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Academic success factors in Latin American schools: a systematic review study

Factores de éxito académico en escuelas de Latinoamérica: estudio de revisión sistemática

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify the factors contributing to academic success in elementary and secondary schools in Latin America. The PRISMA 2020 methodology was adopted, and a systematic search was conducted in two bibliographic databases using specific search terms and inclusion and exclusion criteria. The results identify various factors for academic success, which are grouped into three main categories: school context, socioeconomic and family aspects, and personal and emotional factors. The school context includes teaching methods, working conditions and teacher training, institutional infrastructure, and class management or organization. In contrast, the socioeconomic-family factor encompasses parental education, family support, the economic situation of families, and the availability of educational resources in the home. On the other hand, personal-emotional factors group together elements such as motivation, self-regulation of learning, classroom climate, or the interrelationship between classmates, attitudes, age, and maturity, among others. Considering these results, proposals for action and/or educational policies must adopt a holistic approach that takes into account all these interrelated factors and also considers the particular or contextual realities of each country in order to improve academic success.

Keywords: Student, school, learning, academic success, academic performance.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es identificar los factores de éxito académico en escuelas de educación básica y media de Latinoamérica. Se adoptó la metodología PRISMA 2020 y se realizó una búsqueda sistemática en dos bases de datos bibliográficas empleando ecuaciones y criterios específicos de inclusión y exclusión. Los resultados identifican diversos factores de éxito académico que se agrupan en tres categorías principales: contexto escolar, aspectos socioeconómicos-familiares y factores personales-emocionales. El contexto escolar incluye los métodos de enseñanza, las condiciones laborales y formación de los docentes, la infraestructura institucional y la gestión u organización de las clases. En cambio, el factor socioeconómico-familiar abarca la formación de los padres, el apoyo familiar, la situación económica de las familias y la disponibilidad de recursos educativos en el hogar. Por otro lado, los factores personales-emocionales agrupan elementos como la motivación, la autorregulación del aprendizaje, el clima de aula o la interrelación entre compañeros de clase, las actitudes, la edad y la madurez, entre otros. Las propuestas de acción y/o políticas educativas deben adoptar un enfoque holístico que contemplen los factores interrelacionados y considerar, además, realidades particulares o contextuales de cada país, para mejorar el éxito académico.

Palabras clave: Estudiante, escuela, aprendizaje, éxito escolar, rendimiento académico.

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Introduction

Various lines of research, disciplinary fields, and methodologies examine the factors that influence both school success and learning. The literature addressing these factors encompasses a wide range of possibilities: education systems, curricula, schools, types of institutional administration, management and administrators; organization, organizational climate, interpersonal relationships, the classroom, and discipline; teachers and their performance, their relationships with students, and their educational philosophy; students, their habits and customs; their families, and even the communities in which they live, among others. Moreover, these factors may interact to influence school success or learning (Sánchez, 2017).

Latin American countries share certain common characteristics, such as educational inequality, the technological divide, segregation (Krüger, 2020), poverty, cultural and idiosyncratic factors, as well as students' low performance on international knowledge assessments. In this regard, Arias Ortiz et al. (2023) maintain that the results of the 2022 assessment administered by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) place Latin American and Caribbean countries below the global rankings in terms of educational quality.

Despite these limitations, regional disparities exist: countries such as Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, and Peru achieve better results than others on PISA assessments. In contrast, countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Paraguay rank among the lowest (Arias Ortiz et al., 2023). Nevertheless, it should be noted that international assessments do not capture the full complexity of the educational phenomenon, nor do they explore in depth the causes of school success and failure or the contextual realities of each education system.

Cossio (2018), for his part, argues that Latin America has an educational tradition that originated from schools of thought, other traditions present in the region, and its own educational practices. At the core of this tradition are principles aimed at liberation and independence, that is, at "emancipation," through the proposal of a critical pedagogy and didactics. This tradition emphasizes the educational issues and particularities of the specific context.

