Article

Academic Aspirations and Dropout Intentions in the Perspective of Positive Youth Development: Protective Factors in Adolescence

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Abstract: Early school leaving is a problem that, especially in adolescence, can lead to maladaptive development. It is, therefore, essential provide quality, equitable, and inclusive education. Following the Positive Youth Development perspective, the aim of this study was to identify the possible strengths and resources of adolescents. Specifically, we analyzed three protective factors of school dropout intentions and academic aspirations: positivity, self-efficacy for self-regulated learning (SESRL), and school engagement. The participants in the present study were N = 260 ninth-grade students (M = 14.36, SD = 0.78, 204 boys) that were recruited in two Technical high schools in the center of Italy. There were two multiple hierarchical regression analyses that were carried out, considering academic aspirations and intentions to drop out of school as dependent variables. Hierarchical regression models highlighted that positivity, SESRL, and school engagement have significant and positive roles in school aspirations. Moreover, positivity and SESRL were negatively associated with intention to drop out of school. These results have pivotal implications in the prevention and promotion of interventions, suggesting the importance of building positive orientation and self-efficacy for self-regulated learning, and school engagement in the classroom context.

Keywords: dropout intentions; academic aspirations; protective factors; adolescence; positive youth development

1. School Dropout in Adolescence

In adolescence, school dropout is considered a critical widespread issue. Therefore, one of the goals of the "EU Agenda 2030" [1] is to provide quality, equitable, and inclusive education and learning opportunities for all, with the awareness that education is the basis for improving adolescents' lives and achieving sustainable development. Adolescents who decide to abruptly interrupt their studies—losing the opportunity (and the right) to learn, train, and educate themselves—represent a huge individual and social loss. Consequently, this phenomenon is a critical economic and social issue for many countries, especially for the potential growth of human capital. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate adolescent dropout in order to lower students' school attrition rates [1–5].

The Early School Leavers from Education and Training Indicator (ELET) considers minimum lower secondary school achievements and disengagement in formal and non-formal education or training of young people that are aged 18–24 and provides a steady measurement across EU countries of the school dropout effect. Data from 2020 indicate that the level of ELET in Italy was up to 13.1%, significantly higher than the EU 2020 average (9.9%). Moreover, in 2020, dropouts in Italy were approximately 15.6% among boys, and 10.4% among girls. According to these indicators, Italy is still in the lowest position on the EU school dropout ranking list [6].

With specific reference to the transition from lower-to upper-secondary school, data from the Italian Ministry of Education [7] showed that dropout affects male students (1.2%)

more than female students (1%). The data highlight that dropout is significantly higher in the first year of upper secondary school, with a peak of 5.1%, and gradually decreases in the following years (II and III years: up to 3.4%; IV year: up to 3.2%; V year: only 1%). Overall, the dropout rate is higher in both vocational (7.2% medium dropout rates) and technical (3.8% medium dropout rates) high schools, than in the lyceum (1.6% medium dropout rates) as confirmed by the Italian Ministry of Education [7]. The literature has highlighted the complexity of the dropout phenomenon and the need to analyze the possible risk factors at different levels, both contextual and individual. Regarding contextual settings, factors influencing adolescents' early school leaving are family (e.g., low parental education and family income), school (e.g., school policies and practices), community, and peer group (e.g., disadvantaged neighborhoods). Individual factors that are related to dropout regard demographic factors (e.g., males and language minority students) and attitudes (e.g., low educational and occupational aspirations) (for review studies see [8–11]).

2. The Positive Youth Development Perspective

According to the positive psychology approach [12] and in contrast with earlier theories of "storm" and "stress" in adolescence, the Positive Youth Development perspective [2,13] emphasizes individual resources, strengths, and potentialities. Following this perspective, the crucial strengths of adolescents are hopeful future orientation (e.g., positive expectations); intentional self-regulation (e.g., goal selection, optimization, and compensation); and school engagement (e.g., emotional, cognitive, and behavioral). The positive and reciprocal association between the strengths of youths and those of their living environment contributes to promoting healthy development and preventing risk behaviors [14]. In the interest of the present study, the strengths of youths in the PYD framework may promote academic achievement (e.g., promoting adolescents' academic aspirations and preventing school dropout intentions) [15,16].

