# Research on the Determining Factors of School Dropout: Case Study CPEM N° 21 in Neuquén Capital, Argentina.

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Abstract

The study at CPEM N.º 21 on school dropout in the 3rd year evening program reveals a multi-causal problem that intertwines socioeconomic, family, and emotional factors. The main risk causes are the need to prioritize work, family problems, and overlapping schedules. Despite 100% of students wishing to finish their studies, the biggest perceived barrier is not academic difficulty, but the lack of psychological well-being, emotional containment, and listening on the part of the institution (stress, anxiety). The initial intervention of a motivational talk proved to be effective, reducing absences and improving performance. Furthermore, the students' marked tendency towards an internal locus of control (71% and 86%) is a strength, as they feel responsible for their results. Recommendations focus on creating permanent spaces for emotional support and listening, teacher training in soft skills, and exploring flexible schedules for working students, seeking a more comprehensive approach to school retention.

Keywords: School dropout; Emotional containment; Locus of control.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Early school dropout constitutes a critical challenge in education systems globally, with profound implications at both the individual and societal levels (Zengin, 2021; Grazia, Molinari & Mameli, 2023). Previous studies have identified multiple factors associated with the risk of dropping out, encompassing individual, family, socioeconomic, and school dimensions (Gil, Antelm-Lanzat, Cacheiro-González & Pérez-Navío, 2018; Zengin, 2021). Among these, low academic performance, lack of motivation, learning difficulties, and an adverse socio-family context emerge as consistent predictors (Grazia et al., 2023; Gil et al., 2018).

In this regard, research has advanced significantly in characterizing the profiles of students at risk, as well as in identifying variables associated with the phenomenon (Zengin, 2021; Gil et al., 2018). However, a significant gap persists in understanding how students' **perceptions of teacher fairness** and their **locus of control** interact to modulate this vulnerability (Burke & Fanshawe, 2024; Grazia et al., 2023). While Grazia et al. (2023) demonstrate that the perception of fair treatment by teachers exerts a protective effect against the intention to drop out, Burke and Fanshawe (2024) highlight the relevance of the locus of control—internal and external—in managing learning and academic persistence. Nevertheless, studies that integrate both dimensions into a unified analytical framework to understand their joint influence on the predisposition to school dropout are scarce.

Furthermore, most research has focused on teacher or institutional perspectives (Gil et al., 2018), neglecting the **student's voice** and their agency in the construction of resilient educational trajectories (Burke & Fanshawe, 2024). Nor has it been sufficiently explored how these variables operate in non-traditional educational contexts or in populations with high socioeconomic vulnerability, where perceived fairness and the self-perception of control could play even more determinant roles.

Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the **relationship between the perception of teacher fairness, academic locus of control, and the intention to drop out** in high school students from disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts. Through a mixed and longitudinal design, the study will analyze not only the direct influence of these variables but also their **interaction and evolution** throughout an academic year. The findings aim to contribute to the design of more effective and contextualized educational interventions, focused on strengthening student agency and promoting school climates perceived as fair and equitable.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study implemented a mixed research design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to comprehensively address the problem of school dropout. The sample is limited to the student population of the 3rd year, evening shift (Adult Program), of the Provincial Secondary Education College (CPEM) N° 21. In this section, we will detail the steps followed to carry out the analysis of our objective.

🔬 Instruments and Measurements

Two strands were established for information gathering:

- Quantitative Data Collection
    - Baseline: Initial institutional data were collected to establish the measurable percentage of dropout, including the number of registered students at the beginning of the year, and student attendance before and after the winter recess.
    - Systematic Observations: The course teaching staff conducted observations to identify behavioral patterns and early signs of disengagement.
    - Pre and Post-Recess Surveys: A brief, anonymous survey was administered to 3rd-year students before and after the winter recess to measure their motivation, expectations, possible risk factors for dropout, and the perception of the usefulness of subjects, including the exploration of their locus of control.
- Qualitative Data Collection
    - Interviews with Pedagogical Counseling: An interview was conducted to contextualize the problem, access official data on repetition rates, institutional dropout history, and predominant socioeconomic profiles.
    - Interviews with Teachers: The perspective of the teaching team was collected through semi-structured interviews to identify at-risk students and capture their perceptions of student difficulties and the classroom climate.
    - Student Surveys with Open-Ended Questions: The surveys included semi-closed and open-ended questions to obtain in-depth data on the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the students, addressing their perceptions of the causes, risks, and factors influencing school dropout.

