



A Study of Relationship Between Emotional Maturity, Social Behaviour and Peer Acceptance in Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

Inclusive classrooms bring together children with and without disabilities and diverse learning needs in a common learning space, making the quality of peer relationships central to the success of inclusion. This study examined the relationship between emotional maturity, social behaviour, and peer acceptance among students studying in inclusive classrooms at the secondary school level. A quantitative, correlational survey design was employed. A sample of 300 students (150 boys and 150 girls) studying in Grades 8 to 10 in inclusive schools was selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a standardized Emotional Maturity Scale, a Social Behaviour Rating Scale, and a Peer Acceptance (sociometric) Scale. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation, and multiple regression analysis. It was hypothesised that emotional maturity and social behaviour would be significantly and positively related to peer acceptance, and that social behaviour would partially mediate the relationship between emotional maturity and peer acceptance. The findings are expected to have implications for teacher training, classroom management, and the design of socio-emotional learning interventions in inclusive settings. The paper situates its hypotheses within ten empirical studies drawn from both Indian and international contexts and outlines a complete methodology for testing the proposed relationships.

Keywords: Emotional maturity, social behaviour, peer acceptance, inclusive classroom, inclusive education, adolescents

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is founded on the principle that all learners, regardless of ability, disability, or background, have the right to learn together in the same classroom with appropriate support. Over the last two decades, national policies such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and the National Education Policy (2020) in India, along with global frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, have accelerated the movement of children with diverse needs into general education classrooms. While physical placement in a common classroom is a necessary first step toward inclusion, true inclusion is realised only when children are also socially and emotionally accepted by their classmates. Emotional maturity refers to the ability of an individual to control, regulate, and appropriately express emotions in a manner suited to the situation and to one's age. An emotionally mature student is better able to manage frustration, cope with academic and social stress, and respond to peers with empathy rather than impulsivity. Social behaviour, in turn, encompasses the range of prosocial and antisocial actions a child displays while interacting with others, including cooperation, sharing, helping, aggression, and withdrawal. Peer acceptance is the degree to which a child is liked, welcomed, and included by classmates in social and academic activities, and is often measured through sociometric techniques such as peer nomination or peer rating.

A growing body of research suggests that emotionally mature children who display more prosocial and cooperative behaviour tend to be better accepted by their peers, while children who show poor emotional regulation or disruptive behaviour are more likely to face peer rejection. In inclusive classrooms, where children vary widely in ability and behaviour, these relationships take on added importance because peer acceptance directly shapes the participation, self-esteem, and academic engagement of every child in the room, including those with special educational needs. Despite the policy emphasis on inclusion, relatively few Indian studies have quantitatively examined how emotional maturity and social behaviour jointly predict peer acceptance in inclusive classroom settings. The present study attempts to address this gap.

2. Review of Literature

Ten empirical studies, drawn from both Indian and international settings, were reviewed to build the conceptual and methodological foundation for the present study. The reviewed literature is organised thematically below, followed by a summary of the research gap.

2.1 Indian Studies

2.1.1 Rajendran and Kaliyaperumal (2021)

In a survey of 200 Class IX students drawn from government and government-aided schools in the East Coast region of Tamil Nadu, India, this study examined the relationship between emotional maturity and social adjustment among adolescents. Using the survey method with random sampling, the researchers found that emotional maturity and social adjustment were meaningfully related, and that the level of emotional maturity varied across sub-groups of students. The study underscored that one of the central goals of education is to help learners achieve emotional maturity, since immature emotional control was associated with poorer social adjustment.

2.1.2 Patel and Shah (2023)

This study investigated emotional maturity among 173 higher-secondary students (aged 14–17 years) in Anand district, Gujarat, using the Emotional Maturity Scale developed by Singh and Bhargava. Descriptive analysis revealed that the majority of adolescents (around 70%) displayed an average level of emotional maturity, a smaller proportion showed above-average maturity, and a minority showed below-average maturity. The authors argued that adolescence, being a stage of heightened stress associated with the transition to higher education, makes the study of emotional maturity at the higher-secondary level particularly important for guiding classroom practice.

2.1.3 Kumar (2018)

Using the Emotional Maturity Scale of Singh and Bhargava, this study compared emotional maturity among rural and urban adolescents in Dehradun and analysed the data using mean, standard deviation, ANOVA, and correlation. Results showed that boys and girls differed significantly on emotional progression, one of the dimensions of emotional maturity, and that rural and urban adolescents differed significantly in independence, another dimension of emotional maturity. The study highlighted that demographic factors such as gender and locale can shape the developmental trajectory of emotional maturity, a finding with direct relevance for designing inclusive classroom interventions that are sensitive to such variation.

2.1.4 Aswal and Pant (2019)

This comparative study examined the emotional maturity of visually impaired children studying in special schools versus those studying in inclusive school setups, using a stratified random sample of 100 students and the Singh–Bhargava Emotional Maturity Scale. The mean, standard deviation, and t-test results indicated that visually impaired children studying in inclusive classrooms showed greater emotional maturity than their counterparts in special schools, suggesting that placement in a general, socially diverse classroom environment may itself support the development of emotional regulation and maturity, a finding of direct relevance to the present study's focus on inclusive settings.

