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FAMILY STRESS AS PREDICTOR OF ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NSUKKA EDUCATION ZONE, ENUGU STATE

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ABSTRACT

*This study examined family stress and gender as predictors of academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State. Two research questions and two null hypotheses guided the study. The study adopted a predictive correlational survey research design. The population consisted of 10,229 Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students in public secondary schools in Nsukka Education Zone during the 2025/2026 academic session. A sample of 404 students was selected using Taro Yamane's formula and multi-stage sampling technique, out of which 392 valid responses were used for analysis. Data were collected using the Family Stress Questionnaire (FSQ) and Academic Adjustment Scale (AAS). The instruments were face-validated by experts, while reliability coefficients of 0.74 and 0.80 were obtained respectively using Cronbach's Alpha. Data were analyzed using simple linear regression and Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 1). The findings revealed that family stress had a significant negative very low predictive power on academic adjustment (**$R = .132; R^2 = .017; p < .05$**), indicating that increased family stress reduces students' academic adjustment. The study further revealed that gender, within the predictive model, had a significant weak predictive power on academic adjustment (**$R = .179; R^2 = .032; F = 4.283; p < .05$**), indicating that gender significantly predicted academic adjustment among the students. It was concluded that family stress remains a significant risk factor in students' academic adjustment, while gender also plays a significant role in shaping students' adjustment to academic demands. The study recommended that parents should create stable and supportive home environments, while schools should provide family-based counselling programmes and gender-sensitive interventions to improve students' academic adjustment.*

Keywords: Family stress, gender, academic adjustment, secondary school students, Nsukka Education Zone.

Introduction

Academic adjustment has become one of the most important issues in educational research because it determines the extent to which students adapt effectively to the academic, emotional, and behavioural demands of schooling. Academic adjustment is a multidimensional construct that reflects students' ability to align their learning behaviours, emotional responses,

and cognitive efforts with school expectations in order to achieve educational goals. Bücker et al. (2018) defined academic adjustment as students' ability to adapt effectively to educational demands while maintaining psychological well-being and academic engagement. Similarly, Gubbels, van der Put, and Assink (2019) further described academic adjustment as the process through which students establish adaptive academic habits and psychological stability necessary for sustained participation and academic success. Operationally, academic adjustment in this study refers to the extent to which Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students effectively cope with academic demands by maintaining concentration, sustaining academic motivation, completing assignments regularly, regulating examination-related anxiety, demonstrating effective study habits, and actively participating in classroom learning.

Academic adjustment is fundamental because it directly influences students' academic performance, emotional stability, classroom engagement, and persistence in school. Students who adjust effectively tend to perform better academically, maintain emotional balance, and develop stronger resilience, while those who struggle with adjustment often experience poor concentration, low motivation, academic anxiety, and school disengagement (Bücker et al., 2018).

Globally, academic adjustment difficulties among adolescents have become increasingly prevalent. Reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) indicate that approximately 66% of students across participating countries experience moderate to high school-related stress. These statistics indicate that academic maladjustment is not a marginal issue but a major developmental and educational concern.

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by rapid physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes, making adjustment to academic demands particularly challenging. During this stage, students are expected to demonstrate higher levels of self-regulation, resilience, and emotional control. However, these developmental changes seem to often coincide with increasing academic pressure, making students vulnerable to stress and maladjustment.

Secondary education occupies a strategic place in the educational system because it serves as the bridge between primary and tertiary education. In Nigeria, secondary education is designed to equip learners with relevant knowledge, skills, and values for useful living and higher education (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2014). At the Senior Secondary School level, particularly Senior Secondary School Two (SS2), students face increased academic demands due to subject specialization and preparation for external examinations such as WAEC and NECO. This stage requires effective academic adjustment for academic progression and future educational opportunities.

Despite these expectations, many students seem to continue to experience adjustment difficulties. Studies have shown that nearly

one in every five adolescents experiences school adjustment problems severe enough to affect academic functioning. In Nigeria, a study found that 68% of secondary school students in the study area (Osundele 2026). Findings show higher distress levels among female students and those in senior secondary classes, emphasizing a need for school-based mental health interventionsWithin Enugu State, and particularly Nsukka Education Zone, students continue to exhibit poor concentration, weak study habits, examination anxiety, inconsistent assignment completion, and low classroom engagement, indicating persistent academic adjustment difficulties (Agodo & Vita-Agundu, 2025; Ncheke et al., 2023).