Initial Intervention

As a prevention and containment action, and prior to the winter recess (a critical period for dropout risk), a Motivational and Awareness Talk was organized. This intervention was led by graduates of the same CPEM N° 21 and focused on reinforcing the social value of the secondary degree and the development opportunities it entails. The impact of this talk was validated by comparing the results of the surveys and attendance records pre and post-recess.

Data Analysis

The final stage consisted of the triangulation of quantitative information (attendance, dropout), student perceptions, institutional data, and the teaching staff's perspective. This comprehensive analysis allowed for the identification of the predominant causalities for the formulation of specific diagnoses and the consequent proposal of effective retention strategies.

## 3. RESULTS

In the methodology section, we referred to the interview conducted with the Pedagogical Advisory with the intention of understanding and accounting for the causes that lead to school dropout. Among the findings collected in this interview, according to official reports, it was noted that students exhibit intermittent absences, generally in the months of October and November, which harms the closing of grades for the second semester, consequently affecting the completion of their studies.

Among the most relevant causes concerning the risk of school dropout in the analyzed course is the fact that students prioritize work, as they state that it is difficult for their families to cover household expenses. Another reason linked to this refers to the superposition of schedules between school entry and their work hours. They also express that other obstacles are due to family problems the students face. These are the most outstanding causes highlighted in the analysis of students at risk of school abandonment according to the survey of teachers and psycho-pedagogues.

The motivational talk held before the school break showed a great motivation for them to finish their studies as a result, which was demonstrated by the few absences presented by the students in October and an improvement in their performance in the subjects.

### Teacher Perspectives

Regarding the interviews conducted with the teachers of the analyzed group, relevant data was collected. Among them, teachers stated that the analyzed group of students presents difficulties when submitting practical assignments and complying with regular attendance. They perceive that students often do not receive encouragement from their families or family group. Furthermore, they express that students present intrafamily problems or are in situations of vulnerability, mainly economic, adding that students often drop out due to interpersonal conflicts with peers from other courses. These causes, according to the teachers, are the most relevant when analyzing the causes of the risk of school abandonment.

### Student Survey Findings

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Subsequently, through the surveys conducted with the students, we were able to observe once again the multi-causality of this evaluated phenomenon: school dropout.

While 29% of the total respondents reported having considered quitting their studies at some point, 100% of the interviewees stated that they wished to finish their studies.

This result is truly encouraging, as there is a unanimity aiming to achieve this goal.

Furthermore, we delved into the curricular content by asking students if they considered the education provided useful for life and work. They were asked to weigh their answer between 1 "Not important at all," 2 "More or less important," 3 "Important," and 4 "Very important," and the majority of the results yielded values that indicate they consider the teachings in high school important and very important for their professional future and their life.
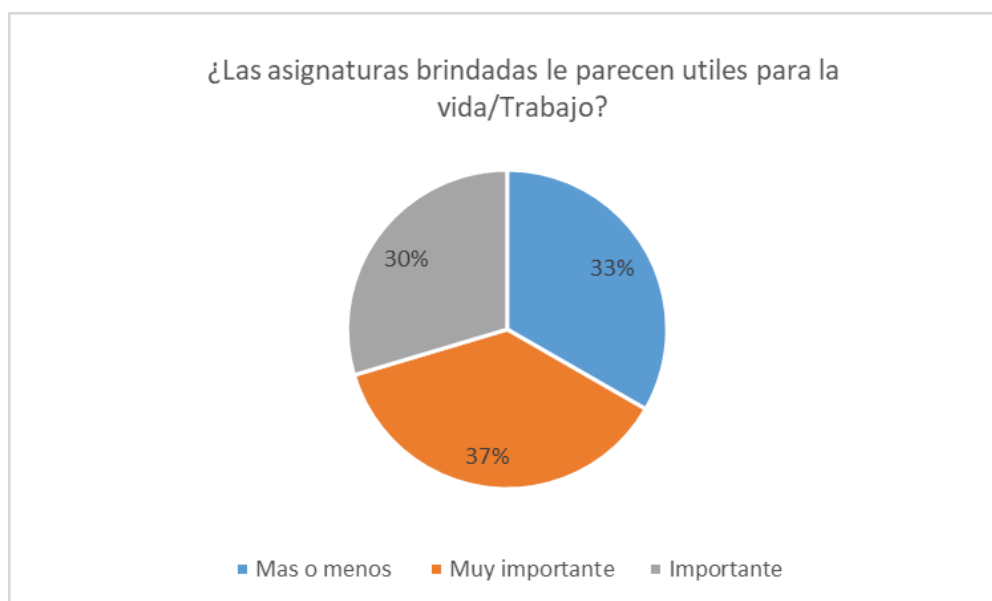


