

Article

Dropout Risk and School Trust: An Exploratory Study in the First Classes of High School in the Suburbs of Southern Italy

Elisabetta Fenizia ¹, Jacopo Postiglione ¹, Lucia Irene Porzio ¹, Grazia De Angelis ², Dario Bacchini ¹ and Santa Parrello ^{1,*}

¹ Department of Humanities, University of Naples “Federico II”, 80133 Napoli, Italy; elisabetta.fenizia@unina.it (E.F.); jacopo.postiglione@unina.it (J.P.); luciairene.porzio@unina.it (L.I.P.); dario.bacchini@unina.it (D.B.)

² Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Pegaso University, 80143 Napoli, Italy; grazia.deangelis@unipegaso.it

* Correspondence: parrello@unina.it

Abstract: This study investigates the dropout risk among first- and second-year high school students in the peripheral areas of Southern Italy, where the dropout rates are extremely high. It focuses on individual and relational factors associated with dropout, analyzing data from 645 students ($M_{age} = 14.64$) who completed a self-report questionnaire. The examined variables include self-efficacy, amotivation, future orientation, peer relationships, and students’ trust in teachers. Hierarchical regressions assessed the influence of grade levels on these dimensions. Our findings show a positive developmental trend in second-year students, including higher self-efficacy, better peer relationships, and reduced intentions to drop out. However, trust in teachers declines during this transition. Moreover, relationships with teachers show no significant improvement across grades. Therefore, this study underscores the importance of fostering trust between students and teachers as a protective factor against dropout. It also reveals the need for interventions targeting both students and the educational environment to improve teacher–student relationships and support students’ educational aspirations. By addressing these relational aspects, stakeholders can better mitigate dropout risks and promote school engagement during critical transitions in adolescence.

Keywords: school dropout; school trust; intention to leave; school transition; adolescents



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1. Introduction

Although education is a fundamental right recognized by international law, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2023 highlighted that the school completion rate is 87% in primary education, 77% in lower secondary education, and 59% in upper secondary education. In absolute terms, it is estimated that 251 million children and young people are still out of school, either never enrolled or being dropouts [1].

School dropout is a global issue that affects both individuals and society in terms of psychophysical wellbeing and the waste of economic and human resources. In fact, students who drop out from school are less likely to achieve more dignified and better-paid employment, and they can have trouble in accessing healthcare or building healthy lifestyles [2,3]. Furthermore, these individuals are more likely to develop mental, physical, and other health disorders [4,5].

School dropout generally refers to students who leave school definitively in a given year, but this definition may vary by country or state/region. In Europe, the Early School

Leaving (ESL) indicator represents a dropout measure [6]. Specifically, it refers to young people aged 18 to 24 who dropped out before finishing upper secondary school and who are not enrolled in other training or educational paths.

However, a key problem in the literature is that the terms “early school leaving” and “school dropout” are defined inconsistently or used interchangeably [7], even though they are slightly different (as can be seen in Table 1).

Table 1. The terms “early school leaving” and “school dropout”.

Early School Leaving (ESL)	School Dropout
Indicator that measures the percentage of people aged 18 to 24 (Europe) or aged 16 to 24 (USA) who have not completed school and are not involved in any education and training.	School dropout refers to students who leave school definitively in a given year. It is the result of a long process of school disengagement. Its main antecedents are as follows: • school refusal, which refers to extended or periodic absences from school, missed lessons, or chronic tardiness, based on anxiety (generalized or social) or intense dread about school; • truancy, which refers to unjustified, illegal, or clandestine absences not linked to anxiety but to a lack of parental monitoring and knowledge of children or to poverty and delinquency or specific school problems; • in-school dropout, which refers to repeated school failures and the serious dispersion of skills (staying at school without learning anything).