Considering the PYD structure as a system encompassing different levels of personal and contextual resources [2,17], we may consider school success a positive developmental outcome that may be explained by the combined and sequential effect of positivity as a basic individual potential, SESRL as personal believes that influences adolescents' behaviors to achieve academic goals and school engagement as individual perception of a positive relation to the school context.

Positive orientation towards the future (e.g., hopeful positive orientation, optimism, and positivity) is an individual disposition that may contribute to adaptive and positive development [2]. For instance, Häggström Westberg et al. [18] in their study indicated that adolescents' optimism influenced their health-related quality of life such as positive psychological function, outlook of life, social function, and cognitive function. We specifically investigated positivity, as a stable self-evaluative disposition that includes self-esteem, life satisfaction, and optimism. Several studies have shown that a higher level of positivity contributes to optimal functioning, mental health, and general psychological adjustment [17,19,20]. Regarding the present study, positivity is likely to be related and positively affect academic achievement, performance level, school climate, prosocial behaviors, and general well-being [21–25]. Future-positive adolescents have higher academic engagement and persistence in achieving their academic goals, invest more effort in school-related tasks, and are more prone to take measures to close performance gaps [26,27]. In a longitudinal study, Zhang and colleagues [28] investigated domain-specific indicators of optimism and found that positive academic expectations predicted higher academic achievement. In a longitudinal study in a nationally representative Switzerland sample of 16–20-year-olds, Eicher and colleagues [29] found that optimism towards life decreased dropout intentions on both personal and annual levels. Moreover, Barbaranelli and colleagues [21] found that positivity affected both school grades and academic citizenship behaviors in Italian university students, with the mediation of academic self-efficacy. Furthermore, both hope and optimism have been found to be important predictors of academic performance and psychological well-being [30–32]. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal

evidence has confirmed the relationship between dispositional optimism and indicators of academic achievements, such as individual grade point averages [33] and cognitive abilities [34]. Accordingly, other studies have shown that optimism can contribute to satisfaction and commitment to remain in college [35] and that is associated with less chance of dropping out [36].

As second individual protective factor, we considered SESRL a facet of academic self-efficacy. According to social cognitive theory [37–39], academic self-efficacy is the personal belief to accomplish specific learning tasks and achieve academic goals. Relevant contributions suggest that academic self-efficacy beliefs can directly influence adolescents' learning abilities, decision-making, and cognitive and affective states [39,40]. Additionally, self-efficacy beliefs can influence learning, motivation, and academic achievement [41–44]. SESRL is the belief in one's ability to build environments and competencies conducive to planning goal-learning activities [45,46]. According to Zimmerman's model [47], SESRL generates thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are aimed at achieving learning goals that increase student motivation and promote academic achievement [48]. In a longitudinal study on Italian adolescents [49], academic self-efficacy mediated the effects of parental monitoring and teachers' support on academic performance over time. The relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic aspirations has been demonstrated. For instance, a study on Ghana adolescents [50] revealed that a higher level of academic self-efficacy explained academic achievement with the mediating role of academic aspirations. In another study, Carroll and colleagues [51] examined self-efficacy beliefs in a group of Australian high-school students. The results of this investigation showed that academic and social self-efficacy beliefs positively influenced academic achievement, both directly and through the positive impact of academic aspirations. This construct proved particularly crucial in the transition phases from lower to upper high education and from upper high to university as well as to succeed in career engagement and job exploration [52–55].