Chart 1. Source: Prepared by the author using survey data from Google Forms (2025)

Support from the teaching staff was also observed; students feel supported when facing difficulties and can rely on teachers to seek a solution.

¿Si tengo una dificultad, puedo hablar con mis profesores para buscar una solucion?

13%

20%

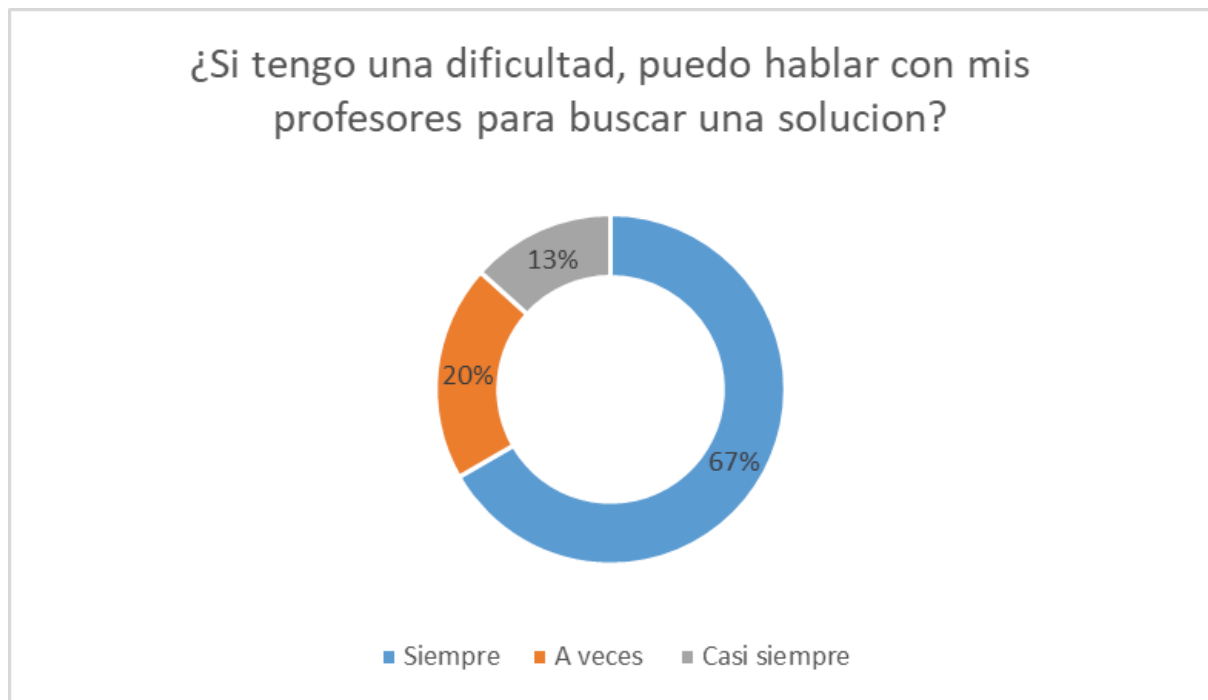67%

■ Siempre   ■ A veces   ■ Casi siempre

Chart 2. Source: Prepared by the author using survey data from Google Forms (2025)