In Italy, ESL reaches very high percentages, with 10.5% (431.000) of students dropping out from school in 2023, especially in the Campania region in Southern Italy [8]. This value is above the European average (9.5%) [9]. In particular, school transitions may be crucial in terms of the school dropout risk [10]: according to data reported by the Ministry of Instruction and Merit (MIM) [11], during the transition from lower to upper secondary school, more than 7300 students dropped out in the school years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. Moreover, the early years of upper secondary school are also relevant, with high dropout rates in the transition from the first to the second year: in the two-year period 2019/2020–2020/2021, 3.35% of students dropped out of school in the first year, and the rate rose further to 3.47% in the second two-year period (2020/2021–2021/2022).

In the psychological literature, school dropout is measured through various variables, including intention to leave. In fact, school dropout is rarely a sudden event; rather, it is the final outcome of a long process of disengagement [12–16] that often evolves in the intention to leave school [17–20]. The concept of the intention to leave originates from theories of planned behavior [21] and motivational models emphasizing intention as a precursor of actual dropout behavior [22]. Intention to leave school captures the level of students’ inclination to leave school before completion while still enrolled. Typically, this construct refers to students’ intention to leave or change schools [23], but also to feeling insecure about continuing their studies [24].

1.1. Theoretical Framework

The recent literature in the field of psychology on school dropout refers mainly to Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological theory [25] and Tinto’s integrated model [26].

Bronfenbrenner stressed the importance of considering the entire contextual system of a student’s life to understand and improve his or her academic performance—not only,

therefore, his or her individual abilities but also the external influences coming from the family, neighborhood, community, school, and government policies.

Tinto conceptualized dropout as a process that deals mainly with how events and conditions in the learning environment affect the individual's intentions and how this could result in a decision to leave. According to Tinto [26], relationships within the classroom are an important characteristic of students' educational experience and only a community climate can help to retain all students in school.

Moreover, theorists of critical theory propose to look at the school, curriculum, and education as factors and activities that have important political, economic, social, and educational implications [27]. Consequently, it is important to consider the environmental factors able to influence students' educational paths.

School dropout could be understood as an expression of the progressive deterioration of the bond between young people, school, and society [13,28] that can be caused by several factors, both internal and external to the school environment. Pull factors relate to factors outside school that are attractive to pupils [29]. For example, since socioeconomic status (SES) is strongly associated with students' intention to leave [30,31], students with low SES could be forced to interrupt their studies to support their families. Generally, the job market and the possibility of making money can be very attractive to pupils. On the other hand, push factors refer to those aspects that are generated in the relationship between school and students [29]. The common theme in these factors is the aversion that pupils have towards school, which can be caused by feelings of boredom, a perceived lack of ability, and social isolation or discrimination [32]. While both pull and push factors can lead to the decision to leave school, the latter help to clarify the internal aspects of the educational system that require intervention.

Ainscow [33] suggests that a school is inclusive when it develops practices capable of accommodating students who are typically excluded by educational systems. Therefore, based on the points discussed so far, schools should work on strengthening students' self-efficacy and building a social support network that prevents them from feeling isolated or marginalized. To accomplish this, it is important for teachers themselves to have access to adequate training and to work in healthy environments [34,35].

1.2. Factors Related to School Dropout

Several factors have been investigated by researchers in terms of their impact on the school dropout risk. Among them, self-efficacy has been shown to play an important protective role [12,16,36–38].

In the educational context, self-efficacy refers to a student's confidence in their ability to achieve specific educational outcomes, such as successfully completing a test or obtaining good grades on assignments [39]. Zimmerman [39] demonstrated that students' self-efficacy predicts their motivation to learn, influencing their choices, engagement, emotional reactions, and perseverance in challenging situations. Consequently, self-efficacy not only contributes to academic success and reduces the likelihood of school disengagement but also serves as a psychological resource that supports coping processes in the face of academic challenges.

Furthermore, school dropout has long been framed as the result of a motivational crisis among students [40–42], but the findings remain ambiguous. Indeed, while the study by Grazia and colleagues [23] indicates a limited effect of academic motivation on the intention to leave, the study by Anttila and colleagues [42] suggests that only certain dimensions of motivation play a predictive role.

Regarding the school climate, relationships between teachers and students, as well as peer relationships, have been proven to be significant protective factors.

