

Identifying Emotional and Behavioral Factors Affecting School Dropout Intentions

Arman. Sargsyan¹, Ethan. Holloway^{2*}

¹ Department of Applied Psychology, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia

² Department of Experimental Psychology, Western University, London, Canada

* Corresponding author email address: ethan.holloway@uwo.ca

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

Section:

Educational Counseling

How to cite this article:

Sargsyan, A., & Holloway, E. (2026). Identifying Emotional and Behavioral Factors Affecting School Dropout Intentions. *KMAN Counseling and Psychology Nexus*, 4, 1-9.

<http://doi.org/10.61838/kman.ec.psynexus.5653>



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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the emotional and behavioral factors shaping school dropout intentions among secondary-school students. This qualitative study employed a semi-structured interview design to capture students' lived experiences and internal processes related to dropout intention. A total of 26 participants from various regions across Canada were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of students who had expressed dropout intention or were considered at risk. Interviews were conducted in person or through secure online platforms, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. NVivo software was used to support systematic coding and theme development through inductive thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was enhanced through peer debriefing, reflexive memoing, and maintaining an audit trail throughout the analytic process. Analysis revealed four overarching categories influencing dropout intention: emotional determinants, behavioral risk patterns, interpersonal and social influences, and motivational-cognitive barriers. Emotional determinants such as stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem significantly contributed to dropout inclination, while behavioral patterns—including absenteeism, academic disengagement, and digital overuse—amplified existing vulnerabilities. Interpersonal and social influences, particularly peer dynamics, teacher support, family conflict, and school climate, demonstrated strong associations with disengagement trajectories. Motivational and cognitive factors, including low academic motivation, poor self-regulation, and limited future orientation, further intensified withdrawal considerations. Collectively, the themes highlighted dropout intention as a multidimensional process shaped by interacting emotional, behavioral, relational, and motivational conditions. Findings demonstrate that dropout intention emerges from the interplay of psychological strain, disengagement behaviors, social contexts, and motivational deficits, emphasizing the need for early identification and holistic support systems. Interventions addressing emotional well-being, relational support, behavioral regulation, and academic motivation may reduce dropout intention among school-aged youth.

Keywords: School dropout intention; emotional factors; behavioral disengagement; motivation; qualitative research; adolescents

1. Introduction

School dropout intention remains one of the most pressing challenges facing contemporary educational systems, with long-term implications for students' academic, emotional, and socioeconomic trajectories. Although dropout has traditionally been viewed as a sudden decision, recent research reveals that it is a gradual, multidimensional process shaped by interrelated psychological, social, motivational, and contextual factors (Veliz & Ortega, 2023). Understanding dropout intention—not merely dropout behavior—is crucial because intention represents the cognitive and emotional state that precedes withdrawal and therefore offers opportunities for early identification and intervention (Vijayakumaran et al., 2023). Across global contexts, researchers have identified a growing range of emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and environmental determinants that contribute to students' desire to disengage from schooling. However, given the rapidly changing educational environments, increasing academic pressures, and broader sociocultural challenges affecting youth, more nuanced and context-specific examinations of dropout intention are required.

One of the most frequently documented contributors to dropout intention is academic stress. Studies across diverse countries demonstrate that elevated stress levels significantly increase the likelihood that students will consider leaving school. Academic stress reduces self-efficacy, diminishes emotional resilience, and interferes with motivation and concentration (Guo & Huh, 2023). Among university students, similar patterns are observed: high levels of academic pressure predict lower persistence, poorer mental health outcomes, and stronger dropout intention (Lee, 2023). These findings align with evidence from vocational and teacher-training programs, where academic overload, unclear expectations, and performance anxiety undermine students' integration into their programs (Stellmacher et al., 2025). The centrality of academic stress is further supported by research demonstrating its indirect effects through mediators such as depression, self-efficacy, and perceived support from family or teachers (Van, 2024). Thus, academic stress functions as a foundational emotional driver that disrupts both academic engagement and psychological well-being.