Also, based on the psychological theory of the locus of control, which indicates that each individual can attribute the successes or failures of events in their life to external events (external locus of control) or to their own actions and efforts (internal locus of control); we wanted to investigate the tendency of our study population. The results showed a marked tendency towards the internal locus. This is observed in charts 3 and 4 where students had to answer whether they agreed or disagreed with a statement. The phrases have a marked tendency that determines the student's profile. This result is important for applying different support and emotional containment techniques for the students.
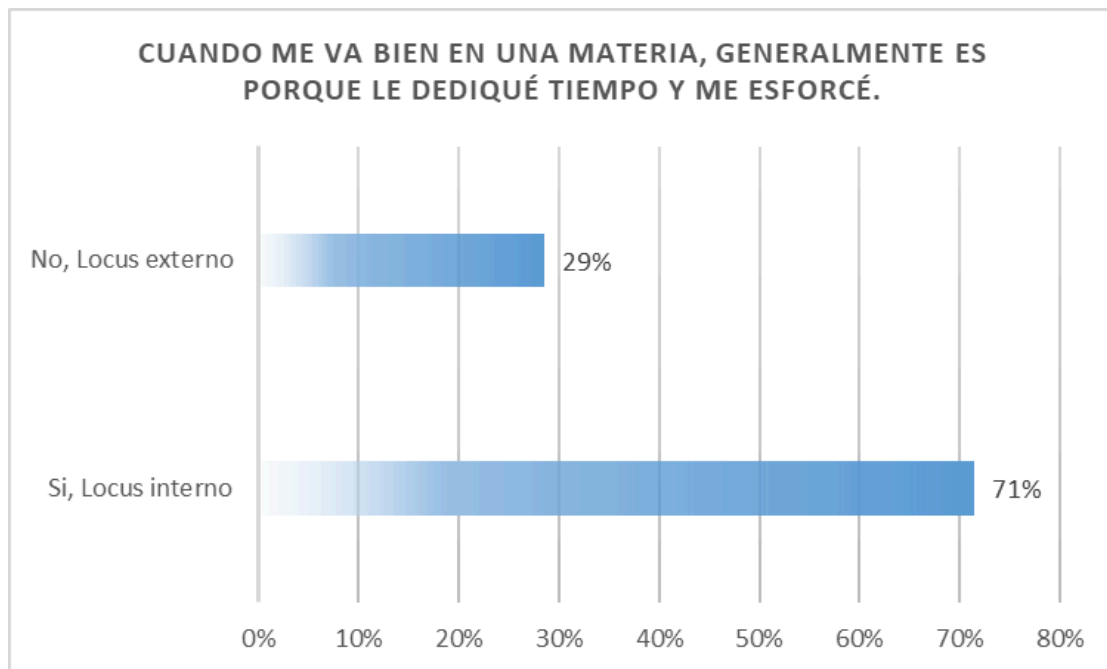
Chart 3. Source: Prepared by the author using survey data from Google Forms (2025)
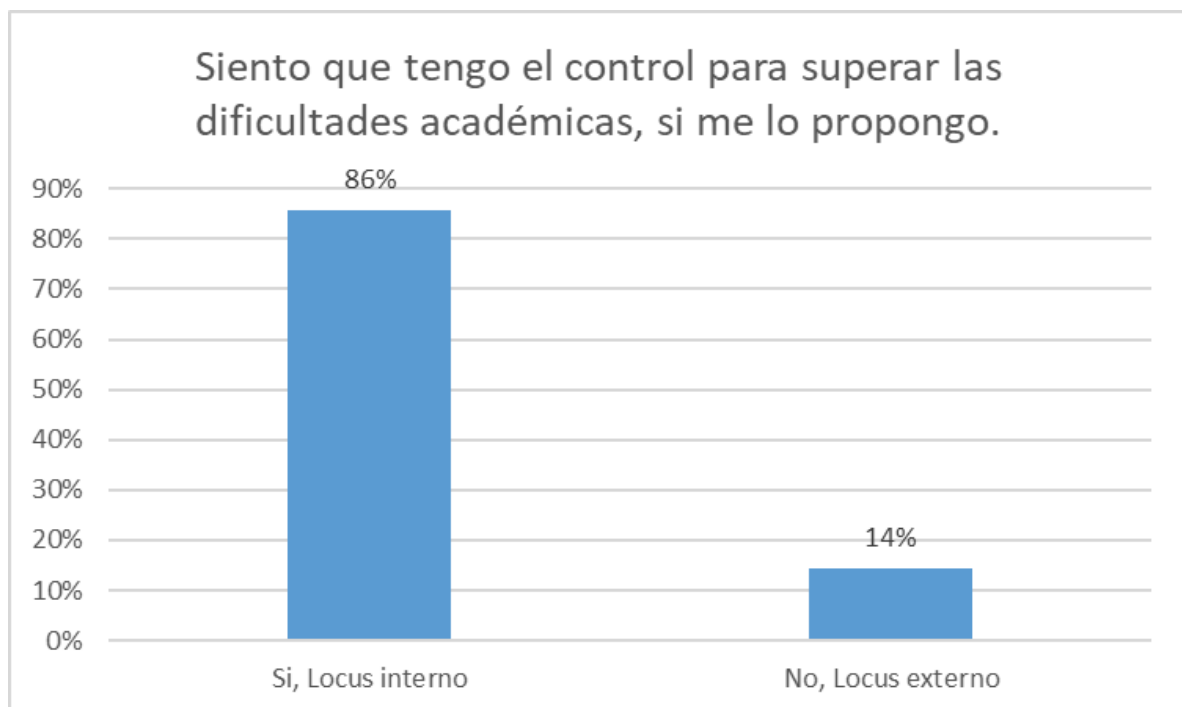