Regarding factors associated with academic performance, Tene-Tenempaguay et al. (2024), in a systematic review, focus on factors affecting performance in Mathematics, Science, and Reading among Latin American students. The authors conclude that a variety of factors have a positive influence on performance, including families' socioeconomic status, parental expectations, students' gender, the tasks assigned by teachers, school and classroom climate, teacher leadership, school infrastructure, the availability of educational resources at home, teacher support for students, the economic development of the school district, school characteristics (private or public), culture and civic participation, the appropriate use of information and communication technologies (ICT), interpersonal relationships, teacher training and teaching strategies, as well as family support, participation in extracurricular activities, and students' intrinsic motivation.

On the other hand, Tene-Tenempaguay et al. (2024) also identify factors that negatively affect academic performance, such as child labor, grade repetition, bullying, student absenteeism, family structure, unrealistic parental expectations (which generate pressure), traditional teaching methods that fail to engage students, classroom climate, shortages of teaching staff, inadequate school infrastructure, lack of financial resources, exposure to crime or violence, the location of the educational institution, the population's economic situation, national culture, and the lack of educational resources.

Real-Delor et al. (2024), in a study entitled *Factors Associated with Academic Performance among University Students in Latin America in 2023*, which includes students from Paraguay, Peru, Chile, and Cuba, conclude that family support is one of the determining factors in academic performance; conversely, family dysfunction is associated with poor academic performance.

Other studies focus on higher education and specific countries. For example, Bonastre Ramírez (2023) investigates factors affecting academic performance

among students pursuing a bachelor's degree in Education Sciences and concludes that factors such as the following have a favorable influence on learning:

> …motivation, family support, educational resources, quality of teaching […] setting clear goals, engaging in effective planning, maintaining good organization, managing time appropriately, seeking help when necessary, maintaining a positive attitude, and showing consistent dedication and effort in one's studies. (p. 1185)

Individual circumstances, such as being employed, may also affect academic performance. In this regard, the study finds that working students face greater challenges, including lack of time and stress, and achieve lower academic outcomes (Bonastre Ramírez, 2023).

Abramo Acuña et al. (2025), for their part, address factors contributing to educational success in the Paraguayan context through qualitative interview-based research and identify four aspects that influence academic success: individual, family, school, and community factors.

Within this context, the objective of this study is to identify the factors associated with school success or learning; that is, to determine the common denominator, similarities, and variables that explain school success. The study is justified by the need to understand these factors and generate relevant information for evidence-based decision-making and the development of educational policies, while also contributing to the broader discussion.

Methodology

The systematic review follows the methodology established in the PRISMA 2020 Statement. It explores information from two scientific literature databases: *Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus*. According to Gregorio-Chaviano et al. (2022), WoS provides access to a large number of scientific journals across various research fields. Scopus, on the other hand, according to Chaparro-Martínez et al. (2016), is one of the largest international databases of scientific literature.

The systematic search was conducted between November and December 2024 using a search equation with keywords and Boolean operators to ensure the largest possible number of results aligned with the objective of the study. In WoS, the following search equation was used: («secondary* education*» OR «middle* education*» OR «primary* education*» OR «basic* education* OR «school education» OR «education elemental» OR «school basic education») AND («learning* factors*» OR «achievement factors» OR «achievement» OR «school performance factors» OR «determinants of educational success» OR «school performance variables» OR «elements of school success»), which yielded 141,003 results.

In Scopus, the following search equation was used, differing only in some input characters: (secondary education OR middle education OR primary education OR basic education OR school education OR education elemental OR school basic education) AND (learning factors OR achievement factors OR achievement OR school performance factors OR determinants of educational success OR school performance variables OR elements of school success). This search yielded 5,656 results, including all document types. Subsequently, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to filter and refine the results, as shown in Table 1.

Regarding the rationale for applying these criteria, scientific articles were selected because they are a publication format that meets standards of scientific rigor, as they have undergone peer review or evaluation, which to some extent ensures their quality. With regard to the time frame, the most recent five-year period (2020–2024) was selected because it provides up-to-date information, which is considered important given the dynamic nature of science as a form of knowledge.

