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To learn or to leave, that is the question for Mexican middle-school students: exploring predictors of intentions to leave school early

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ABSTRACT

Although every person has the right to education, not all students complete compulsory schooling. In fact, early school leaving (ESL) remains a challenge in many countries, including Mexico. This study tested sociodemographic factors, perception of inclusion, differentiated instruction practices, and general self-efficacy as predictors of students' intentions of ESL. The sample included 602 middle school students from inclusive and regular classrooms in Mexico. Our results show that, overall, students' intention to quit school early is low. Furthermore, a higher intention to leave school early is related to students' SEN status, whereas a higher emotional well-being, social inclusion and academic self-concept is correlated to a lower level of ESL intention. Additionally, a higher perception of differentiated instructional practices is positively correlated with the intention to quit school. Interestingly, no correlations were found between students' intention to leave school early and gender, general self-efficacy or classroom setting (inclusive vs. regular class).

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Introduction

From a basic human rights perspective, every individual has the right to receive an education (United Nations 1948). As Marshall (2013) asserts, education enables individuals to further develop their cognitive skills and acquire practical knowledge. Higher educational attainment is often associated with better employment opportunities, thereby improving a person's living conditions (Brunello and Paola 2014; González-Rodríguez, Vieira, and Vidal 2019; Leoni 2025). Beyond these benefits at the individual level, education can play a crucial role in societal progress. In fact, education is seen as an investment in a country's economy, contributing to the creation of skilled workers who are highly productive (Leoni 2025). Moreover, education can serve as a means of promoting social order and reducing disruptive behaviours within the population (Brunello and Paola 2014; Leoni 2025). Bearing in mind the critical importance of an educated population, numerous international policies have been developed and implemented to ensure that education systems serve *all* learners (Ainscow 2020; UNESCO 2015). Among these, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) within UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action, aims to ensure that, by 2030, all Member States – including Mexico – provide 'equitable and quality primary and secondary education' (UNESCO

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2015, 20). SDG4 also highlights the importance of equipping young generations of students with skills that are essential for the labour market (UNESCO 2015). Although the latest UNESCO report acknowledges progress in transforming education systems (UNESCO 2024), no country has yet achieved a fully inclusive system that leaves no student behind (Haug 2017). In fact, one of the most persistent and concerning global educational challenges is early school leaving (ESL) (Brown et al. 2021; Brunello and Paola 2014), which usually precedes the outcome of 'drop-out'.

ESL is typically defined as 'leaving school before the end of compulsory education' and is associated with not acquiring 'adequate skills, knowledge, or qualifications to deal with adult life and employment' (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education n.d.). During their time at school, some students may experience 'turning points' that lead them to perceive abandoning school as the most reasonable decision. However, they often do not fully anticipate the long-term (negative) consequences (Santos et al. 2020). For instance, studies have shown that early school leavers face unemployment or precarious working conditions, negatively affecting their physical and socioemotional well-being (Hagström and Hammarström 2024). Moreover, they may be stigmatised, as dropping out is frequently perceived as an individual failure rather than a systemic issue (Tukundane et al. 2015). Alarming, ESL patterns tend to repeat across generations, creating a 'vicious cycle' that families struggle to break (Doyle and Keane 2019). This underscores the importance of identifying factors that increase the risk of students dropping out of compulsory education at an appropriate point in time (Traag and Van Der Velden 2011). By addressing the issue in early stages, targeted interventions can still be implemented to prevent students' decision to leave school (Frostad, Pijl, and Mjaavatn 2015; Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014). According to Bayón-Calvo, Lucas-García, and Gómez-García (2021), students display early signs of their intention to leave school prematurely. ESL is thus better understood not as a spontaneous decision, but as a dynamic and gradual process shaped by multiple interacting factors (Haugan, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2019; Schwab 2018; Tukundane et al. 2014). As such, in the following lines we present individual and contextual factors identified in the international literature as predictors of ESL. This article also situates the analysis within the Mexican educational context, a system marked by comparatively high rates of ESL (Bonnet and Murtin 2024). A comprehensive account of this context is provided in a later section; however, it is important to note here that Mexico represents a particularly pertinent case given the extension of compulsory education until the age of 18 (Santiago et al. 2012) and the persistent challenges in retaining students through the upper secondary level (OECD 2024).