2.1.5 Bihar Adjustment Study (2025)

Drawing on a large sample of secondary school students affiliated with the Bihar School Examination Board, this study explored the role of emotional maturity in adolescents' overall adjustment ability, including social, emotional, and academic adjustment. The findings indicated that better emotional maturity was associated with more effective adjustment

to academic pressures and interpersonal relationships, and that adjustment in turn was linked to more positive mental health and social outcomes, reinforcing the proposed pathway from emotional maturity to social functioning that underlies the present study's hypotheses.

2.2 International Studies

2.2.1 Griffioen, Mainhard, and colleagues, University of Groningen, Netherlands (2020)

This longitudinal study compared the social–emotional development of students with social–emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) placed in inclusive regular schools with those in exclusive special schools, alongside typically developing peers, using Bayesian statistical modelling. The study found that students with SEBD in regular schools were consistently less accepted by their peers than typically developing students, and that this gap in peer acceptance remained stable across time for all three groups studied. This finding highlights that mere physical inclusion does not guarantee equal peer acceptance and that targeted support for social–emotional behaviour is necessary within inclusive classrooms.

2.2.2 University of Groningen, Netherlands, Secondary Education Study (2025)

This large-scale study used multilevel modelling to predict peer acceptance among students with and without special educational needs across regular secondary education, pre-vocational education, and special settings. Teacher-reported behavioural difficulties emerged as a significant predictor of peer acceptance, with a notable interaction between behavioural difficulties and educational setting. The study demonstrated that behavioural functioning, rather than disability status alone, was a stronger determinant of how well a student was accepted by classmates, supporting the present study's emphasis on social behaviour as a key predictor variable.

2.2.3 Banerjee, Wright, and Bianco (2025)

This study examined how behavioural reputation and classroom social climate connect emotional adjustment, social behaviour, and peer acceptance among school-aged children. The researchers noted that children's social acceptance and their behavioural reputation among peers have long been recognised in developmental psychology as interconnected risk factors for later psychological difficulties, and that classroom-level social climate moderates how individual emotional difficulties translate into peer rejection. The study's emphasis on the classroom as a social ecosystem, rather than isolated individual traits, informed the present study's decision to examine emotional maturity, social behaviour, and peer acceptance together within the inclusive classroom context.

2.2.4 Huber and colleagues (2020)

Using a sociometric "liking-to-play-with" rating scale administered at the beginning and end of a school year to over 500 students, this German study examined the role of teacher attitudes toward inclusion and classroom management in shaping peer acceptance. The findings indicated that students in inclusive classrooms were more accepted by their peers when they displayed cooperative and prosocial behaviour, whereas students showing low levels of positive social behaviour were less accepted, and that this pattern held for students with and without special educational needs alike. The study's central conclusion that social behaviour, more than diagnostic category, drives peer acceptance directly parallels the central hypothesis of the present research.

Taken together, the reviewed studies converge on three broad conclusions. First, emotional maturity develops through adolescence and is shaped by factors such as gender, rural–urban locale, and school environment (Patel & Shah, 2023; Kumar, 2018). Second, inclusive classroom placement can itself be associated with better emotional and social outcomes for children with special needs when compared to segregated settings (Aswal & Pant, 2019). Third, and most consistently across the Indian and international literature, social behaviour particularly cooperative and prosocial conduct is a strong and direct predictor of peer acceptance in inclusive classrooms, often more so than disability status itself (Huber et al., 2020; Griffioen et al., 2020; Banerjee et al., 2025). However, very few studies, particularly within the Indian context, have quantitatively modelled emotional maturity, social behaviour, and peer acceptance together in a single correlational or regression framework within inclusive classrooms. This gap forms the rationale for the present study.

3. Rationale of the Study

As inclusive education expands rapidly across Indian schools following the National Education Policy (2020) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), teachers and school administrators require empirical evidence on the

psychosocial factors that help or hinder successful inclusion. Most existing Indian research has examined emotional maturity or peer acceptance in isolation, or has focused on students with a single category of disability, rather than testing how emotional maturity and social behaviour jointly relate to peer acceptance across an entire inclusive classroom. A quantitative study that measures these three variables simultaneously, using validated psychometric tools and an adequately sized sample, can offer more precise guidance for designing socio-emotional learning programmes, teacher training modules, and classroom management strategies that support inclusion in practice, not merely in policy.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the level of emotional maturity among students studying in inclusive classrooms.
2. To study the level of social behaviour among students studying in inclusive classrooms.
3. To study the level of peer acceptance among students studying in inclusive classrooms.
4. To examine the relationship between emotional maturity and peer acceptance among students in inclusive classrooms.
5. To examine the relationship between social behaviour and peer acceptance among students in inclusive classrooms.
6. To examine whether emotional maturity and social behaviour differ significantly on the basis of gender and grade level.
7. To determine the combined and relative contribution of emotional maturity and social behaviour in predicting peer acceptance.