Alongside academic stress, emerging literature highlights the importance of psychological adjustment and well-being in shaping dropout intention. Depression, anxiety, and burnout have consistently been found to influence intention

to withdraw from academic programs, particularly when students experience limited institutional support. A recent study found that female university students experiencing depressive symptoms and low levels of school pride reported stronger dropout intention, demonstrating the psychological vulnerability that accompanies emotional distress (Kim & Mo, 2024). Similarly, research among veteran students with disabilities indicated that mental health challenges, specifically PTSD symptoms, significantly impaired academic adjustment and increased dropout decisions, though positive psychological factors such as gratitude offered some protective effects (Wang et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings underscore how emotional instability and psychological burden act as major drivers of disengagement, even among high-achieving or highly committed students.

Another stream of research emphasizes motivational variables as central to dropout intention. Students' value beliefs, expectancy judgments, and academic motivation play essential roles in persistence. When students doubt their academic abilities, when coursework feels irrelevant, or when they perceive low utility in educational achievement, dropout intentions rise sharply. For instance, expectancy-value interactions were found to predict dropout intention more accurately when students' expectancies were low but values were equally low or declining (Breetzke & Bohndick, 2024). Likewise, self-efficacy and sense of connectedness—both critical motivational factors—were shown to greatly influence dropout intention among Italian students (Buizza et al., 2024). Supporting this, research examining first-year university students' motivations for attending university revealed that intrinsic motivation and alignment between educational goals and personal aspirations significantly reduce dropout intention (Cazan et al., 2024). Cognitive motivational variables such as goal clarity, future orientation, and perceived meaning of education also emerged as predictors of dropout intention in other higher education contexts (López-Angulo et al., 2024). Together, this body of work illustrates how both cognitive and motivational factors interact to shape students' willingness to persist or disengage.

Social and environmental contexts also exert strong influence on dropout intention. Family dynamics and parental involvement are critical, especially for adolescents. A recent systematic review documented how parental engagement and supportive home environments buffer the harmful effects of low academic motivation and school disengagement (Vijayakumaran et al., 2023). Social support

from teachers, mentors, and peers functions similarly, especially in contexts where students struggle emotionally or academically. For example, teacher support has been shown to mediate the relationship between academic stress and dropout intention, with stronger support reducing dropout inclination (Van, 2024). Among university students, perceptions of instructors' mindset beliefs—such as whether instructors believe intelligence can grow or remains fixed—significantly shape students' belonging uncertainty, which in turn predicts dropout intention (Höhne et al., 2024). Students who perceive instructors as holding fixed-mindset beliefs often feel judged or unsupported, making them more vulnerable to disengagement. Institutional and program-level factors such as academic integration, campus climate, and perceived fairness also influence dropout intention, as demonstrated in a study examining satisfaction and intention to drop out in Korean universities (Shin & Kwon, 2025).

A related and increasingly recognized determinant involves the social integration of students within their academic environments. Research exploring student integration within university settings reveals that both academic and social integration significantly predict dropout intention, particularly when students feel disconnected from the peer community or perceive limited opportunities for meaningful engagement with faculty (Stellmacher et al., 2025). Studies in Korean higher education similarly demonstrate that integration and university characteristics strongly shape dropout intention by influencing students' sense of belonging and institutional satisfaction (Kim & Lee, 2024). In vocational and teacher training programs, career choice motivation and the ability to meaningfully connect with academic content further affect dropout intention, suggesting the importance of alignment between students' goals and program structure (Stellmacher et al., 2025). Social integration, therefore, appears not only as a protective factor but also as a mechanism that strengthens resilience against academic adversity.