Understanding early school leaving through both individual and contextual factors

Previous research indicates that both individual and contextual factors influence students' decision to remain in or leave (compulsory) education (Bayón-Calvo, Lucas-García, and Gómez-García 2021; Frostad, Pijl, and Mjaavatn 2015; Haugan, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2019; Schwab 2018; Tukundane et al. 2015). One frequently studied individual factor is gender. Freeney and O'Connell (2012), for instance, found that Irish female students had a lower intention to leave school early compared to male students, although the difference was not statistically significant. In Mexico, there is evidence that more females than males complete upper secondary education, with males showing higher dropout rates (Bonnet and Murtin 2024; Cazarez and Carolina 2019). Similar trends have been observed in other countries, such as Spain (Requena and Valdés 2024) and the Netherlands (Traag and Van Der Velden 2011). However, in Austria, Schwab (2018) found that girls had a higher intention to leave school early, suggesting that gender-related patterns in ESL may vary across contexts.

Another key factor seems to be the presence of special educational needs (SEN), which has been associated with higher risk of ESL (Brown et al. 2024; Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014). Students with SEN are sometimes perceived by teachers as difficult to include in the mainstream classroom (De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2011) and have been identified as having teacher-student relationships with less closeness and more conflicts (Blacher et al. 2014; Feldman et al. 2019). This is concerning, especially since teachers are central to fostering inclusive school environments. Furthermore, teacher

support can enhance the retention of students with SEN in middle school education (Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014), whereas receiving different treatment and not having positive interactions with teachers can lead to disengagement and reluctance to pursue further educational levels (Doyle and Keane 2019; Hagström and Hammarström 2024; Pikkarainen and Kykyri 2023; Pikkarainen, Kykyri, and Harju-Luukkainen 2023; Tukundane et al. 2014). Unfortunately, many students with SEN report low(er) levels of socio-emotional inclusion and academic self-concept, even in inclusive settings (DeVries, Voß, and Gebhardt 2018; Di Palma 2024). Experiencing emotional states such as anxiety or loneliness at school can have a negative impact on students' intention to continue their education (Brown et al. 2021; Frostad, Pijl, and Mjaavatn 2015; Markussen, Frøseth, and Sandberg 2011; Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014). On the contrary, having a positive perception of the school environment has been found to decrease the risk of ESL (Traag and Van Der Velden 2011) and overall trigger students' engagement with school (Pikkarainen, Kykyri, and Harju-Luukkainen 2023). When exploring students' ESL, it is also important to consider the key socioemotional variables of emotional well-being, social inclusion and academic self-concept (Pozas et al. 2023a). Previous research has highlighted the negative relationship between students' emotional well-being (De Witte et al. 2013), social inclusion (Schwab 2018), and academic self-concept (Pozas et al. 2023a) and their intentions to quit school (Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014).

Another highly relevant predictor of ESL is students' self-efficacy. Self-efficacy can be considered as a protective psychological resource that helps individuals cope with different demands (Bandura 1993), inherently shaping an individual's goals, outcome expectations, and perseverance when facing difficulties (Komarraju and Nadler 2013). Consequently, a student's self-efficacy beliefs may be related to their intentions to drop out of school (Samuel and Burger 2020). Key findings from previous research have underscored the predictive role of self-efficacy on students' ESL (Tinto 2017). For instance, results from a longitudinal study by Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) revealed that students' self-efficacy was significantly related to their dropout intentions, indicating that students with higher level of self-efficacy had lower intentions to leave school. Similarly, Samuel and Burger's (2020) study highlighted the protective role of self-efficacy for not only ESL intentions, but actual dropout.