Academic adjustment difficulties may be influenced by several factors such as school climate, peer relationships, personal resilience, and family-related conditions. Among these, family-related variables remain particularly important because the family serves as the primary environment where adolescents develop emotional stability, coping strategies, behavioural discipline, and academic orientation. One important family-related variable is family stress. Family stress refers to the strain, tension, and pressure experienced within the family system due to economic hardship, marital conflict, parental workload, illness, or other household challenges. Masarik and Conger (2017) defined family stress as the strain experienced within the family arising from economic and relational difficulties that disrupt parenting and family functioning. Prime, Wade, and Browne (2020) conceptualized family stress as the cumulative psychological and relational pressure within households that alters emotional climate and caregiving quality. Neppl, Senia, and Donnellan (2016) described family stress as persistent exposure to stressors within the home environment that interfere with emotional responsiveness and behavioural regulation. Operationally, family stress in this study refers to the level of strain, tension, and stress-related experiences within the households of SS2 students as manifested through frequent conflict, financial pressure, emotional instability, and other stress-related disruptions that may affect students' emotional well-being and academic functioning.

High levels of family stress may create emotionally unstable home environments that weaken parental support and reduce students' concentration, motivation, and coping abilities. Prime et al. (2020) noted that family stress alters emotional climate and parental responsiveness, thereby affecting adolescents' adjustment outcomes. Similarly, Masarik and Conger (2017) found that prolonged family stress significantly undermines adolescents' emotional functioning and academic behaviour.

Another important variable in this study is gender. Gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed roles, behaviours, and expectations associated with being male or female. Hyde (2014) defined gender as the social and psychological attributes associated with biological sex that shape behavioural patterns and life experiences. In educational contexts, gender has been found to influence

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academic motivation, coping strategies, emotional regulation, and school adjustment. Operationally, gender in this study refers to the biological categorization of students as male or female as reported by the respondents.

Gender remains an important variable because male and female students may differ in their response to academic stress, family challenges, and coping strategies. Studies have shown that female students often report higher academic anxiety and emotional sensitivity, while male students may display lower academic persistence and weaker help-seeking behaviours (Voyer & Voyer, 2014). These differences may affect how students adjust academically. Despite growing evidence linking family stress and gender with adolescent academic outcomes, many studies have focused on academic achievement or psychological well-being rather than academic adjustment as a broader construct. More importantly, there appears to be limited context-specific evidence on the predictive power of family stress and gender on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State. Given the persistent adjustment difficulties observed among students and the possible influence of these variables, there is a need to investigate these relationships. This need forms the basis for the present study.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine family stress as predictor of academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State. Specifically, the study seeks to determine the:

1. predictive power of family stress on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State.
2. predictive power of gender on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What is the predictive power of family stress on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State?
2. What is the predictive power of gender on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses will be tested at 0.05 level of significance:

$H0_1$: Family stress does not significantly predict academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State.

$H0_2$: Gender does not significantly predict academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State.

Reviewed Literature

The reviewed literature generally establishes family stress as an important predictor of students' academic adjustment and broader school adaptation. A common pattern across the studies is that increased

family stress is associated with poorer academic functioning, weaker adjustment, and heightened emotional difficulties. Idris (2025) found that parental conflict significantly predicted poor academic adjustment among senior secondary school students in Nigeria, while Jafary (2022) reported a significant negative relationship between parental stress and academic adjustment among students with learning disabilities. These findings consistently suggest that stressful family environments weaken students' concentration, emotional stability, and coping capacities needed for effective academic adaptation.

The reviewed studies further show that family stress affects students' adjustment both directly and indirectly. Pourshahryar et al. (2023) found that helicopter parenting negatively influenced academic adjustment indirectly through anxiety, indicating that stress-related parenting practices impair academic adaptation through emotional distress. Collectively, these findings reinforce the argument that family stress disrupts the emotional and relational stability necessary for successful academic adjustment.

However, although the reviewed studies consistently support the negative influence of family stress, they largely overlooked gender as a predictor or moderating variable. Emerging evidence suggests that gender may shape how adolescents experience stress and respond to academic challenges. For instance, recent findings show that female adolescents report significantly higher school-related stress than males, with about 63% of girls compared to 43% of boys reporting high academic pressure (World Health Organization [WHO], 2024) . Similarly, Souza-Lima et al. (2025) found that girls experience higher school stress and lower academic satisfaction than boys. These findings suggest that gender may shape students' vulnerability to family stress and their adjustment patterns. Despite this, there remains limited context-specific evidence examining family stress and gender together as predictors of academic adjustment among mainstream Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State. This conceptual and contextual gap is what the present study seeks to fill.