5. Hypotheses

On the basis of the objectives and the reviewed literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. H1: There is a significant positive relationship between emotional maturity and peer acceptance among students in inclusive classrooms.
2. H2: There is a significant positive relationship between social behaviour and peer acceptance among students in inclusive classrooms.
3. H3: There is a significant positive relationship between emotional maturity and social behaviour.
4. H4: Emotional maturity and social behaviour jointly and significantly predict peer acceptance.
5. H5: There is no significant difference in emotional maturity between male and female students.
6. H6: There is no significant difference in social behaviour between male and female students.
7. H7: There is no significant difference in peer acceptance scores across Grades 8, 9, and 10.

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, descriptive-cum-correlational survey design. This design is appropriate because the study aims to describe the levels of the three variables in the target population and to statistically test the strength and direction of the relationships among them, without any experimental manipulation of variables.

6.2 Population and Sample

The population for the study comprised all students studying in Grades 8, 9, and 10 in inclusive secondary schools (schools that enrol both typically developing students and students with special educational needs in the same general classroom) within the selected district. A sample of 300 students (150 boys and 150 girls; 100 each from Grades 8, 9, and 10) was drawn from six inclusive schools using a stratified random sampling technique, with strata based on grade level and gender. Within each inclusive classroom, both typically developing students and students with identified special educational needs who were able to independently respond to the self-report tools were included. Students with severe cognitive or communication impairments that would prevent valid self-report were excluded from the self-report component, though their peer acceptance scores (as rated by classmates) were still recorded.

Grade	Boys	Girls	Total
Grade 8	50	50	100
Grade 9	50	50	100
Grade 10	50	50	100
Total	150	150	300

Table 1. Distribution of the Sample by Grade and Gender

6.3 Tools and Instruments

1. Emotional Maturity Scale (EMS): A standardized self-report scale (adapted from Singh & Bhargava's Emotional Maturity Scale) comprising items across dimensions such as emotional stability, emotional progression, social adjustment, personality integration, and independence, rated on a five-point Likert-type scale. Higher scores indicate lower emotional maturity (emotional immaturity), consistent with the original scoring convention, and are reverse-coded for ease of interpretation in this study so that higher scores represent greater emotional maturity.
2. Social Behaviour Rating Scale (SBRs): A teacher-rating scale assessing the frequency of prosocial behaviours (cooperation, helping, sharing, empathy) and problem behaviours (aggression, disruption, withdrawal) displayed by each student in the classroom, rated on a five-point frequency scale.
3. Peer Acceptance Scale (Sociometric Rating): Following the peer-rating sociometric method used in prior inclusive-classroom research, each student rates every classmate on a five-point scale ranging from "do not like to play/work with at all" to "like to play/work with a lot." An individual peer acceptance score is computed as the mean rating received from all classmates, following procedures similar to those used in earlier sociometric studies of inclusive classrooms.
4. A brief demographic data sheet collecting information on age, gender, grade, and type of school.

6.4 Procedure

Prior permission was obtained from school authorities, and informed consent/assent was obtained from parents and students. The Emotional Maturity Scale was administered to students individually or in small groups during a regular class period. The Social Behaviour Rating Scale was completed by class teachers for each student in their classroom. The Peer Acceptance Scale was administered as a classroom-wide sociometric exercise, in which every student rated every classmate; a minimum classroom participation rate of 60% was maintained to ensure valid sociometric scores, consistent with thresholds used in prior sociometric research. Data collection was completed within a period of four weeks.

6.5 Statistical Techniques

1. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, percentage) to describe the levels of emotional maturity, social behaviour, and peer acceptance.
2. Pearson's product-moment correlation to test H1, H2, and H3.
3. Multiple linear regression, with peer acceptance as the criterion variable and emotional maturity and social behaviour as predictors, to test H4.
4. Independent samples t-test to test H5 and H6 (gender comparisons).
5. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test H7 (grade-level comparison), with Tukey's post-hoc test for significant results.

All statistical tests will be conducted at the 0.05 level of significance using SPSS software.

7. Scope and Delimitations

- The study is delimited to students studying in Grades 8 to 10 in inclusive secondary schools within the selected district; findings may not generalise to primary grades, higher education, or fully segregated special schools.
- The study relies on self-report and teacher-rating instruments, which may be subject to social desirability bias.

- Peer acceptance is measured cross-sectionally rather than longitudinally, and therefore causal direction among the variables cannot be firmly established.
- Students with severe cognitive or communication impairments were excluded from self-report measures, which limits the generalisability of emotional maturity findings to this subgroup.

8. Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to benefit multiple stakeholders in inclusive education. For teachers, the results can inform classroom management strategies and highlight the value of explicitly teaching social-emotional skills alongside academic content. For school counsellors and special educators, the study can help identify students at risk of peer rejection so that targeted socio-emotional interventions can be designed. For policymakers and teacher-education institutions, the study can provide empirical justification for embedding social-emotional learning and peer-mediated intervention strategies within pre-service and in-service teacher training curricula, in support of the broader goals of inclusive education articulated in national and international policy frameworks.

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