In a study on pre-adolescents, Bandura, and colleagues [56] found that academic self-efficacy, along with social and self-regulatory self-efficacy, influenced academic aspirations and achievements. Furthermore, children who believed themselves to be more able to accomplish learning goals expressed strong beliefs even in various high-level occupational spheres (e.g., technology, literature, and medicine); this impact was both direct and mediated by academic aspirations and achievements.

Moreover, in line with the aforementioned evidence, it has been confirmed by different studies that lower levels of perceived academic control [57], and poorer academic self-efficacy beliefs [58], are considered psychological determinants of school dropout intentions. A recent study proved that young people with higher levels of perceived self-efficacy reported a lower level of intention to drop out [59]. Even though personal (e.g., adverse life events, stressors, and personal dispositions) and psychosocial contributions (e.g., social support and parenting) should be considered, these findings contribute to demonstrating the role of academic self-efficacy beliefs as possible determinants of academic success.

Finally, we considered school engagement, which is a multidimensional construct that includes the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional involvement of students in different school-related activities [60]. School engagement is defined as students' progress and success in different academic tasks, either in curricular or extracurricular social activities, as well as affective responses to individual context-dependent states. High levels of school engagement are positively related to academic achievements, and prevent student boredom, apathy, and general disaffection. Evidence suggests that school engagement could be considered a valuable protective factor for the educational aspirations of students and the early school leaving of students [60–64]. Wang and Fredricks [65] showed that the risk of dropout was strictly related to "unstable pathways" of school engagement. In this context, Truta and colleagues [66] examined the association between school engagement and the dropout intentions of students. The results of this investigation showed that school engagement was a significant predictor of dropout intentions. In a longitudinal study, Haugan and colleagues [67] reported that school engagement in upper-secondary school is

an important explanatory factor for low intentions of dropout. Moreover, Pascarella and Terenzini [68] provided evidence that the engagement of students in the school context could be a relevant predictor of students' success. For instance, students that were more engaged in school activities showed higher levels of academic performance [69]. In conclusion, these studies reveal that students that are more engaged in school activities show higher levels of academic aspirations, have lower rates of academic uncertainty, and tend to continue their education [70,71].

3. Present Study

In this study, we considered adolescents' academic aspirations and intentions to drop out as proxy indicators of school success in high school [70,72,73].

Following to the PYD perspective [2], the main aim of this study was to evaluate the combined and specific effect of positivity (as a general tendency to think positively), SESRL (as a specific belief in learning strategies), and school engagement (as the perception of the relationship with the school context), on the school dropout intentions and academic aspirations of students.

Although the authors of previous studies have considered the individual influence of positivity [21], academic self-efficacy beliefs [58,74,75], and school engagement [62] on student school success, to the best of our knowledge, no study has simultaneously addressed the contribution of all these variables on adolescent academic aspirations and the intentions to drop out of school. Drawing on the work of previous studies, we hypothesized that positivity, SESRL, and school engagement operate in concert to predict adolescents' school success by favoring academic aspiration and decreasing school dropout intention.

Finally, in our study, we also considered the level of education of the parents and the sex of the students, in accordance with the literature that highlights the effects on the variables that are considered [5,76]. For instance, previous researchers indicate that early school leaving in adolescence is higher in boys [4,5] and higher economic, social, and cultural status predicts better school outcomes [77]. In adolescence, sex differences also emerged in academic self-efficacy. Girls feel more effective than boys in school performance [46] and in the use of self-regulated learning strategies [78]. Regarding school engagement, Wang and Fredricks found a higher level of emotional and behavioral engagement in girls than boys and in adolescents with higher SES than those with lower SES [65]; furthermore, lower school engagement, associated with higher problem behaviors, predicted greater likelihood of dropping out of school. Another study found that boys with less school emotional engagement were more likely than girls to shift from uncertainty to continue their studies to planning to leave school [70].