Methods

This study adopted a predictive correlational survey research design. According to Nworgu (2015), a correlational survey design is used to determine the nature and degree of relationship among variables without manipulating them. The design was considered appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to examine the predictive relationship between family stress and academic adjustment, as well as the moderating role of gender among secondary school students. Since the variables were studied as they naturally occurred, the design also provided a suitable basis for regression-based moderation analysis using PROCESS Macro.

The study was conducted in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State, Nigeria. The population consisted of 10,229 Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students in public secondary schools in the zone during the 2025/2026 academic session. SS2

students were considered appropriate because they occupy a relatively stable academic position within the senior secondary school structure and have had sufficient exposure to academic demands to demonstrate measurable patterns of adjustment. A sample of 404 students was drawn using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula at 0.05 level of precision, with an additional 5% added to account for possible attrition. A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed. First, two Local Government Areas (Nsukka and Igbo-Etiti) were selected from the zone. Thereafter, 14 public secondary schools were randomly selected from the two LGAs. The sample was proportionately distributed across the selected schools, after which simple random sampling through balloting without replacement was used to select the respondents.

Two instruments were used for data collection: the Family Stress Questionnaire (FSQ) and the Academic Adjustment Scale (AAS). The FSQ was a 12-item instrument adapted from the Family Stress Scale based on the work of Conger et al. (1994). It measured dimensions such as family conflict, financial pressure, emotional strain, and instability within the home environment as perceived by students. The minimum obtainable score was 12, while the maximum was 48, with higher scores indicating higher levels of family stress. The Academic Adjustment Scale was adapted from the Academic Adjustment subscale of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) developed by Baker and Siryk (1984). It consisted of 15 items designed to measure students' ability to cope with academic demands, regulate study behaviours, sustain academic motivation, and manage academic stress. Scores ranged from 15 to 60, with higher scores indicating better academic adjustment. Gender information was obtained through the demographic section of the questionnaire and coded as male and female for moderation analysis.

To establish validity, the instruments were subjected to face validation by three experts from the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Two of the experts were from the Department of Counselling and Human Development Studies, while one was from the Measurement and Evaluation Unit of the Department of Science Education. Their observations and suggestions helped improve the clarity, relevance, and adequacy of the items. Reliability was established through a pilot test involving 20 SS2 students from a public secondary school outside the study area but within Enugu State. Cronbach's Alpha was used to determine internal consistency. The Family Stress Questionnaire yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.74, while the Academic Adjustment Scale yielded 0.80, indicating acceptable reliability.

The researcher adopted the direct administration and retrieval method for data collection. A total of 404 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the respondents, out of which 392 were properly completed and returned, representing a return rate of 97.0%. The valid copies were used for data analysis. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 27, alongside Hayes' PROCESS

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Macro (Model 1). Simple linear regression analysis was used to answer the first research question on the predictive power of family stress on academic adjustment, while moderation analysis through PROCESS Macro was used to determine whether gender moderated the relationship between family stress and academic adjustment. The corresponding null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance, and decisions were based on the probability values obtained.

Results

Research Question One

What is the predictive power of family stress on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State?

Table 1: Linear regression analysis of the predictive power of family stress on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State

Variables	R	R^2	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Family Stress and Academic Adjustment	–.132a	.017	.015	8.304

a. Predictors: (Constant), Family Stress
b. Dependent Variable: Academic Adjustment
(R^2 = Coefficient of Determination)

The result in Table 1 shows that the correlation coefficient (R) between family stress and academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone was –.132. However, the regression coefficient of –.132 indicates that the relationship is negative. Based on the benchmark proposed by Nwana (1979) in Nworgu (2015), this represents a low negative relationship between family stress and academic adjustment. The result further shows that the coefficient of determination (R^2) associated with the correlation coefficient of –.132 was .017. This implies that family stress accounts for 1.7% of the variation in academic adjustment among secondary school students, while the remaining 98.3% is attributed to other variables not included in the model. This means that as family stress increases, academic adjustment decreases.

Hypothesis One

Family stress does not significantly predict academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State.

Table 2: Regression analysis of the predictive power of family stress on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	32.987	1.075	–	30.677	.000
Family Stress	-.118	.045	-.132	-2.627	.009

a. Dependent Variable: Academic Adjustment

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The result in Table 2 shows that the t-value of -2.627 with an associated probability value of .009 was obtained. When compared with the 0.05 level of significance, the result was found to be statistically significant since .009 is less than 0.05. Hence, the null hypothesis which stated that family stress does not significantly predict academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State was rejected. The researcher therefore concludes that family stress has a significant negative predictive power on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State.