Another growing body of research identifies professional identity development and academic identity formation as important predictors of dropout intention. For instance, students' career-related identities have been shown to influence dropout intention through emotional mediators such as depression, with social support moderating these indirect pathways (Lee et al., 2025). This indicates that students who feel uncertain about their career trajectories or disconnected from their chosen fields may experience emotional distress that contributes to withdrawal intention. The importance of professional identity is further

highlighted in medical education, where a study found that professionalism levels were significantly associated with dropout intention during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hanco-Monrroy et al., 2024). Students who struggled to develop a sense of professional responsibility or connection to their future careers experienced increased vulnerability to contemplating withdrawal. These findings reinforce the critical role of identity development—both academic and professional—in determining persistence.

Institutional characteristics and perceived program quality also contribute to dropout intention. Satisfaction with university infrastructure, teaching quality, administrative responsiveness, and campus resources has been shown to influence both satisfaction and intention to continue studies (Shin & Kwon, 2025). Additional evidence suggests that perceptions of school satisfaction and self-efficacy among adolescents are linked to lower dropout intention, demonstrating the early emergence of motivational and institutional variables that later shape academic persistence (Peditzi, 2024). Instructors' attitudes also play a significant role in shaping students' intentions to persist. For example, students' perceptions of instructors' mindset beliefs affect their sense of belonging and belonging uncertainty, which directly influence dropout intention (Höhne et al., 2024). Across institutions, the importance of program quality and institutional support thus emerges as a consistent theme.

Research further shows that demographic factors, student characteristics, and contextual variables also intersect with dropout intention. A study examining trainees in mathematics teaching programs found different trajectories of dropout intention between Bachelor of Science students and trainee teachers, indicating that program structure and demands shape persistence differently across academic pathways (Heusel et al., 2023). Other studies have observed differences based on gender, academic background, and socioeconomic contexts, though these factors are often mediated by psychological or motivational processes. Additionally, systematic reviews emphasize the need for more integrative approaches that consider the interplay among emotional, motivational, social, and institutional determinants rather than focusing on single-factor explanations (Velíz & Ortega, 2023). This reflects a broader shift in dropout research toward complex, multi-layered models that capture the dynamic nature of dropout intention.

While this growing body of literature has significantly expanded understanding of dropout intention across higher education, vocational training, and specialized university programs, relatively less attention has been directed to the

emotional and behavioral factors underlying dropout intention among school-aged youth. Much of the existing research focuses on university-level determinants, leaving a gap in the understanding of how early emotional experiences, behavioral patterns, and interpersonal influences shape dropout intention at the secondary-school level. Moreover, qualitative explorations remain limited, despite the value of capturing subjective experiences and context-specific meanings that cannot be fully understood through quantitative measures. The complexity of emotional strain, behavioral risk patterns, and motivational barriers faced by adolescents requires deeper qualitative inquiry to uncover the nuanced processes underlying dropout intention, particularly in diverse social contexts such as Canada.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify and explore the emotional and behavioral factors that shape school dropout intentions among students.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design aimed at exploring the emotional and behavioral factors that influence school dropout intentions among students. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for in-depth examination of participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes related to leaving school. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who had either expressed dropout intentions or were considered at risk based on referrals from school counselors, psychologists, and social workers.

A total of 26 participants from across Canada took part in the study. The sample included secondary school students aged 15 to 19, representing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and school environments. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new conceptual insights or themes emerged from the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants and, where necessary, their guardians.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to elaborate on their thoughts while ensuring consistency across interviews. An interview guide was developed based on existing literature on emotional and behavioral predictors

of school disengagement. Key domains included emotional regulation, peer relationships, experiences of academic pressure, motivation levels, family dynamics, school climate, and behavioral patterns associated with disengagement.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure online videoconferencing platforms, depending on participant preference and geographic accessibility within Canada. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. The recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and were anonymized to protect participants' confidentiality.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis approach. Transcripts were first read multiple times to establish familiarity with the content. Initial open coding was conducted to identify meaningful units of information related to emotional and behavioral influences on dropout intentions. Coding and analysis were facilitated using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which supported systematic organization, retrieval, and comparison of codes.