Relationships with “positive peers” (peers who are engaged in school) are negatively associated with dropout, a finding that holds true for both male and female students [43]. Finally, according to the study by Bianchi and colleagues [24], peer group acceptance is negatively correlated with the intention to leave among immigrant students, whereas it does not appear to be significant for native students. Moreover, referring to student–teacher relationships, perceived support [44] and the perception of teacher fairness [23] are negatively associated with, respectively, the risk of dropout and the intention to leave school.

In addition, professionals and scholars indicate school trust as a critical aspect for school disengagement and intention to leave [45–48]. School trust translates into the expectations that an individual has towards the educational system and how it will contribute to his or her future development [46]. It manifests at multiple levels: interpersonal relationships between individuals and groups (interpersonal trust), within classrooms (educational trust), and within the broader educational organization (institutional trust) [47].

Other studies have explored the association between intention to leave and future orientation, highlighting the protective role of the latter [49]. Future orientation refers to the affective, attitudinal, cognitive, and motivational dimensions involved in the ability to envision one’s future life circumstances. This construct describes the ability to set and pursue long-term goals, anticipate potential challenges, and make decisions that are consistent with desired future outcomes. It reflects an individual’s ability to plan, delay gratification, and remain motivated by considering the long-term consequences of one’s actions [50]. Denovan and colleagues [51] emphasized the correlation among future orientation and student engagement. This construct appears to be related to higher levels of motivation, while a shorter future orientation is associated with educational dropout [52].

Finally, gender is also a significant variable. In fact, many studies indicate that males have a greater propensity to drop out than females [30,31,53]. In Italy, the percentage of males who had dropped out from school in 2023 (13.1%) was higher than the percentage regarding girls (7.6%) [54].

1.3. Aims and Hypotheses

The first aim of this exploratory study was to investigate the possible differences between 9th- and 10th-grade students regarding several individual and relational dimensions traditionally associated with the dropout risk. The second aim of the study was to explore whether and to what extent these dimensions affect students’ intention to leave.

The following dimensions have been considered: at the individual level, self-efficacy, amotivation, future orientation; at the relational level, student–teacher relationships, peer relationships, students’ trust in teachers. In addition, we evaluated the intention to leave to assess the dropout risk.

Furthermore, since the transition from the first to the second year of upper secondary school is a critical moment but students can gradually benefit from the opportunities offered by the school context during these years, we hypothesized the following.

H1: *Students in the 10th grade show higher levels of self-efficacy, future orientation, trust in teachers, and positive relations among students and with teachers.*

H2: *Students in the 10th grade show lower levels of amotivation and intention to leave.*

In addition, considering the literature on school dropout, we also hypothesized the following.

H3: *Self-efficacy, future orientation, trust in teachers, and positive relations among students and with teachers negatively predict intention to leave.*

H4: *Amotivation positively predicts intention to leave.*

Our findings highlighted that students' trust in teachers was the only critical dimension in the comparison between 9th- and 10th-grade students and that, since it was also found to be a significant predictor of the intention to leave school, it would be important to address this aspect. In particular, this construct helps to identify factors on which interventions should focus: teachers' benevolence, competence, reliability, honesty, and openness and students' expectations toward their teachers and their educational paths.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

This study, commissioned by a no-profit association that combats school dropout [55], was performed in the Campania region [8] and involved five upper secondary schools in the VI Municipality of Naples: 12.04% of the students residing in this Municipality were absent for more than 50% of the regular school days in 2023. Of a total of 40 classrooms, 10 were involved in projects against school dropout designed by the association, while the other 30 were selected randomly by principals and researchers. The participants were 645 students aged between 14 and 17 years ($M_{age} = 14.64$, $SD = 0.69$, males = 324, females = 321) from the first- ($N = 389$, males = 199, females = 190) and second-year ($N = 256$, males = 122, females = 134) classes (ninth and tenth grades). The questionnaire was administered during school hours, so only students still enrolled in school were involved. However, subsequently, dropout students were recruited in a qualitative study.