Table 3: Predictive Power of Gender on Academic Adjustment among Secondary School Students

Variable	R	R^2	MSE	F	df1	df2	p	Decision
Gender	.1790	.0321	68.2823	4.2827	3.0000	388.0000	.0054	Significant

Research Question Two

The result in Table 3 showed that the model had a multiple correlation coefficient of R = .1790, indicating a weak predictive relationship between the variables and academic adjustment among secondary school students. The coefficient of determination (R^2 = .0321) showed that about 3.21% of the variance in academic adjustment was explained by the model, while the remaining 96.79% was attributed to other variables outside the model. The mean square error (MSE = 68.2823) represents the average unexplained variation in academic adjustment. This indicates that gender, within the model, had a weak predictive power on academic adjustment.

Hypothesis Two

The result in Table 3 further showed that the overall model was statistically significant, F(3, 388) = 4.2827, p = .0054, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that gender does not significantly predict academic adjustment among secondary school students was rejected. This implies that gender significantly predicted academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State.

Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed that family stress has a significant negative very low predictive power on academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State (R = .132; R^2 = .017). The negative direction indicates that as family stress increases, academic adjustment decreases. Although the magnitude of the relationship is very low based on Nwana's (1979) benchmark classification, the predictive effect was statistically significant. This implies that stressful family conditions, such as parental conflict, financial strain, emotional instability, or persistent tension within the household, can weaken students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive adaptation to academic demands. The hypothesis testing further showed that the

associated probability value was less than the 0.05 level of significance, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This confirms that family stress significantly predicts academic adjustment among secondary school students. The implication is that exposure to stressful family environments may compromise students' emotional stability, concentration, academic engagement, and resilience, thereby hindering effective adjustment within the school setting.

The present finding aligns with several empirical studies reviewed. Idris (2025) reported that parental conflict, a key dimension of family stress, significantly predicted poorer academic adjustment among senior secondary school students in Nigeria. Similarly, Jafary (2022) found a significant negative and moderate relationship between parental stress and students' academic adjustment, indicating that higher parental stress levels were associated with lower academic adjustment. Furthermore, Pourshahryar et al. (2023) reported that stress-related parenting dimensions indirectly predicted poorer academic adjustment through anxiety, highlighting the psychological pathways through which family stress undermines students' academic functioning. Collectively, these studies reinforce the conclusion that stress within the family environment constitutes a risk factor for students' academic adaptation.

The findings of the study further revealed that when gender was considered within the predictive model, the overall model accounted for 3.21% of the variation in academic adjustment ($R = .179$; $R^2 = .032$), and the associated F-ratio was statistically significant ($F = 4.283$, $p < .05$). This suggests that gender, alongside family stress and their interaction, contributed to the prediction of academic adjustment. The implication is that gender may shape how students experience family stress and respond to academic demands, even though its contribution should be understood within the broader predictive model rather than in isolation.

This finding is supported by previous empirical studies that reported gender differences in stress experiences and academic adjustment. The World Health Organization (2024) reported that female adolescents experience significantly higher school-related stress compared to males, indicating that gender influences vulnerability to academic and emotional pressures. Similarly, Souza-Lima et al. (2025) found that female students reported higher stress levels and lower academic satisfaction than male students, suggesting differential adjustment patterns across gender. These findings support the present result by indicating that gender remains an important factor in understanding how family stress relates to students' academic adjustment.

The convergence of these findings underscores the combined relevance of family stress and gender in shaping students' academic adjustment. While stressful family environments constitute a risk factor that weakens students' adaptive capacity, gender may influence the intensity and manner in which such stress is experienced and managed. Together, these variables provide important insight into understanding the academic adjustment process among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that family stress is a significant predictor of academic adjustment among secondary school students in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State. The study established that increased family stress negatively affects students' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive adaptation to academic demands, suggesting that stressful family environments may weaken students' ability to cope effectively with school challenges. Although the predictive strength of family stress was relatively low, its statistical significance indicates that it remains a relevant factor in students' academic adjustment. The study also showed that when gender was considered within the predictive model, it contributed to the overall explanation of academic adjustment, suggesting that male and female students may differ in how they experience and respond to family-related stress. Overall, the study concludes that reducing family stress and providing gender-responsive support are important for promoting better academic adjustment among secondary school students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Parents should be encouraged to create stable, supportive, and less conflict-ridden home environments in order to reduce the negative impact of family stress on students' academic adjustment.
2. School counsellors should provide family-based counselling and intervention programmes aimed at helping parents manage stress, resolve conflicts, and maintain healthy family relationships.
3. Counsellors and educators should implement gender-sensitive intervention strategies to address possible differences in how male and female students cope with family stress and academic challenges.

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