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Participants

The participants in the present study were N = 260 ninth-grade students that were recruited in 14 classes from two Technical high schools in Rome (i.e., Information Technology and Telecommunications, Chemistry and Materials, Environmental and Health Biotechnologies, Electronics, and Electrical Engineering). The students were 78.5% boys and 21.5% girls, aged between 14 and 17 years old (M = 14.36, SD = 0.78); 92.4 of them were born in Italy and 7.6% were born in another country. Specifically, 3.6% of adolescents originated from a European country, (e.g., Romania), and 4% from a non-European country (e.g., Latin America). About 80% of the parents were born in Italy. Specifically, 80.4% of fathers and 77.3% of mothers were born in Italy. The participants reported that 14.2% failed a class at least once. Regarding the educational level of parents, 32.3% of fathers and 38.1% of mothers had attended high school, 25% of fathers and 28% of mothers had a university degree or beyond, 17.3% of fathers and 12.7% of mothers only completed middle school, 14.2% of fathers and 12.3% of mothers completed vocational education courses, and 7.7% of fathers had a primary school degree or none and 6.5% of mothers reported they did not

receive any education (this information was not present for 3.5% of fathers and 2.3% of mothers).

4.2. Procedure

This study was conducted following the requirements of privacy and informed consent that were laid down by Italian law (General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679; Italian Legislative Decree DL-101/2018). Moreover, the study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee (deleted for blind review). The research procedure conformed to the APA ethical standards for research with adolescents. Participation in the study was voluntary, and no compensation was offered to the participants. Before data collection, informed parental consent was obtained from 96% of parents, and adolescents expressed their verbal consent for participation. Questionnaires were administrated as an online survey, during school hours in a dedicated room, without the presence of the class teacher, and under the supervision of trained assistants (deleted for blind review). Before the questionnaire administration, a short presentation of the project was provided, and adolescents were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential; they were encouraged to answer as truthfully as possible. The questionnaire administration lasted about 50 min. The data of the study were collected in 2018–2019.

4.3. Measures

Parents' educational level. Students were asked about their parents' educational level using the Italian classification of qualifications, then codified in accordance with ISCED [64], from 0 to 8.

Positivity Scale [79]. Adolescents self-evaluated their positivity with an eight-item five-point Likert scale (from 1 = I strongly disagree to 5 = I strongly agree). The scale measured the degree of satisfaction with oneself and life, optimistic expectations about the future, and trust that was placed in others and oneself (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life", "I look to the future with hope and optimism", "I generally feel confident in myself"). The scale showed good evidence of reliability and validity in different countries and cultures [79], and the Cronbach alpha for this study was $\alpha = 0.86$.

Self-Efficacy for Self-Regulated Learning Scale [46,80]. To evaluate SESRL, adolescents completed a 12-item scale that was originally based on Children's Perceived Self-Efficacy scales [38]. The SESRL scale is related to the academic self-efficacy and measures adolescents' beliefs in their ability to structure environments that are conducive to learning and to plan and organize academic activities (e.g., "How well can you organize your schoolwork?"; $\alpha = 0.88$). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = Not at all capable to 5 = Fully capable.

School Engagement scale [81]. To evaluate their school engagement, adolescents completed the subscale school engagement from a multi-dimensional questionnaire on school climate. The subscale consisted of 6 items on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = not at all to 5 = a lot, e.g., "how proud are you to attend this school?" or "if you were to stop attending this school how much would you miss your classmates?"; $\alpha = 0.76$).

Academic Aspirations [56]. Adolescents evaluated their future expectations concerning the level of education that they wish to achieve by completing a single item (e.g., "which school grade would you like to achieve?"). Students rated their aspirations on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = some years of a professional training center; 2 = professional qualification (2 or 3-year course); 3 = second level secondary school (4 or 5-year course); 4 = achievement of a bachelor's degree (3 years); 5 = achievement of a master's degree (2 years).