Subsequently, axial coding was performed to cluster related codes and develop broader conceptual categories. Through iterative comparison and refinement, these categories were integrated into overarching themes that captured the core emotional and behavioral factors contributing to students' dropout intentions. Analytical memos and constant comparisons across interviews ensured credibility and depth in theme development.

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies were applied, including peer debriefing with two qualitative research specialists, reflexive note-taking throughout the analytic process, and maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions. Final themes were confirmed once saturation had been reached and no new insights emerged.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 26 participants from various regions across Canada, all of whom were secondary-school students between the ages of 15 and 19 years. Of the total sample, 14 participants (53.8%) identified as female, 11 participants (42.3%) identified as male, and 1 participant (3.8%) identified as non-binary. In terms of grade level, 6 students (23.1%) were in Grade 9, 7 students (26.9%) were in Grade 10, 8 students (30.8%) were in Grade 11, and 5 students

(19.2%) were in Grade 12. Participants represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with 10 students (38.5%) reporting low-income households, 11 students (42.3%) reporting middle-income households, and 5 students (19.2%) reporting upper-middle-income backgrounds.

Additionally, 18 participants (69.2%) were born in Canada, while 8 participants (30.8%) were first- or second-generation immigrants. This diversity in demographic characteristics provided a broad range of perspectives on the emotional and behavioral factors contributing to school dropout intentions.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts

Main Theme (Category)	Subtheme (Subcategory)	Concepts (Open Codes)
Emotional Determinants of Dropout	Chronic Academic Stress	Feeling overwhelmed; constant worry about grades; emotional exhaustion; fear of failure
	Low Self-Esteem and Self-Worth	Negative self-talk; feeling “not good enough”; avoidance of challenges; sensitivity to criticism
	Emotional Isolation	Feeling misunderstood; lack of emotional support; loneliness at school; emotional withdrawal
Behavioral Risk Patterns	Unmanaged Anxiety	Panic before classes; school-related dread; physiological tension; difficulty concentrating
	Depressive Symptoms	Persistent sadness; loss of motivation; hopelessness; fatigue and low energy
	School Avoidance	Skipping classes; avoiding teachers; excessive lateness; intentionally missing deadlines
	Risk-Taking Behaviors	Substance experimentation; online gaming addiction; associating with risky peer groups; impulsive decisions
	Declining Academic Engagement	Not submitting assignments; passive classroom presence; no interest in school activities; homework avoidance
	Conflictual Behavior	Arguments with teachers; classroom disruption; aggressive reactions
	Digital Overuse	Excessive phone use; social media distraction; staying up late online; reduced study time
Interpersonal and Social Influences	Poor Time-Management	Last-minute studying; disorganized schedules; forgetting tasks; prioritizing leisure over school
	Negative Peer Influence	Peer pressure; belonging to disengaged groups; desire for social acceptance
	Family Conflict	Parental arguments; home instability; emotional distance; feeling unsupported
	Lack of Teacher Support	Perceived teacher bias; lack of encouragement; feeling ignored; teacher–student miscommunication
	Bullying and Victimization	Verbal harassment; social exclusion; cyberbullying; fear of peers
	Poor School Climate	Strict or unfair rules; unwelcoming environment; low sense of safety; lack of belonging
	Inadequate Guidance Resources	Limited access to counselors; lack of emotional support services; overworked staff; absence of intervention programs
Motivational and Cognitive Barriers	Low Academic Motivation	No interest in learning; feeling school is irrelevant; lack of long-term goals
	Poor Self-Regulation	Procrastination; difficulty organizing tasks; giving up easily
	Learned Helplessness	Belief that effort won’t help; feeling trapped; reliance on external rescue
	Cognitive Overload	Too many competing demands; difficulty processing information; mental fatigue
	Limited Future Orientation	Uncertainty about future; absence of career goals; short-term thinking; lack of purpose