Participation in the study was anonymous and free of charge. The schools obtained informed consent from the parents of the students, as they were underage. The informed consent form included detailed information regarding the objectives and procedures of the research and the confidentiality and anonymity of the data and its processing. Teachers, educators, and researchers supervised the administration of the questionnaires during school hours, giving adequate information to the students and supporting them in any emotional or comprehension difficulties. In addition, they worked together to create and ensure a calm and judgement-free atmosphere, informing the students that there would be no form of academic evaluation and that the results would not be shared with their professors.

The data collection measures, administered via an online survey on the Qualtrics Experience Management (XM) platform, were used to assess the variables of interest. For those students who were not equipped with a mobile device through which they could connect online and answer the questionnaire, the school made its computer rooms available.

2.2. Instruments

Instruments were selected from the scientific literature and administered at one time in the following order: Academic Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale (APSES), Intention to Leave (ITL), Academic Motivation Scale (AMS), Multidimensional School Climate Questionnaire (MSCQ), Future Orientation Scale (FOS), Students' Trust in Teachers Scale (STTS).

2.2.1. Socio-Demographic Questionnaire

In the socio-demographic questionnaire, the participants were asked to provide information about their age, gender, school, class, and possible past failures. Gender was coded as follows: Male = 1; Female = 2.

Regarding grades, we included 9th- and 10th-grade students (9th grade = 1; 10th grade = 2).

2.2.2. Academic Perceived Self-Efficacy Scale (APSES)

The Italian version of the APSES [56] is a self-report scale consisting of 15 items measuring students' beliefs about their ability to master various school subjects, to regulate their own motivation and learning activities, and to respond to the expectations of parents and teachers. Examples of items are *"How well can you finish homework assignments by the deadline?"* and *"How well can you learn general mathematics?"*. Participants were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). In the present study, Cronbach's α was 0.88, demonstrating the good reliability of the scale.

2.2.3. Academic Motivation Scale (AMS)

The Italian version of the AMS [57] consists of five subscales assessing amotivation, external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and intrinsic motivation. In this study, the subscale of amotivation, consisting of four items, was examined. Examples of items are *"Honestly, I don't know; I really feel that I am wasting my time in school"* and *"I don't know; I can't understand what I am doing in school"*. Participants were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = does not correspond at all, 7 = correspond exactly). In the present study, Cronbach's α was 0.86, showing the good reliability of the scale.

2.2.4. Multidimensional School Climate Questionnaire (MSCQ)

The MSCQ [58] is a questionnaire, validated in Italy, that investigates several areas associated with the school climate and was used in this study to measure peer relations (SR) and relationships between students and teachers (STR).

The SR scale consists of four items (e.g., *"Students treat one another with respect"* and *"Students can count on each other"*), and Cronbach's α in the present study corresponded to 0.88.

The STR scale consists of 4 items (e.g., *"Students and teachers feel good together"* and *"In general, relations between students and teachers are friendly"*), and Cronbach's α in the present study was 0.86.

In both cases, participants were asked to express their levels of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

2.2.5. Students' Trust in Teachers Scale (STTS)

The STTS [59] measures students' collective trust in teachers, emphasizing trust at the school level rather than on an individual level. It encompasses five dimensions, as hypothesized by Adams and Forsyth [59]: benevolence, competence, reliability, honesty, and openness. The original version was subjected to a process of back-translation curated by expert scholars. It consists of 13 items (e.g., *"Teachers at this school are always honest with me"* and *"Teachers at this school have high expectations for all the students"*). Participants were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's α in the present study was 0.84.

2.2.6. Future Orientation Scale (FOS)

The Italian version of the FOS [50] measures the extent to which individuals tend to perceive, anticipate, and plan for the future. This scale uses an item presentation method aimed at minimizing socially desirable responses [60]: a series of contrasting statements with the word "BUT" between them are presented, and individuals are asked to select

one of the two statements based on their level of identification. An example item is “Some people like to think about all the possible good and bad things that can happen before making a decision BUT other people don’t think it’s necessary to consider every little possibility before making a decision”. The scale consists of 15 items, and its reliability in the current sample was found to be adequate (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.70$).