Intentions to Drop Out of School scale [82]. Intentions to drop out of school were assessed with 3 items on a 7-point Liker scale from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much so. The original scale, by Vallerand and colleagues [83], was composed of two items "I sometimes consider dropping out of school" and "I intend to drop out of school", to which the authors added, "I often think of the idea of dropping out of school" ($\alpha = 0.87$).

4.4. Data Analysis

Preliminary analysis was conducted to check data for their normality in terms of skewness and kurtosis. A series of ANOVAs were carried out to verify sex differences, and correlation analyses were conducted to explore associations among variables. Finally, we conducted two hierarchical regression models to accomplish the main goal of the present study and analyze the concurrent contribution of positivity, SESRL, and school engagement on adolescents' future school aspirations and intentions to drop out of school. In each regression model, sex was entered in the first step and the parents' education level in the second step as control variables. Positivity was entered in the third step, followed by SESRL in the fourth step. Finally, school engagement perception was entered in the fifth step.

5. Results

5.1. Preliminary Results

The results from preliminary analyses showed that none of the study variables revealed significant deviation from normality, indicating no normality issues (values were less than $|2|$ for skewness and $|7|$ for kurtosis [84].

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for boys and girls are reported in Table 1. A series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed to examine sex differences in the study variables, and the results indicated that, overall, girls had higher school engagement than boys [$F_{(1, 258)} = 5.401$, $p = 0.021$]. No other significant sex differences emerged.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	Males		Females		Total	
	Mean	**St. Dev.**	**Mean**	**St. Dev.**	**Mean**	**St. Dev.**
Positivity	3.59	0.76	3.65	0.81	3.60	0.77
SESRL	3.03	0.68	3.13	0.69	3.05	0.68
School engagement	3.00	0.76	3.26	0.69	3.05	0.75
Intentions to drop out of school	2.07	1.36	2.01	1.29	2.06	1.35
Academic aspirations	3.70	0.91	3.95	0.90	3.75	0.91

Zero-order correlations (see Table 2) went in the expected direction. The results revealed significant and positive correlations between the parents' educational level and school engagement, as well as between positivity, self-regulated learning self-efficacy, and school engagement. Moreover, positivity, SESRL, and school engagement were significantly and positively correlated with academic aspiration and significantly and negatively correlated with intention to drop out of school. Finally, academic aspirations and intentions to drop out of school were negatively related.

Table 2. Intercorrelations among variables.

	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Parental Education	-				
2.	Positivity	−0.040	-			
3.	SESRL	−0.016	0.289 **	-		
4.	School engagement	0.155 *	0.307 **	0.313 **	-	
5.	School dropout intentions	0.020	−0.319 **	−0.368 **	−0.254 **	-
6.	Academic aspirations	0.044	0.325 **	0.444 **	0.353 **	−0.452 **

Note. * $p < 0.5$; ** $p < 0.01$.

5.2. Multiple Hierarchical Regression Results

The hierarchical regression models explained a total of 27% of the variance for academic aspirations and 18% of the variance for intention to drop out of school. The results

of the first regression models (see Table 3) highlighted that positivity, SESRL, and school engagement had significant and positive roles in the school aspirations of adolescents.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression analysis: academic aspirations (dependent variable).

		B	β	t	p	F	Adj R²
	Dependent Variable = Academic Aspirations						
Step 1	Sex	−0.242	−0.109	−1.743	0.083	$F (1, 253) = 3.038$, $p = 0.083$	0.008
Step 2	Sex	−0.240	−0.108	−1.722	0.086		
	Parental Education	0.024	0.040	0.645	0.519	$F (1, 252) = 0.416$, $p = 0.519$	0.006
Step 3	Sex	−0.220	−0.099	−1.674	0.095		
	Parental Education	0.032	0.054	0.911	0.363		
	Positivity	0.391	0.330	5.571	<0.001	$F (1, 251) = 31.034$, $p < 0.001$	0.112
Step 4	Sex	−0.152	−0.068	−1.249	0.213		
	Parental Education	0.033	0.057	1.038	0.300		
	Positivity	0.254	0.214	3.753	<0.001		
	SESRL	0.530	0.391	6.829	<0.001	$F (1, 250) = 46.637$, $p < 0.001$	0.248
Step 5	Sex	−0.115	−0.052	−0.952	0.342		
	Parental Education	0.017	0.030	0.543	0.587		
	Positivity	0.208	0.175	3.017	0.003		
	SESRL	0.474	0.349	5.960	<0.001		
	School Engagement	0.197	0.161	2.681	0.008	$F (1, 249) = 7.188$, $p < 0.01$	0.266