Participants described a wide range of emotional experiences that shaped their intentions to leave school, with chronic academic stress emerging as a key factor. Many students spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the constant pressure to perform, and several described “worrying about grades every single day” as a persistent emotional burden. Low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy further intensified these pressures; one student noted, “No matter how hard I try, I always feel like I’m not good enough for school.” Emotional isolation was another major contributor, particularly among students who felt disconnected from peers or misunderstood by teachers. Unmanaged anxiety, often expressed as panic before entering classrooms or avoidance triggered by fear of failure, also played a

significant role. Several participants additionally reported depressive symptoms, including sadness, low motivation, and hopelessness, with one adding, “I just wake up and feel drained... it’s like school doesn’t matter anymore.” Collectively, these emotional determinants shaped an inner landscape that made school feel unbearable for many students.

A second major theme highlighted the behavioral patterns that reinforced or escalated dropout intentions. School avoidance behaviors—such as skipping classes, arriving late, and intentionally missing deadlines—were commonly described, often beginning gradually before becoming routine. Some participants acknowledged engaging in risk-taking behaviors, including substance experimentation or

excessive online gaming, as a coping mechanism for their stress. One student explained, “Gaming became easier than facing school... I knew it was ruining things, but I kept doing it.” Declining academic engagement manifested through incomplete assignments, passive classroom presence, and disinterest in extracurricular activities. Conflictual behaviors, including arguments with teachers or disruptive actions, were also reported as expressions of frustration or emotional overwhelm. Digital overuse, particularly excessive social media consumption, emerged as a significant distractor that interfered with sleep and study time. A participant noted, “I’d stay up scrolling until 3 a.m., then couldn’t focus in class and eventually stopped going.” Finally, poor time-management skills—such as last-minute studying and disorganized schedules—further intensified academic struggles and contributed to dropout intentions.

Interpersonal relationships and social environments profoundly shaped students’ school disengagement trajectories. Negative peer influence, including pressure to skip classes or associate with disengaged groups, was frequently mentioned, with one participant saying, “Everyone in my friend group stopped caring about school, so I followed them.” Family conflict also played a central role; students experiencing parental arguments, home instability, or emotional distance often felt unsupported in managing school stress. A participant shared, “When things blow up at home, school becomes the last thing I can deal with.” Lack of teacher support emerged across interviews, particularly when students felt judged, ignored, or misunderstood by educators. Bullying—whether verbal, social, or online—significantly impacted students’ motivation to remain in school, with one remarking, “I started skipping because I couldn’t handle being picked on every day.” Poor school climate, including strict or unfair rules and an unwelcoming environment, further reduced students’ sense of belonging. Finally, inadequate access to guidance counselors and emotional support services left many participants feeling they had “nowhere to go” for help, reinforcing their dropout intentions.

The final theme described internal motivational and cognitive challenges that hindered students’ ability to persist in school. Low academic motivation was widely reported, with students describing learning as irrelevant or disconnected from their future aspirations. One student stated, “I don’t see how any of this is going to help my life later.” Poor self-regulation—manifested through procrastination, disorganization, and difficulty following through on tasks—deepened academic difficulties. Several

participants expressed a sense of learned helplessness, explaining that no matter how much effort they put in, their circumstances never seemed to improve: “After a while, you just feel stuck, like nothing you do makes a difference.” Cognitive overload also contributed to dropout intentions, especially for students balancing multiple stressors at home and school. Mental fatigue and difficulty processing information often left them feeling defeated. Limited future orientation further intensified disengagement, as many students lacked clear career goals or long-term purpose. One participant reflected, “I can’t picture my future, so it’s hard to care about school right now.” These motivational and cognitive barriers interacted to create significant internal obstacles to sustained school participation.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore emotional and behavioral factors contributing to school dropout intentions among students, and the findings provide a nuanced understanding of how psychological strain, disengagement behaviors, interpersonal dynamics, and motivational barriers interact to increase the likelihood of considering withdrawal from school. The qualitative results revealed four major thematic domains—emotional determinants, behavioral risk patterns, interpersonal and social influences, and motivational and cognitive barriers—each of which aligns with and extends the existing literature. These findings reinforce numerous theoretical perspectives on dropout intention while revealing new layers of complexity, particularly relevant for secondary-school contexts. When interpreted alongside previous studies, the results highlight both consistent global patterns and the unique contextual influences shaping adolescents’ experiences.