2.2.7. Intention to Leave (ITL)

The ITL scale was constructed ad hoc and consisted of 2 items: “Sometimes I feel insecure about continuing my studies year after year” and “I intend to drop out of school permanently”. Participants were asked to express their level of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s α for the present study was 0.55.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Group Differences

The means and standard deviations of the study variables for the total sample and grouped by grade are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive analyses.

	Total Sample		9th Grade		10th Grade	
	(N = 645)		(N = 389)		(N = 256)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
APSES	3.2	0.6	3.1	0.7	3.3	0.6
AMS	2.2	1.5	2.3	1.4	2	1.3
FOS	2.7	0.4	2.7	0.4	2.8	0.5
SR	3.5	0.9	3.3	0.9	3.6	0.8
STR	3.2	0.9	3.2	0.9	3.2	0.8
STTS	2.7	0.5	2.8	0.5	2.6	0.5
ITL	2.1	1	2.2	1	1.9	0.9

APSES = Academic Self-Efficacy Scale; AMS = Academic Motivation Scale; FOS = Future Orientation Scale; SR = Student Relations; STR = Student–Teacher Relations; STTS = Students’ Trust in Teachers Scale; ITL = Intention To Leave.

The ANOVA showed significant group differences regarding grade. Compared with the 9th grade, the 10th-grade students reported significantly higher levels of academic perceived self-efficacy ($F_{(1,633)} = 13.171$, $p < 0.001$), future orientation ($F_{(1,633)} = 13.171$, $p < 0.001$), and student relations ($F_{(1,556)} = 10.302$, $p = 0.001$). Furthermore, 10th-grade students showed lower levels of amotivation ($F_{(1,588)} = 14.191$, $p < 0.001$), intention to leave ($F_{(1,633)} = 7.253$, $p = 0.007$), and trust in teachers ($F_{(1,501)} = 9.920$, $p = 0.002$).

No significant differences were found regarding student–teacher relations.

3.2. Correlations

The correlations between grade and psychological measures are presented in Table 3, indicating that it was significantly correlated with all dimensions except for student–teacher relations. Specifically, positive correlations were found with academic self-efficacy, future orientation, and student relations, while negative correlations were observed with amotivation, intention to leave, and trust in teachers. Intention to leave demonstrated negative correlations with academic self-efficacy, future orientation, both school climate dimensions, and trust in teachers and a significant positive correlation with amotivation. In contrast, trust in teachers was positively correlated with academic self-efficacy, future orientation, student relations, and student–teacher relations, and it was negatively correlated with

amotivation. Regarding academic self-efficacy, it exhibited significant positive correlations with future orientation, student relations, and student–teacher relations, while a negative correlation was found with amotivation. The latter was negatively correlated with future orientation, student relations, and student–teacher relations. Finally, future orientation showed positive correlations with student–teacher relations and trust in teachers, while student relations, in turn, also showed a positive correlation with student–teacher relations.

Table 3. Correlations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Grade	-							
2. APSES	0.143 **	-						
3. AMS	−0.104 **	−0.363 **	-					
4. FOS	0.154 **	0.369 **	−0.215 **	-				
5. SR	0.135 **	0.224 **	−0.142 **	0.028	-			
6. STR	−0.026	0.279 **	−0.311 **	0.134 **	0.333 **	-		
7. STTS	−0.139 **	0.266 **	−0.326 **	0.153 **	0.202 **	0.676 **	-	
8. ITL	−0.106 **	0.365 **	0.528 **	−0.192 **	−0.125 **	−0.297 **	−0.323 **	-

APSES = Academic Self-Efficacy Scale; AMS = Academic Motivation Scale; FOS = Future Orientation Scale; SR = Student Relations; STR = Student–Teacher Relations; STTS = Students’ Trust in Teachers Scale; ITL = Intention To Leave. ** $p < 0.01$.

3.3. Regression Analysis

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether the variables contributed to the prediction of students’ intention to leave (see Table 4).

Table 4. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis for the prediction of intention to leave ($N = 635$).