Moreover, the results of the second model showed that positivity and SESRL were negatively associated with intention to drop out of school, and the contribution of school engagement tended toward significance (see Table 4).

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analysis: school dropout intentions (dependent variable).

		B	β	t	p	F	Adj R²
	Dependent Variable = School Dropout Intentions						
Step 1	Sex	0.072	0.022	0.351	0.726	$F (1, 253) = 0.123$, $p = 0.726$	−0.003
Step 2	Sex	0.074	0.023	0.360	0.719		
	Parental Education	0.018	0.021	0.329	0.743	$F (1, 252) = 0.108$, $p = 0.743$	−0.007
Step 3	Sex	0.047	0.014	0.240	0.811		
	Parental Education	0.007	0.008	0.129	0.898		
	Positivity	−0.553	−0.316	−5.279	<0.001	$F (1, 251) = 27.864$, $p < 0.001$	0.090
Step 4	Sex	−0.030	−0.009	−0.160	0.873		
	Parental Education	0.005	0.006	0.100	0.920		
	Positivity	−0.399	−0.228	−3.799	<0.001		
	SESRL	−0.596	−0.298	−4.956	<0.001	$F (1, 250) = 24.560$, $p < 0.001$	0.168
Step 5	Sex	−0.068	−0.021	−0.358	0.721		
	Parental Education	0.021	0.024	0.418	0.677		
	Positivity	−0.352	−0.201	−3.263	0.001		
	SESRL	−0.539	−0.270	−4.338	<0.001		
	School Engagement	−0.200	−0.111	−1.746	0.082	$F (1, 249) = 3.049$, $p = 0.082$	0.175

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate the possible protective and preventive factors of academic dropout intentions and academic aspirations, according to the Positive Youth Development perspective [2,13]. We considered positivity, SESRL, and school engagement as protective factors.

Addressing protective factors of adolescent academic success according to "EU Agenda 2030 SDG 4", this study was aimed to provide a deeper and updated analysis of the models underpinning educational loss, which is known to be a critical social issue. Therefore, the goal of this investigation was to provide updated data that were exploitable to whoever aims to build inclusive and equal learning opportunities, regardless of social status and cultural background. Specifically, this study is in line with relevant targets of SDG 4, which include: ensuring that all students achieve relevant and effective learning outcomes (target 4.1); reducing barriers to technical and vocational education and training, starting at the secondary level (target 4.3); providing opportunities to acquire knowledge and competencies that are relevant to a decent job and life, as well as developing high-level cognitive and non-cognitive/transferable skills (target 4.4); and eliminating all forms of inequality and discrimination in order to promote inclusive education (target 4.5) [1,3,85].

The results of the hierarchical regression analyses in the first model showed that positivity, SESRL, and school engagement have a significant, positive, and combined effect on the academic aspirations of adolescents. Moreover, the second model showed that positivity and SESRL had a negative effect on intentions to drop out of school. In other words, positivity, SESRL, and school engagement may nourish positive future expectations concerning the desired level of education and high level of positivity and SESRL may protect adolescents against developing intentions and ideas of school dropout.