One of the central themes emerging from the findings was the role of emotional determinants in shaping dropout intentions. Students frequently described chronic academic stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, low self-esteem, and depressive symptoms as core emotional experiences driving disengagement. These emotional determinants closely mirror findings from prior research indicating that academic stress is one of the most significant predictors of withdrawal intention across educational levels. For example, the relationship between high academic stress and dropout intention has been documented extensively, such as in studies highlighting how stress reduces students’ perceived ability to cope, erodes self-efficacy, and ultimately contributes to withdrawal behaviors (Guo & Huh, 2023;

Van, 2024). Academic stress has also been shown to increase vulnerability to depression, which further mediates the relationship between academic pressure and dropout intention (Lee et al., 2025). Consistent with these findings, participants in this study described how persistent stress and emotional burden gradually undermined their motivation, contributing to avoidance and negative self-evaluation. Similarly, previous research suggests that emotional instability, depression, and belonging uncertainty significantly increase dropout intention among university and STEM students (Höhne et al., 2024; Kim & Mo, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). These parallels across contexts suggest that emotional strain is not merely a byproduct of disengagement but an active mechanism that erodes students' psychological resources and contributes to their desire to leave school.

In addition to emotional symptoms, the study revealed that behavioral risk patterns—such as school avoidance, declining academic engagement, risk-taking behavior, digital overuse, and poor time-management—play a critical role in shaping dropout intention. These behavioral themes are consistent with established pathways identified in the literature, wherein disengagement behaviors often signal early stages of dropout trajectory. Prior research on high school students identified similar patterns, including absenteeism, reduced involvement, and avoidance behaviors, as strong predictors of dropout intention (Kwak & Lee, 2023). Likewise, university-level studies show that students exhibiting behavioral disengagement, such as missing classes or reducing academic effort, are significantly more likely to consider withdrawal (Cazan et al., 2024; Kim & Lee, 2024). These behaviors often emerge as coping strategies in response to emotional distress; for instance, digital overuse or gaming may serve as avoidance mechanisms that temporarily alleviate stress but worsen academic performance and disengagement. The qualitative findings further enrich this understanding by illuminating how students perceive these behaviors not merely as habits but as symptoms of deeper emotional and cognitive overload. This aligns with emerging research suggesting that behavioral patterns are intertwined with motivational and psychological states, forming a self-reinforcing cycle that accelerates dropout intention (Breetzke & Bohndick, 2024; Buizza et al., 2024).

Interpersonal and social influences also emerged as a significant category in shaping dropout intentions. Students described negative peer influences, family conflict, lack of teacher support, bullying experiences, and unsupportive

school climates as major contributors to their disengagement. These findings are consistent with the broader literature documenting the central role of relational and contextual factors in predicting dropout. Systematic reviews emphasize parental involvement, supportive teacher relationships, and positive peer contexts as essential protective factors against dropout intention (Velíz & Ortega, 2023; Vijayakumaran et al., 2023). Similarly, perceptions of instructor support and mindset beliefs have been shown to impact students' sense of belonging and engagement, ultimately influencing their intention to persist (Höhne et al., 2024). The role of social support is further highlighted in studies showing that teacher and family support can mediate the relationship between academic stress and dropout intention, offering emotional buffering that decreases withdrawal likelihood (Van, 2024). The findings from this study reinforce the idea that school dropout intention is not solely an individual psychological process, but one deeply shaped by interpersonal dynamics and social environments. When students lack supportive relationships at home or in school, their emotional and behavioral struggles intensify, making dropout appear as a rational coping response rather than a sudden failure of effort or ability.