Beyond socioemotional factors, scientific literature further suggests ESL could also be linked to classroom factors (European Commission 2015; Freeney and O'Connell 2012), such as teaching approaches and classroom setting (e.g. inclusive learning environments). To address the heterogeneity of classrooms and to provide equal opportunities to all students for succeeding, teachers worldwide have been encouraged to implement differentiated instruction (DI) (Pozas and Schneider 2019; Pozas, Letzel, and Schneider 2020). Through DI, teachers meaningfully address the needs of all learners in heterogeneous classrooms (Scarparolo and Porta 2025). With this background, the priority theme on ESL policy report by the European Commission's (2015) calls for teachers to engage and implement DI as a means to support at risk students. Surprisingly, a study by Schwab (2018) revealed that more DI correlates positively with students' intentions to leave school early. In detail, a more differentiated instruction significantly predicted seventh graders intention to leave school, but not for fourth graders. Moreover, the findings revealed that the classroom setting (i.e. regular vs. inclusive classrooms) did not determine students' ESL. However, although literature has stressed the importance of classroom factors on students' ESL, up to the best of our knowledge, the study by Schwab (2018) has been the only to take into consideration such variables. Hence, there is a strong need for further research in the matter.

Context of the study

Mexico is recognised as one of the most diverse countries in the world (OECD 2018; 2019) a characteristic that is also reflected in its education. The system serves a heterogeneous population of students through over two million teachers and more than 200,000 schools across all educational levels (INEGI 2024). The country follows a dual system comprising both mainstream and special schools, further divided into public and private institutions. Notably, the majority of Mexican

students are enrolled in public schools (Gobierno de México 2024), although evidence suggests that private schools may offer advantages in terms of resources and student performance (Santiago et al. 2012). For instance, a recent study found that 71.3% of students in Mexican private schools completed upper secondary education, a higher percentage than in other types of schools (Cazarez and Carolina 2019). That being said, education in Mexico is compulsory for all children and adolescents between the ages of 3 and 18 (INEE 2019), covering preschool, primary and middle school, and upper secondary education (Santiago et al. 2012). As a result, Mexican students have a school life expectancy rate of 15 years (Gobierno de México 2022). This legal obligation is reinforced by the General Law of the Rights for Children and Adolescents, which mandates that the education system be adapted to students' needs to ensure their continued participation (Gobierno de México 2024).

Despite these legal provisions and the extension of compulsory education to include upper secondary level since 2012 (Santiago et al. 2012), enrolment rates among students aged 15–19 remain comparatively low to other OECD countries (OECD 2024). In addition, Mexico continues to have one of the lowest percentages of individuals who have attained an upper secondary education degree (OECD 2024). In fact, among OECD countries, Mexico has one of the highest rates of early school leaving (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015; Bonnet and Murtin 2024). Recent data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) shows that dropout rates at the upper secondary level in Mexico have fluctuated between 10.2 and 11.6% over the past four years (INEGI 2024). Although the causes of ESL remain understudied in the country, an earlier national survey reported that 42.6% of school dropouts attributed their decision to educational factors, such as boredom or perceived irrelevance of school (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015). Similar to other countries, individuals who do not complete upper secondary education face limited access to higher education (Requena and Valdés 2024), which in turn can restrict their employment opportunities and negatively affect their financial well-being (Brunello and Paola 2014; González-Rodríguez, Vieira, and Vidal 2019; Leoni 2025). In this sense, Bentaouet Kattan and Székely (2015) estimated a 61.5% income gap between Mexicans who completed upper secondary education and those who dropped out prematurely of the system.

In sum, one of the most pressing challenges in the Mexican education system lies at the upper secondary level (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015). While reducing the number of early school leavers is a clear priority, most of the existing literature on this issue focuses on the European context, leaving a limited understanding of how ESL unfolds in developing countries (with high rates of early school leavers) such as Mexico (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015; Bonnet and Murtin 2024). Moreover, the few studies conducted in Mexico have primarily focused on students who have already left the education system (Cazarez and Carolina 2019; Fernandez-Haddad and Gonzalez 2023), overlooking those who are still enrolled but may be at risk of leaving early. To address this gap, it is essential to focus on Mexican students currently enrolled in middle school education for two key reasons. First, research suggests that the roots of school dropout often emerge in earlier stages of schooling (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015), with the intention to leave becoming visible during middle school education (Frostad, Pijl, and Mjaavatn 2015; Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014; Schwab 2018). Second, dropout rates in Mexico are the highest during upper secondary education, especially in the state of Nuevo Leon, where this study was conducted (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015). Therefore, targeting lower middle school students may allow the early identification of at-risk students, and the development of timely interventions before they disengage from school and ultimately decide to drop out (Bayón-Calvo, Lucas-García, and Gómez-García 2021; Schwab 2018).