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2	<i>p</i>
Step 1						0.010		0.092
Gender	0.12	0.078	0.007	0.147	0.883			
Grade	−0.189	0.087	−0.099	−2.187	0.29			
Step 2						0.363	0.354	<0.001
APSES	−0.265	0.066	−0.176	−4.002	<0.001			
AMS	0.322	0.031	0.440	10.342	<0.001			
FOS	0.006	0.086	0.003	0.064	0.949			
SR	0.011	0.040	0.011	0.276	0.782			
STR	0.020	0.058	0.018	0.337	0.737			
STTS	−0.305	0.101	−0.155	−3.201	0.003			

APSES = Academic Self-Efficacy Scale; AMS = Academic Motivation Scale; FOS = Future Orientation Scale; SR = Student Relations; STR = Student–Teacher Relations; STTS = Students’ Trust in Teachers Scale.

Before performing the regression analysis, we conducted preliminary tests to assess whether the regression hypotheses were met. In the normal probability plot, the residuals closely followed the diagonal line, providing evidence in support of the normality assumption. The Durbin–Watson statistic value was 2.009, indicating no significant autocorrelation and confirming the independence of the residuals. To test for multicollinearity, variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance statistics were calculated for each predictor variable in the regression model. The VIF values ranged from 1.058 to 2.073, and the tolerance values were all above 0.10, indicating no multicollinearity issues. These results suggest that the regression model meets the necessary assumptions, allowing a valid interpretation of the results.

Since grade was found to be significantly associated with most of the variables and to intention to leave, we decided to use it as a control variable along with gender. Then, the addition of APSES, AMS, FOS, SR, and STTS resulted in a statistically significant increase in R^2 of 0.35 ($F_{(6,477)} = 44.141, p < 0.001$). The full model explained a substantial amount of variance in the intention to leave, with $R^2 = 0.36$.

4. Discussion

School dropout is a widespread phenomenon worldwide that must be effectively addressed to achieve universal quality education, as envisioned in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [61].

In all countries, concerning data reveal that the education system often fails to counteract social inequality and, in some cases, even exacerbates it, as highlighted by scholars of critical theory [62].

It is clear that school dropout is too often directly or indirectly linked to socioeconomic status. However, certain theoretical models, such as those of Bronfenbrenner [25] and Tinto [26], suggest that it is necessary to effectively intervene within educational contexts.

From this perspective, the most recent studies seek to move beyond individual and socioeconomic factors associated with school dropout, shifting the focus toward organizational and relational factors within the school environment [31].

If the school fails to be welcoming and inclusive [33], dropping out from school may be perceived as the only possible form of self-protection. School transitions are particularly stressful periods for adolescents [10]: while experiencing personal and family changes, they often have to adapt to new classmates, new teachers, and increasingly demanding academic expectations. A positive school climate, in all its dimensions, thus becomes a crucial factor [23].

The current exploratory study aimed to investigate the differences between 9th- and 10th-grade students from the outskirts of Naples regarding individual and relational dimensions traditionally associated with the risk of dropping out from school. In addition, it contributed to explaining the role of the abovementioned dimensions in the participants' intention to leave school.

Regarding the first aim of the study, the ANOVA results showed significant differences between students attending the 9th and 10th-grades in all dimensions except for student-teacher relations.

H1 was only partially confirmed, since 10th-grade students showed higher levels of academic self-efficacy, future orientation, and positive student relations, while trust in teachers was found to be higher in ninth-grade students. In addition, H2 was confirmed, with 10th-grade students showing lower levels of amotivation and intention to leave.

It was surprising to discover that trust in teachers was lower among 10th-grade students, given that the relationship with teachers could be assumed to strengthen over time. Nonetheless, psychological research on school trust describes it in terms of the expectations that students hold toward their teachers and the school itself [46,63,64]. Thus, this result might suggest that while, in the 9th grade—in the first year of high school—students' expectations are still high and idealized, over time, they could develop a more critical perspective of their school environment. This finding could indicate that these expectations may not have been fully met. Indeed, teachers need greater resources in terms of training to adequately respond to students' relational needs and expectations. To develop relational skills and to protect their well-being, teachers should be able to rely on social and professional support networks [34,35].