Motivational and cognitive barriers formed the final major theme in the findings, illustrating how decreased motivation, poor self-regulation, learned helplessness, cognitive overload, and limited future orientation contribute to dropout intention. These findings correspond closely with motivational theories such as expectancy-value theory and self-determination theory, which posit that low expectancy beliefs, diminished value perceptions, and weakened intrinsic motivation strongly predict dropout intention. Prior research supports this, showing that students with low academic motivation and poor future orientation demonstrate significantly higher dropout intentions (Cazan et al., 2024; López-Angulo et al., 2024). Similarly, expectancy-value interactions have been shown to predict withdrawal when students perceive low returns on academic investment (Breetzke & Bohndick, 2024). Self-efficacy and motivation also appear as crucial protective factors, reducing dropout intention when students feel capable, confident, and connected to their academic goals (Buizza et al., 2024). The qualitative findings resonate with these conclusions, as participants consistently expressed feelings of academic irrelevance, lack of purpose, and uncertainty about their future. Moreover, learned helplessness—expressed as the belief that effort will not improve outcomes—echoes findings among STEM and medical students who experience

similar motivational collapse in the face of structural or personal challenges (Hanco-Monroy et al., 2024; Heusel et al., 2023). Collectively, these patterns highlight the essential role of cognitive and motivational processes in shaping dropout intention and demonstrate that disengagement often stems from a perceived mismatch between personal efficacy, academic demands, and future aspirations.

Taken together, the study's findings contribute to the broader literature by integrating emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, and motivational perspectives into a comprehensive framework for understanding dropout intention. While previous research has explored many of these variables individually, fewer studies have examined their interactions, particularly among younger student populations. The present study extends existing work by showing how emotional strain fuels behavioral disengagement, which in turn intensifies motivational collapse and disrupts social relationships—ultimately creating a cumulative pathway toward dropout consideration. This aligns with integrative models proposing that dropout intention is shaped by simultaneous interactions between individual, relational, and contextual factors (Shin & Kwon, 2025; Stellmacher et al., 2025). By situating these findings within existing theoretical and empirical frameworks, the study underscores the importance of holistic, multi-dimensional approaches to dropout prevention.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample consisted exclusively of students from Canada, which limits generalizability to other cultural or educational contexts. Second, qualitative data rely on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by memory biases or social desirability. Third, while the sample size of 26 participants is appropriate for qualitative research, it may not capture the full diversity of dropout experiences among adolescents. Fourth, the study focused on students' subjective interpretations rather than objective academic or behavioral data, which may restrict the ability to validate reported experiences. Finally, as with all qualitative studies, the findings provide depth rather than statistical generalizability, highlighting the need for complementary quantitative research.

Future research should consider examining dropout intention using mixed-methods designs that systematically integrate qualitative insights with quantitative modeling to establish generalizable patterns. Longitudinal studies are needed to trace how emotional, behavioral, and motivational

variables evolve over time to influence dropout intentions. Future studies should also explore cross-cultural comparisons to understand contextual differences in dropout pathways. Incorporating additional demographic variables, such as socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and immigration status, may help identify structural contributors to dropout intention. Finally, examining the role of digital behaviors, mental health trajectories, and emerging social environments (e.g., online peer interactions) may provide deeper insight into contemporary dropout processes.

Schools should implement early-identification systems to detect emotional and behavioral risk indicators among students. Teachers and counselors should be trained to recognize stress, anxiety, and disengagement warning signs. Parent-school collaboration should be strengthened to ensure consistent emotional and academic support across environments. Schools should also foster supportive classroom climates that enhance belonging and reduce bullying. Finally, interventions should incorporate motivational counseling, goal-setting programs, and skills-based workshops to improve self-regulation, coping strategies, and future orientation among students.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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