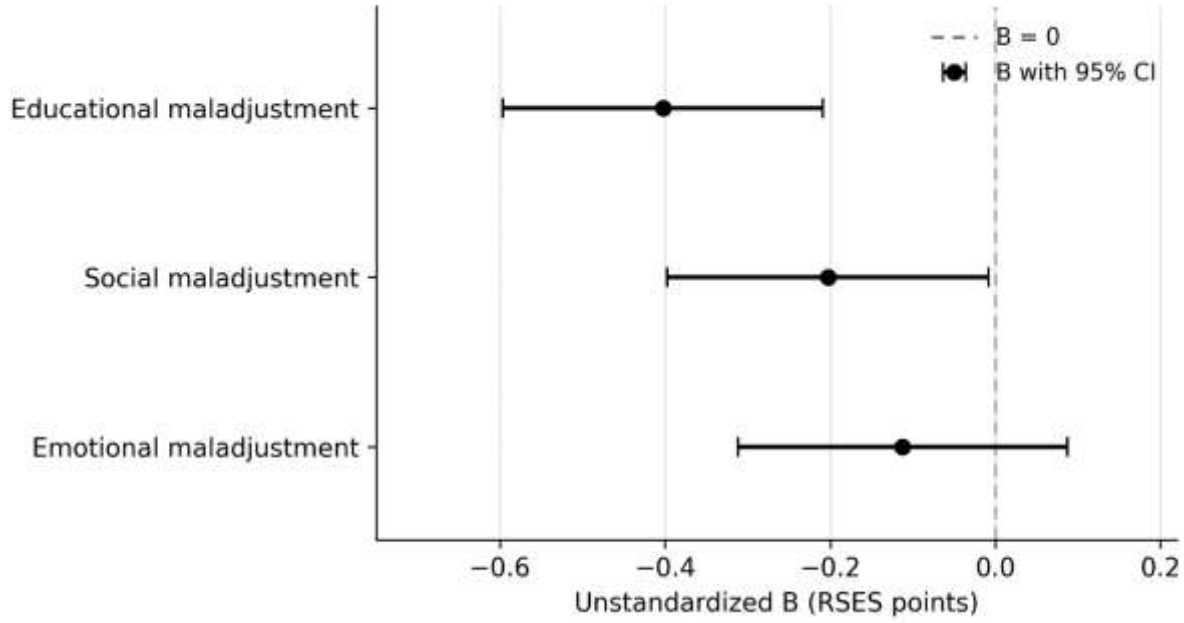
Note. N = 530. Step 1 entered gender; Step 2 added emotional, social, and educational adjustment scores simultaneously. Female = 0; male = 1. AISS = Adjustment Inventory for School Students. Higher AISS scores indicate greater adjustment

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difficulty. Conventional OLS 95% confidence intervals and p values are shown. *The social-adjustment coefficient was not significant with HC3 robust standard errors (p = .066).

Figure 1

Adjusted Regression Coefficients for Adjustment Domains Predicting Self-Esteem



Note. Dots show unstandardized coefficients (B); horizontal bars show conventional 95% confidence intervals; the dashed line marks B = 0. Higher AISS scores indicate greater adjustment difficulty. The social-domain result should be interpreted cautiously: its HC3 robust test was not significant (p = .066).

Discussion

This study examined how emotional, social, and educational adjustment scores related to self-esteem among secondary school students in Bilaspur District. The zero-order findings were consistent: students with higher AISS scores, indicating greater difficulty in adjustment, reported lower self-esteem. When the three related domains were considered together after gender, the adjustment block made a statistically significant incremental contribution. Educational maladjustment had the clearest unique association; the emotional coefficient was not independently significant, and the social coefficient was modest and sensitive to robust inference.

Interpreting the Domain-Specific Pattern

The bivariate emotional association suggests that emotional difficulties and global self-evaluation co-occur in this sample. Its nonsignificant conditional coefficient does not show that emotional adjustment is unimportant. Rather, shared variance with the social and educational domains may leave little unique variance attributable to the emotional score in this model. Because the AISS emotional domain is a screening-oriented adjustment subscale rather than a diagnostic measure, the finding should not be interpreted as evidence about specific mental-health conditions.

The social domain was negatively related to self-esteem at the bivariate level, consistent with theories and longitudinal syntheses that connect social relationships and self-worth (Harris & Orth, 2020; Leary et al., 1995). Yet its conditional estimate was weak and not robust to HC3 standard errors. This pattern supports a restrained conclusion: social maladjustment covaries with self-esteem, but the present data do not establish an independent association once overlapping adjustment domains and gender are accounted for. The AISS manual's specific interpretation of its social score also limits broad claims about peer acceptance or social competence.

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Educational maladjustment retained a negative association with self-esteem in the joint model. This result is compatible with work treating school as a developmental context in which instructional conditions, participation, and academic experiences correspond with adolescents' self-evaluations (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Morin et al., 2013). It should not be read as evidence that educational maladjustment causes low self-esteem. The cross-sectional data cannot distinguish whether school difficulties erode self-evaluation, lower self-esteem makes educational demands harder to manage, or both arise from other influences such as family circumstances, school climate, learning needs, or socioeconomic conditions.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results support a multidimensional treatment of adjustment in school-based research: emotional, social, and educational domains overlap, but the educational domain carried the clearest unique statistical signal in this sample. For schools, this points toward assessing students' experiences of curricular demands, participation, academic feedback, and access to support alongside social and emotional needs. A low self-esteem score should not be used to label a student or infer the cause of school difficulty. Instead, confidential screening, supportive teacher-student relationships, referral pathways, and non-stigmatizing academic support may help identify students who need assistance. Any such program should be evaluated prospectively rather than assumed effective on the basis of these associations. Programs should also target supportive relationships and concrete competencies rather than self-esteem enhancement in isolation, as conceptual and empirical critiques warn against treating high self-esteem as a sufficient intervention target (Baumeister et al., 2003; DuBois & Flay, 2004).

For theory, the findings are consistent with reciprocal-developmental accounts rather than a one-way predictor model. Future studies can test temporal ordering by measuring adjustment and self-esteem repeatedly and can use multilevel models where students are clustered within schools. They should also distinguish global self-esteem from academic self-concept, self-efficacy, and domain-specific worth, which are related but conceptually different constructs (Harter, 2012; Marsh & Craven, 2006).

Strengths and Limitations

The limitations are substantial. The cross-sectional, correlational design means that "predictor" refers to regression order, not temporal or causal prediction. Schools were selected partly for convenience and proximity, so the sample cannot be treated as representative of Bilaspur District or other settings. The study involved seven schools only. Gender was the only covariate in the regression, leaving potential confounding by age, socioeconomic circumstances, school type, academic performance, family context, and mental-health factors.

Conclusion

In this sample of 530 secondary students, greater emotional, social, and educational adjustment difficulties were each associated with lower self-esteem at the bivariate level. Together, the three adjustment scores explained additional variance beyond gender, with educational maladjustment showing the most stable unique association. These results are preliminary and noncausal. Stronger conclusions require verified sampling and ethics documentation, age- and language-appropriate measurement, school-aware analyses, and longitudinal or intervention designs.

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