The present study

Against the context of the previous scientific literature and empirical findings, it appears relevant to explore the individual- and context-level variables that determine Mexican students' intention to leave school. The research questions and hypotheses guiding this study are the following:

1. Does students' intention to leave school early differ at the context level (inclusive vs. regular [non-inclusive] classrooms)?

Hypothesis: It is hypothesized that a more heterogeneous classrooms (i.e. inclusive classrooms) will negatively predict the intention to leave school early. Notably, there is still limited research that could provide sufficient empirical grounds for this hypothesis. However, this assumption is derived from Schwab (2018) as well as other prominent studies which have examined and determined that SEN status is linked to ESL. Inclusive classrooms are comprised of a higher number of students with SEN status, and therefore, a predictor for ESL.

2. Does students' intention to leave school early is predicted by variables at the student individual level (age, gender, SEN status, general self-efficacy, emotional well-being, social inclusion, academic self-concept and ratings of their teachers' DI use) and context level (inclusive vs. regular [non-inclusive] classrooms)?

Hypothesis: In light of the aforementioned and discussed empirical results, it is expected that being male and having a SEN status will be related to a higher intention to leave school early. Higher levels of general self-efficacy, emotional well-being, social inclusion, academic self-concept and perceived DI are further assumed to predict a lower intention to quit school early. Lastly, it is expected that students in regular classroom settings will have lower intentions for ESL.

Method

Sampling and sample

The analyses in this study utilised data from the DI-STePP-Mex project, which explored Differentiated Instruction from the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents in middle schools in [city], Nuevo Leon, Mexico (Pozas et al. 2024). The project employed a quantitative cross-sectional design, focusing on schools within the city. To recruit participants, invitations were sent via email to principals of primary and middle schools, both private and public, offering a meeting to discuss the project's objectives. Additional support was provided by regional governmental education institutions to facilitate contact with schools. Participating schools shared an online survey link with teachers, who administered the questionnaire during school hours.

A total of 602 middle school students (52% female, average age 13.20 years) from 25 inclusive and regular classes participated in the study (6th Grade = 115; 7th Grade = 107; 8th Grade = 198; 9th Grade = 182). All participants attended private schools, with 34% in inclusive classroom settings. Additionally, 15% of the participants self-reported having special educational needs (SEN), including hearing impairments (2 students), visual impairments (24 students), learning difficulties (22 students), emotional and behavioural disorders (25 students), and social skills difficulties (18 students). The research project received approval from the University of Monterrey's School of Psychology Ethical Committee. Data collection occurred from mid-February 2022 through March 2023.

Instruments

Perceptions of inclusion questionnaire (PIQ) student version

The PIQ includes the following three subscales: social inclusion (e.g. '*I have a lot of friends in my class*'; $\alpha = .80$), emotional well-being (e.g. '*I like going to school*'; $\alpha = .80$), and academic self-concept (e.g. '*I am a fast learner*'; $\alpha = .72$), with four items each. Students were asked to indicate their agreement using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all true* to 4 = *certainly true*). One statement in each of the subscales is negatively worded (e.g. '*I have no desire to go to school*'), and thus, recoded for the analyses. The Spanish (Mexican version) PIQ has been previously validated by Pozas et al. (2023a).

General self-efficacy

Students' general self-efficacy was measured using the Spanish version (Bläßler and Schwarzer 1996) of the General Self-Efficacy Scale from (Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1999). The scale includes 10 items

(e.g. 'I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough') and comprises a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not at all true to 4 = exactly true (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$).