With respect to fields of knowledge, articles classified under the social sciences and arts and humanities were selected because these fields are related to pedagogy or educational sciences. Furthermore, for reasons of financial feasibility, only articles available through open access were included.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria used in the database search.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Document type	Scientific articles	Theses, books, and others
Time period or years of publication	2020–2024	After 2024 and before 2020
Fields of knowledge	Scopus: Social Sciences, Psychology, Arts and Humanities **W**oS: Education & Educational Research, Educational Psychology, Management	Basic sciences and other fields not mentioned in the inclusion column
Article accessibility	Open-access articles	Restricted-access articles
Language	Spanish and Portuguese	English, French, Italian, and others
Countries/Regions	Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay, Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia	Countries that are not part of Latin America or that have no publications in the databases searched

Likewise, only publications in Spanish and Portuguese were considered, as these are languages spoken in Latin American countries. Finally, only South American countries were included, since they share common elements and characteristics, such as inequality, history, socioeconomic conditions, rurality, among others.

Although the application of these inclusion and exclusion criteria may have resulted in the loss of relevant information, the aim was to ensure the quality of the sources consulted (scientific articles reviewed by peer evaluators), the currency of the data (the most recent five years), and, above all, alignment with the objective of the study.

The screening process carried out through the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria reduced the number of articles, with the total decreasing at each filtering stage. The application of these criteria ultimately resulted in 152 articles in WoS (Table 2) and 16 in Scopus (Table 3).

Subsequently, all abstracts were translated for further analysis, using the research objective— “To identify the factors associated with academic success in basic and secondary education schools in Latin America”— as a reference. Abstracts that did not provide relevant information were excluded.

Table 2. Results obtained from WoS.

Criteria	WoS
Initial search	141,003
Open-access scientific articles	63,089
Publication year 2020–2024	41,690
Spanish and Portuguese languages	573
Fields of knowledge	399
Countries/Regions	152

Table 3. Results obtained from Scopus.

Criteria	Scopus
Initial search	5,656
Publication year 2020–2024	3,070
Fields of knowledge	2,259
Spanish and Portuguese languages	37
Countries/Regions	16

The process of synthesizing and selecting the factors was carried out on the basis of the screened articles by extracting their results. These were then prioritized, organized, and grouped according to the emerging categories: school context, socioeconomic and family factors, and personal and emotional conditions.

It should be noted that data analysis was conducted with the support of the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (version 2025), which made it possible to code and group the data, generate code networks, and present the results through mind maps and concept maps establishing relationships among the categories and subcategories.

Results

The results are presented under three main categories: school context, socioeconomic and family factors, and, finally, personal and emotional factors.

School Context as a Factor in Academic Performance

Several studies indicate that the school context plays a decisive role in academic success. This category includes three subcategories: institutional infrastructure, teachers, and school and classroom organization (Figure 1).