Chart 4. Source: Prepared by the author using survey data from Google Forms (2025)

The survey also included the open-ended question: "What do you think is the biggest obstacle for you and your peers to finish high school?" with the objective of identifying the barriers perceived by students. The answers obtained revealed a diversity of factors, highlighting not only academic and personal management aspects but also the significant weight of emotional problems and lack of support.

The responses can be grouped into the following main categories (see Table 1):

| Categoría | Respuestas y Percepciones Clave |
|---|---|
| **Responsabilidad y Asistencia** | Algunos estudiantes señalaron directamente la **falta de responsabilidad**, el **tiempo disponible** para el estudio, la **falta de ganas de venir a clases** y la **falta de asistencia** como obstáculos importantes. |
| **Factores Emocionales y Abstractos** | Un grupo significativo de respuestas puso el foco en factores **no físicos ni académicos**, como el **estrés**, la **ansiedad** o los **problemas personales**. Se argumenta que estos aspectos **"influyen más de lo que parece"** porque impiden la concentración mental en los estudios. |
| **Necesidad de Contención y Empatía** | Se enfatizó la **ausencia de contención emocional y comprensión** como un obstáculo central. Varias respuestas mencionaron que la **falta de empatía y de espacios para ser escuchados** lleva a los alumnos a sentir que sus dificultades se deben a "falta de esfuerzo o vagancia", cuando en realidad son **situaciones emocionales que pesan demasiado**. Se destacó que una **"ayuda genuina"** para escuchar y entender los problemas personales podría **"marcar la diferencia"** al demostrar que el estudiante no está solo. |

Table 1. Responses Grouped by Category. Prepared by the author using survey data from Google Forms (2025)

The analysis of the responses underlines that, while traditional problems such as absenteeism and lack of dedication persist, the biggest perceived challenge for completing high school lies in the emotional sphere and psychological well-being. The difficulty of subjects often takes a back seat to the urgent need for emotional support, empathy, and listening spaces within the institution.

While some of the survey responses point to factors that align with an internal locus of control (such as "lack of responsibility," "available time," or "lack of desire to come"), by attributing success or failure to individual decisions and efforts, the preponderant conclusion focuses on a radically opposite level.