Students' rating of their teachers' use of DI

Students' ratings of their teachers' DI practice were assessed using an adapted version of the Teacher Differentiated Teaching Scale by Letzel (2019). This adapted version was previously used in a recent small-scale study conducted by Pozas, Trujillo, and Letzel (2021b) in which it has been previously back translated from German to Spanish. The scale consists of twelve items based on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g. 'My teacher forms groups of students with different capabilities', 1 = never to 5 = very frequently; $\alpha = .86$).

Intention to quit

Students' intentions to leave education early was measured using the Intention to Quit Scale by Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn (2014), which was translated into Spanish following a back-translation process (Bundgaard and Brøgger 2019). The scale consists of 3 items (e.g. 'I really feel that I am wasting my time in school.') and follows a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = always ($\alpha = .86$).

Data analysis

The analyses within this study were conducted using SPSS 27. First, the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables were calculated. Second, a multilevel regression analysis was conducted in order to examine the nested structure of the data (students nested within classrooms) (Level 2: classes, Level 1: individual student). All metric variables at Level 1 (i.e. emotional well-being, social inclusion, academic self-concept and ratings of their teachers' DI practice) were centred at the grand mean (Ryu 2015). Afterwards, two models were calculated for the outcome variable (intention to quit). The first model estimated the variance at Level 2 (class level), and thus, was calculated without any predictors. The second model included all predictor variables at the student level (age, gender, SEN, general self-efficacy, emotion well-being, social inclusion, academic self-concept, ratings of DI, and intention to quit) and predictors at the class level (classroom setting: inclusive vs. regular classroom) was calculated.

Results

Descriptive and correlational analyses

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables under study. In detail, one sample t-tests revealed that overall, students' intention to quit school early is low, ($t(575) = -16.14$, $p \leq .001$, $d = 1.02$) (as the scale ranges from minimum 1 to a maximum of 5).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the components (attitudes) and sociodemographic characteristics.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Student gender	—	—									
2. SEN status	—	—	.06								
Intention to quit	1.79	1.03	-.04	.14**	-						
General self-efficacy	3.08	.62	-.06	-.18**	-.04	-					
Emotional well-being	3.11	.63	.01	-.15**	-.31**	.29**	-				
Social inclusion	3.17	.61	-.11**	-.22**	-.11*	.30**	.53**	-			
Academic self-concept	2.89	.56	.07	-.24**	-.17**	.46**	.47**	.40**	-		
DI	2.15	.78	-.02	-.02	.33**	.24**	.01	.08	-.01	-	
9. Classroom setting (inclusive vs. regular class)	-	-	-.05	-.14**	-.05	.08	.06	.00	.09*	-.09*	-

a (Dummy coded variables) Gender: 1 = female, 2 = male. SEN status: 1 = No, 2 = Yes. Classroom setting: 1 = Yes, 2 = No. * $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

With regards to students' general self-efficacy ($t(575) = 22.58, p \leq .001, d = .62$), emotional well-being ($t(575) = 23.96, p \leq .001, d = .63$), social inclusion ($t(575) = 27.15, p \leq .001, d = .60$), and academic self-concept ($t(575) = 17.28, p \leq .001, d = .55$), the means were all relatively high. In contrast, students' ratings of their teachers' DI practice was significantly low, ($t(601) = -10.99, p \leq .001, d = .78$). Correlation analyses indicate that a higher intention to leave school early is related to students' SEN status, whereas a higher emotional well-being, social inclusion and academic self-concept is correlated to a lower level of ESL intention. Moreover, students who perceive a higher DI implementation in their classrooms is positively correlated with ESL intention. Interestingly, no correlations were found between students' intention to leave school early and gender, general self-efficacy or classroom setting (inclusive vs. regular class).

Multilevel regression analysis

The first model without predictors did not explain any variance at all, indicating that there was no significant variance at the class level. When entering all predictors into Model 2, the analyses revealed that students' SEN status, emotional well-being, social inclusion and ratings of DI were significant predictors at Level 1 (see Table 2) and explained a variance 80%. In detail, not having a SEN status, feeling higher emotional well-being, feeling less socially included and rating less DI practice is related to a lower intention to quit school early.