Overall, our study showed a positive image of the transition from 9th to 10th grade. Indeed, 10th-grade students could rely on more student-related protective factors such

as self-efficacy, future orientation, and motivation. Referring to school-related factors, 10th-grade students seem to rely on better relations with their peers, although not on those with teachers.

Regarding the student-related factors, our results could be understood considering that the critical phase that ninth-grade students have to face—the transition from middle to high school—could cause a temporary decline in dimensions such as self-efficacy [65]. In fact, during their first year, students are still adjusting to the new school context, facing more challenges and uncertainty, which may undermine their self-efficacy.

Generally, pupils appraise their self-efficacy through their actual performance, their vicarious experiences, and the persuasions they receive from others [66]. Thus, 10th-grade students could have had more opportunities to receive feedback about their performance, both from their teachers and peers, better understanding their strengths and weaknesses. This could contribute to building a stronger sense of self-efficacy, in line with our findings.

H3 was only partially confirmed. Indeed, only academic self-efficacy and students' trust in teachers negatively predicted the intention to leave, while future orientation, student relations, and student–teacher relations did not show a significant effect.

Our findings about the protective role of self-efficacy in students' intention to leave are in line with the studies of Samuel et al. [12] and Bianchi et al. [24].

Regarding students' trust in teachers, in the study of Snijders et al. [48], it was found to be associated with higher levels of school engagement, such as students' trust in school [46]. Nonetheless, to our knowledge, there is no evidence of the role of students' trust in teachers regarding their intention to leave school. Thus, this study fills a gap in this field of research, showing that this dimension can be considered as a protective factor in the prevention of school dropout, since it could probably reduce students' intention to leave.

Thus, 10th-grade students' lower levels of trust in their teachers should be considered critical and further investigated, due to the practical implications.

Finally, H4 was fully confirmed, since amotivation was shown to positively predict intention to leave, in line with the results of the study of Balkis [67], which have shown that amotivation has direct and indirect effects on the intention to leave school.

In conclusion, this exploratory study suggests that school dropout still requires further investigation, with a particular focus on the internal dynamics of the educational system. We cannot simply wait for society to change in order to achieve a more equitable school; rather, we must work to transform the school itself so that it actively contributes to reducing social inequalities and fostering a more democratic society [68].

This also entails a commitment to restoring the social value of the teaching profession, as its devaluation by families significantly influences students' perceptions of education and their engagement with school. However, trust is earned through experience and shaped by qualities such as passion for teaching, communication skills, and empathy. In today's schools, however, there is increasing pressure for performance and urgency.

The professional self is not an inexhaustible resource: initial teacher training is not sufficient, as their competencies must continually evolve in order to effectively manage complex situations, including those related to the risk of dropout [69]. To support adolescents in their educational journey, it is essential to sustain the adults within the school, using the many strategies long suggested in the literature. This means creating environments where the priority for everyone is to *exist* rather than merely function [70].

4.1. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations, partly due to its exploratory nature. Firstly, being a cross-sectional study, it does not allow for causal inferences between the identified variables. Future longitudinal research could address this limitation, particularly by examining

students' transitions between the first and second years of high school, as well as the shift from middle to high school.

Another limitation of this study is that the ITL scale showed slightly lower reliability than the recommended threshold, probably due to the limited number of items. This may have affected the robustness of the results. Given the exploratory nature of this research, future studies could benefit from using different instruments to improve the reliability and further substantiate our results, ensuring greater confidence in the conclusions.

Other studies could focus specifically on trust in teachers and the school–student bond, as well as on the perspectives of other stakeholders in the educational process. Moreover, employing qualitative methods could offer deeper insights into students' experiences concerning the themes under investigation.

4.2. Implications for Intervention

Although the limitations of this study preclude the generalization of its findings, the results align with a substantial body of scientific literature that underscores the importance of implementing dropout prevention and intervention programs through a systemic approach. Such programs should target not only students but also teachers and the broader context in which they operate, including the relationships that define it.

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