The last open-ended question in the survey, "What could the school do to help you stay?", directly sought the solutions and improvements that students consider essential to motivate their permanence in high school. The responses reflect a clear demand for a more integral, human, and practical approach.

The strongest and most recurrent point in the responses is the need for active emotional support from the institution. Students propose that:

- The school provides more spaces for accompaniment and listening where they can talk about their feelings and difficulties "without fear of being judged."
- The idea is reiterated that many difficulties are not due to "lack of desire," but rather to stress, anxiety, or personal problems.
- It is highlighted that "genuine help" that listens and understands what is happening, "without obligation or pity," is a gesture that can "make a difference" by showing that the student is not alone.

In summary, they ask for a combination of emotional support with motivational and lively teaching spaces, so that studying is "not a burden, but an opportunity to grow."

Students also identified changes in the teaching dynamics that facilitate their permanence:

- Convey Passion and Meaning: It is important for teachers to "convey passion for what they teach," not just "give the class." Teacher enthusiasm can lead students to stop seeing studying as a "mere obligation."
- Update and Understanding: The need to "update" and show "understanding" regarding their circumstances is requested.
- More Support in Subjects: Offer "greater support in the subjects."

The students' proposals suggest transforming the school into a space that, in addition to imparting academic knowledge, prioritizes psychological well-being, personal connection, and the development of practical skills, understanding that these factors are the foundation for ensuring their commitment and permanence.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results obtained at CPEM No. 21 allow us to understand school dropout as a complex and multi-causal phenomenon, encompassing individual, family, institutional, and socioeconomic dimensions. The evidence gathered indicates that students in the analyzed course exhibit a risk of dropping out primarily associated with the need to enter the labor market early, economic hardship at home, family problems, and intermittent absences that affect academic performance. Before the winter break, low academic performance, economic insecurity, grade repetition, and limited school support were identified as significant predictors of dropout.

Furthermore, the presence of a predominantly internal locus of control among students constitutes a relevant subjective resource, given that those who perceive their effort as impacting academic results tend to develop strategies for organizing, planning, and

self-regulating their learning. However, this individual disposition is conditioned by work demands, the need to contribute financially to the household, and scheduling conflicts with school, suggesting that while this individual situation is necessary, it is not sufficient to sustain educational progress in vulnerable contexts.

In line with Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective on development, the study's data reinforce the notion that school dropout is not due to a single factor but rather to the accumulation of adverse events and conditions over time. Thus, dropping out is more the final manifestation of prior processes involving academic difficulties, family stress, social insecurity, and a perceived lack of support.

Among the findings of this study, the protective role of perceived fairness in teacher treatment and the quality of the teacher-student relationship stands out. These factors are identified as crucial for maintaining school engagement and reducing dropout intentions, especially in vulnerable contexts. In this study, while teachers acknowledge difficulties with assignment submission, attendance, and motivation, no widespread conflict was reported, which could partially mitigate the risk of students leaving the education system. This element is particularly relevant considering that a poor teacher-student relationship is one of the strongest predictors of dropout.

Regarding the interventions, the motivational talk held before the winter break showed immediate positive effects, including a decrease in absences and an improvement in academic performance. This experience suggests that motivational reinforcement strategies, peer tutoring, and emotional support can contribute to strengthening school retention in the short term. However, their sustained effectiveness will depend on their integration with broader institutional policies aimed at ensuring greater scheduling flexibility and support for working students.

In summary, the findings suggest that while the desire to continue studying and the presence of an internal locus of control are important subjective strengths, these can be eroded in the face of critical family and economic circumstances. Therefore, preventing dropout requires comprehensive strategies that combine educational interventions, socio-emotional support, career guidance services, collaboration with families, and greater organizational flexibility for working students.

Finally, although the results are limited to a specific course and institution, they provide relevant evidence for the design of context-specific policies that address the multifactorial nature of the phenomenon and strengthen educational pathways in vulnerable contexts. Further research is suggested through longitudinal and comparative studies to broaden our understanding of school dropout and guide more effective and sustainable interventions.

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