Discussion

Reducing the number of early school leavers is a worldwide priority. While there is much research about how ESL is experienced in European countries, little is known about how this phenomenon is experienced in developing countries, such as Mexico (Vázquez-Nava et al. 2019). To fill this gap in knowledge, the present study analyzed predictors of ESL at both the context (inclusive vs. regular [non-inclusive] classrooms) and individual level (age, gender, SEN status, general self-efficacy, emotional well-being, social inclusion, academic self-concept and ratings of their teachers' DI use).

The descriptive results indicate that, overall, (private) middle school students in the state of Nuevo Leon have low levels of intention to leave school early. These findings, although in considerable contradiction to the numerous studies indicating a high percentage of school dropout in Mexico (López, María, and Lever 2017; Miranda López 2018; Vázquez-Nava et al. 2019), are nevertheless in line with international research (Freeney and O'Connell 2012; Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014; Schwab 2018). A possible explanation of this could be that even though Mexico has one of the highest rates of early school leaving among OECD countries (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015; Bonnet and Murtin 2024), participants in this study come from private schools, where a higher percentage of students complete their education compared to those enrolled in public schools (Bundgaard and Brøgger

Table 2. Estimates of the multilevel regression analyses to predict students' intention to quit school (Model 2 with predictors).

	β	SE
Student gender (male vs. female)	-0.06	0.08
Students' SEN (SEN vs. no SEN)	0.29*	0.11
General self-efficacy	-0.06	0.07
Emotional well-being	-0.53**	0.08
Social inclusion	0.16*	0.08
Academic self-concept	-0.01	0.09
DI	0.45**	0.05
Classroom setting (inclusive vs. regular class)	0.05	0.08
Intra-group variance (variance at the student level)	0.80**	0.05
Inter-group variance (variance at the school level)	-	-
Deviance	1464.68	-

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

2019). Since private schools in Mexico are tuition-based and not publicly subsidised (Santiago et al. 2012), they are typically attended by students from middle to high-income families (García-Cedillo, Romero-Contreras, and Ramos-Abadie 2015). As such, these students enrolled in private education could be less exposed to the structural disadvantages that contribute to ESL in comparison to low-income students who attend public schools. These results reinforce the argument of Doyle and Keane (2019, 75) who note that 'the impact of place also requires consideration in terms of how people's educational aspirations may be influenced by growing up and living in a particular area'. Yet, the exploration of such (potential) differences is something that future research should take into account by including similar numbers of public and private enrolled students across the country.

Consistent with previous national and international studies, students in this study hold high levels of self-efficacy (García García, Miranda, and García 2021; Nieto et al. 2016), emotional well-being, social inclusion and academic self-concept (Pozas, Trujillo, and Letzel-Alt 2023b; Schwab and Alnahdi 2020; Venetz, Zurbriggen, and Schwab 2019). In contrast, descriptive results however reveal that students report a rather low perception of DI. Notably, several studies have underscored how differentiation 'is not used to the necessary extent' (Markussen, Frøseth, and Sandberg 2011, 240), which is in line with students' perceptions of limited differentiated instruction both at national and international (Pozas et al. 2021a; Pozas and Letzel-Alt 2023).

Interestingly, despite numerous studies supporting the relationship between gender and ESL (Bonnet and Murtin 2024; Cazarez and Carolina 2019; Requena and Valdés 2024; Schwab 2018; Traag and Van Der Velden 2011), in this study the intention to quit school did not differ between Mexican female and male students. Similar to our previous point, this could be attributed to the relatively homogeneous socioeconomic background of the sample (García-Cedillo, Romero-Contreras, and Ramos-Abadie 2015).