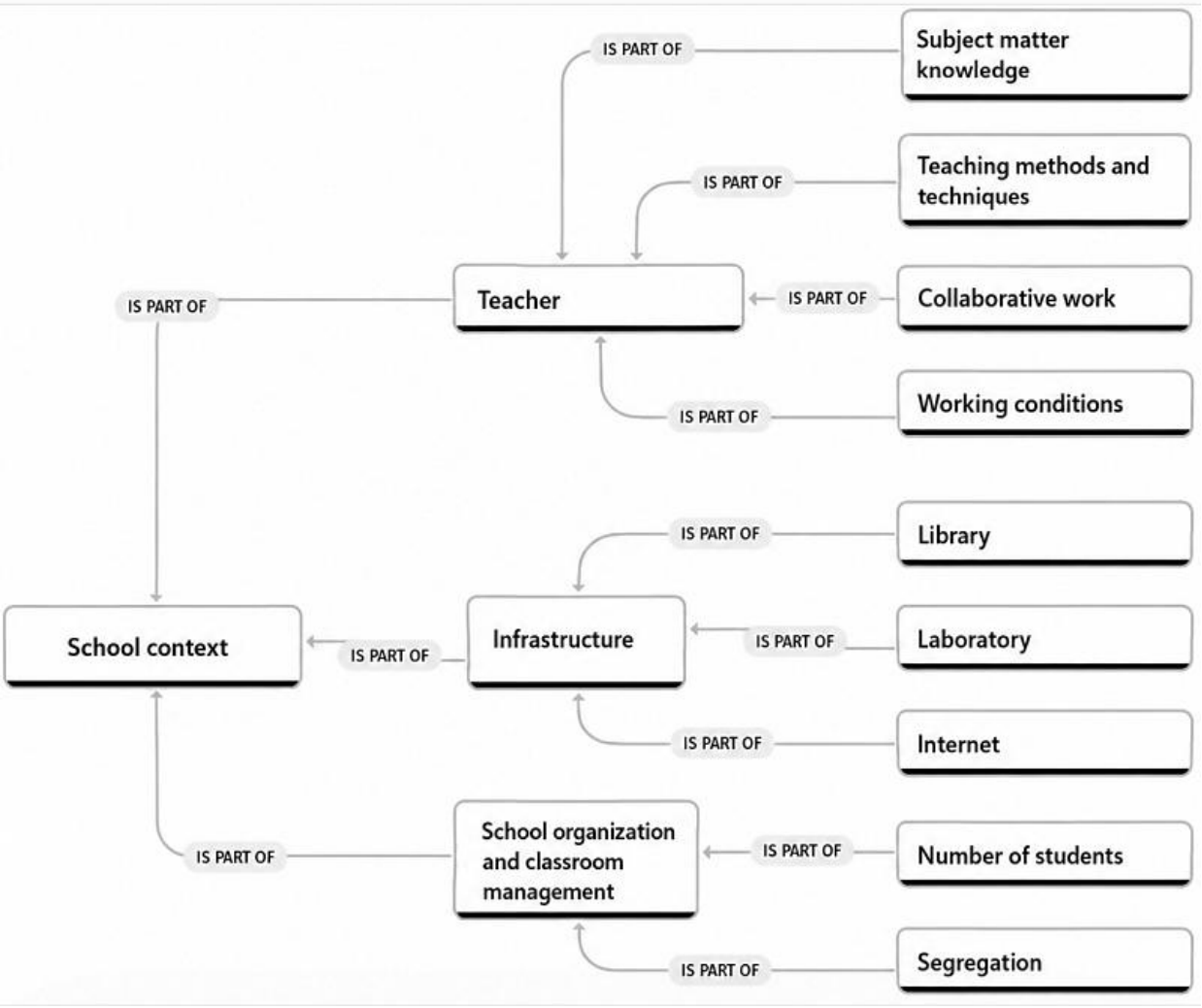

Figure 1. School context as a factor in academic performance.

Regarding *school and classroom organization*, some studies indicate that there is a relationship between the number of students per class and academic performance. Both Guedes et al. (2021) and Araujo et al. (2021) conclude that the number of students per classroom is a relevant factor in academic performance. Other studies point to classroom climate as a determining factor. Vera et al. (2021) mention

student indiscipline as a variable associated with poor academic performance.

Another variable within school and classroom organization that negatively influences performance is segregation, a characteristic of Latin American education systems. Bello (2021) maintains that segregation consists of grouping students according to socioeconomic status. This segregation benefits students from higher socioeconomic strata but worsens conditions for students from lower socioeconomic strata, thereby contributing to greater inequality. In this regard, Krüger (2020) points out that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds generally attend schools with a similar socioeconomic composition, a situation that reinforces their initial disadvantage.