Sex and parents' education level were tested as controlling variables. Significant differences in school engagement were in line with the literature [62,66], however no other sex differences emerged. The absence of sex differences could depend on the prevalence of boys in our sample (78.5%) since the study was carried out in technical high schools, notoriously attended in Italy by a very low number of girls. Early school leaving is the culmination of a long-term process, and the consequences of dropout can extend beyond a lifetime. For this reason, school dropout is considered both a relevant public social health theme and an economic issue that affects not only the country's welfare state but also the growth of human capital [10,86,87]. Different researchers have claimed that adolescents who drop out from high school, compared to those who regularly accomplish their academic studies, may be susceptible to risky behaviors in multiple (personal and social) domains during adulthood. For instance, Lansford and colleagues [88] reported that adolescents who dropped out of high school were up to four times more likely to experience individual negative outcomes (such as being arrested, fired, living on government assistance, using illicit substances, and having poor health) by the age of 27.

To the best of our knowledge, our study was the first in which the researchers analyzed the combined effect of positivity as a general tendency to think positively, SESRL as a specific belief in learning strategies, and school engagement as the perception of the relationship with the school context. Although the authors of previous studies have considered the individual influence of these variables, no previous study has simultaneously addressed the contribution of all these variables on adolescent academic aspirations and intentions to drop out of school.

Despite the strength of the present study, some limitations should be underlined, considering future directions. The main limitation concerns the cross-sectional design which did not allow to infer causal inferences among the explored variables. For this reason, researchers should consider longitudinal studies to explore the causal effect of positivity, SESRL, and school engagement, on the promotion of positive academic success and the prevention of school dropout (e.g., academic aspiration and dropout intentions). Moreover, in this research we only considered students' reports. Future studies could strengthen the investigation by including a multi-informant approach, in order to obtain

a more complete and complex view of the strengths and potentialities of adolescents. Finally, the study was limited to a few Technical high schools; further future studies could analyze larger samples to explore the presence of any differences in the constructs that were considered. Although the sample was mainly composed of boys and was not very extensive, the contribution of school engagement to school dropout tends toward significance. Further studies will have to verify the unique contribution of school engagement beyond other variables that are considered in more extensive and representative samples of all upper secondary school programs.

Nevertheless, these results may have pivotal implications in the development of educational interventions [10,11,63,64,89]. Indeed, the results of this study demonstrated the importance of building positive orientation, SESRL, and school engagement in the classroom context, to prevent adolescent dropout.

Although positivity is considered an individual characteristic [17], a positive orientation and optimism can be promoted in the school context. Boman and Hsi [90] suggested that teachers have a crucial role in promoting optimism among adolescent students. Teachers can promote problem-solving activities, sustain personal strengths, and aid students in focusing on tasks to ensure their positive involvement in learning activities. Teachers can address and help students to achieve their goals and discuss or validate student efforts when committing to a task. Positive behaviors of teachers could encourage students to keep working on challenging tasks and provide evidence that hard work may pay off [90,91]. Moreover, group work activities and explicit student debates on emotional awareness and prosocial behaviors, have been indicated to be significant ways to help students develop optimism [91–93].

There are different ways to improve student academic-self efficacy. Specifically, teachers have an important role in promoting academic self-efficacy through the four forms of self-efficacy information: individual instruction and practice opportunities, modeling (for instance, teachers can provide vicarious learning by modeling successful strategies or point out positive models), providing encouragement, and having students self-evaluate their learning process [41,94,95].

Finally, many researchers have highlighted the role of schools in fostering student engagement by building social communities and environments in which students may experience positive and rewards engagement at school [96–98]. In this direction, Furlong and colleagues [99,100] affirmed that there are different domains and program levels (i.e., universal, targeted, and intensive) in which schools may promote social engagement. For instance, good practices (i.e., cooperative learning instructional strategies, and relational learning) are essential to promote social bonds with students, mutual respect [101,102], student autonomy, relatedness, competence [103], cross-age peer mentors [104], and supportive and close student-teacher relationships [89,105].

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