In line with the study by Schwab (2018), the results of the multilevel analyses showed no significant variance at the classroom level. This inherently leads to the conclusion that whether students learn in an inclusive or regular classroom setting does not significantly influence their intention to leave school early. Variables that contributed significantly to predicting Mexican students' ESL were no SEN status, higher emotional well-being, and surprisingly less social inclusion and DI. In general, empirical research has shown that a SEN status (Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014) and socio-emotional variables are relevant predictors of ESL. In the particular case of this study, the results (surprisingly) indicate that less social inclusion protects learners from ESL. One plausible explanation lies in individual differences on how students cope with adverse situations. Even though one could argue that not feeling included is a major stressor in the life of a student, some students may respond to it with resilience adaptive coping strategies. For example, rather than disengaging with their education, students may be motivated to 'prove others wrong' and demonstrate their accomplishments by completing compulsory education (Egan et al. 2024). Since most school-aged Mexican learners have experienced bullying at some point in their trajectory (Excelsior 2019; SEP 2014), it is possible that they have become resilient to such adverse situations (Egan et al. 2024). The notion of adversarial growth further suggests that people stop attributing their worth to others' comments and therefore are no longer driven by the need to be 'approved' (Egan et al. 2024). Yet, we do not know if this is the case for our sample, as we did not check for resilience-related factors. We do encourage, however, that future research explores the potential connection between low resilience and higher levels of intention to leave school early. Furthermore, we believe that the social part of attending school, as emphasised in several studies, is fundamental for students' well-being (Santos et al. 2020).

Likewise, a surprising result is the fact that less DI practice is associated with lower intention to leave early. Schwab (2018) reported a similar result with a sample of 4th and 7th graders in Austria. One potential explanation could be that while the core intention of DI is providing all students with learning opportunities, some learners tend to worry that differences between peers are accentuated or simply do not like to work in groups, whether these are heterogeneous or homogeneous (Esqueda Villegas et al. 2025). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that ESL conform

a ‘very heterogenous group’ of learners that face different challenges (Tukundane et al. 2015). Thus, further research should explore the findings from this study in greater detail, for instance, through qualitative and participatory research approaches.

Limitations

When interpreting the results of this study, it is necessary to bear in mind several limitations. First, as mentioned beforehand, this sample consisted of mainly private school students from the region of Nuevo Leon, in Mexico. Hence, the sample within this study could be considered highly socioeconomically ‘advantageous’ (García-Cedillo, Romero-Contreras, and Ramos-Abadie 2015). Further research should investigate the (potential) differences across educational institutions as well as regions within the country. Second, this sample makes use of cross-sectional data, limiting the possibility of establishing casual relationships between the variables. With this background, studies should also attempt to explore the educational trajectories of students, focusing on analyzing in a longitudinal approach their intentions to leave school early. Lastly, the present study assessed (only) students’ perspectives via means of self-report questionnaires. Investigations using a multi-method research design which incorporates the perspectives as well of teachers and parents are strongly recommended.

Conclusions

Although our findings indicate low levels of intention to leave school early among students in the state of Nuevo Leon (Mexico), prior research highlights that ESL remains a critical issue in several other states across the country (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015). Future studies should examine potential differences between students in public and private education, as socioeconomic background may influence students’ intention to leave school. In addition, we recommend that future research, particularly within the Mexican context, focus on the middle school setting. Empirical evidence suggests that while dropout rates can be higher in the upper secondary years (Bentaouet Kattan and Székely 2015), signs of students’ intention to quit school tend to emerge earlier in the educational trajectory (Bayón-Calvo, Lucas-García, and Gómez-García 2021). Therefore, targeted interventions to prevent school dropout may be most effective when implemented during earlier educational stages (Frostad, Pijl, and Mjaavatn 2015; Pijl, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2014).

Overall, our findings align with previous research emphasising that ESL cannot be attributed to a single cause, but rather arises from the interplay of multiple factors (Bayón-Calvo, Lucas-García, and Gómez-García 2021; Frostad, Pijl, and Mjaavatn 2015; Haugan, Frostad, and Mjaavatn 2019; Schwab 2018; Tukundane et al. 2015). Still, certain individual-level factors, such as resilience or adversarial growth, remain underexplored in the literature and require further investigation, particularly within the Mexican educational system.

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