Murillo and Carrillo (2021), for their part, maintain that segregation negatively affects learning and school effectiveness: "[…] the concentration of students from families with lower socioeconomic levels in a school results in lower performance […], whereas the concentration of students from families with higher socioeconomic levels results in better performance…" (pp. 1–2). However, segregation does not occur solely on socioeconomic grounds; there are other, less visible forms of student segregation. López et al. (2020) conducted a study on school segregation according to students' sex and abilities. According to these authors:

> […] male and poor students are subjected to more punitive practices, and ability grouping is widely used in Chilean schools, particularly in schools that provide only secondary education. The use of punitive practices is more frequent in schools that organize their classrooms according to academic ability. (p. 30)

Other studies identify the influence of factors associated with *teachers*, such as their working conditions, teaching and learning methods and techniques, the way in which they work collectively within the institution, and their mastery of the subject taught. Araujo et al. (2021) demonstrated in their research the positive influence of teacher remuneration on their performance. Dueñas-Herrera et al. (2020) studied educational quality in schools operating under public-private partnerships (PPPs) and concluded that the quality of teachers' employment contracts, as well as government oversight of their work, has a positive impact on educational outcomes. Along the same lines, Guedes et al. (2021) also identified teacher regularity as one of the indicators of performance.

Rodríguez and Navarrete (2020) concluded that Mathematics teachers' in-depth knowledge, or mastery of the subject they teach, has a positive impact on student learning. Álvarez and Sepúlveda (2024), for their part, use the concept of *collective efficacy* and maintain that purposeful collaboration among teachers is associated with improved learning. In this context, collaborative practices such as learning communities, group work, leadership, and teamwork become particularly relevant.

Ortega et al. (2022) highlight the importance of *school infrastructure*, such as a well-equipped library, internet access, and other teaching resources, in achieving better performance on assessments. Likewise, Miranda and Treviño (2020), based on research into student performance in Chile and Paraguay, reveal that early childhood or preschool education has a significant positive impact on future academic performance.

Drawing an analogy with the systematic review conducted by Tene-Tenempaguay et al. (2024), there is considerable agreement regarding aspects such as classroom climate, teachers' instructional strategies, school infrastructure, and educational resources. However, the present study identifies additional aspects that broaden the range of performance factors, such as teachers' working conditions, student segregation, and the number of students per class, all of which may either enhance or negatively affect learning.

The foregoing indicates that educational policies should be aimed at strengthening schools, not only in terms of their infrastructure but also the people who work in them, particularly teachers, by improving their working conditions and providing continuing professional development that enables them to

conduct their classes more effectively and foster learning. Aspects of school management and organization should also be considered, including how students are supported, how teaching is carried out, and the number of students per classroom, among others.

Socioeconomic and Family Factors

The sociodemographic context of the school is another factor affecting academic performance. Bazán-Ramírez et al. (2020) maintain that learning depends to a large extent on families' socioeconomic, demographic, and educational circumstances. In other words, students from low-income families (rural, Indigenous, etc.) obtain lower scores on knowledge assessments than their peers from families of higher socioeconomic status who, for example, attend private schools. Along the same lines, Muñoz et al. (2022) maintain that there is a correlation between family support and a history of educational excellence in middle or secondary education, on the one hand, and academic success, on the other. Lombana and Cabeza (2024), for their part, conclude that a student is more likely to succeed if their mother holds a postgraduate degree and if they have access to the internet and a computer.

Similarly, Coca et al. (2020) consider the role of families to be decisive in learning, while Palacios et al. (2023) use the concept of *positive parenting* as a factor associated with high academic performance. According to these authors, a favorable family environment or ecosystem has a positive influence on learning.

Míguez (2023), meanwhile, concludes that the availability of educational resources at home is associated with student performance, even more strongly than school infrastructure. On this point, Muñoz and Mendoza (2023) maintain that children of parents with high socioeconomic status who were born abroad stand out for their high performance in Mathematics on Chile's Education Quality Measurement System (SIMCE) assessments. These students belong to a high socioeconomic group and attend private educational institutions. In addition, the authors maintain that the variable "mother's level of education" is directly proportional to academic performance.

Likewise, Lucena and Dos Santos (2020), in a study conducted in Brazil, conclude that secondary school students from higher-income families who attend private schools demonstrate better academic performance. In summary, socioeconomic and family factors encompass several aspects that may have either a negative or positive influence on school success, as summarized in Figure 2.

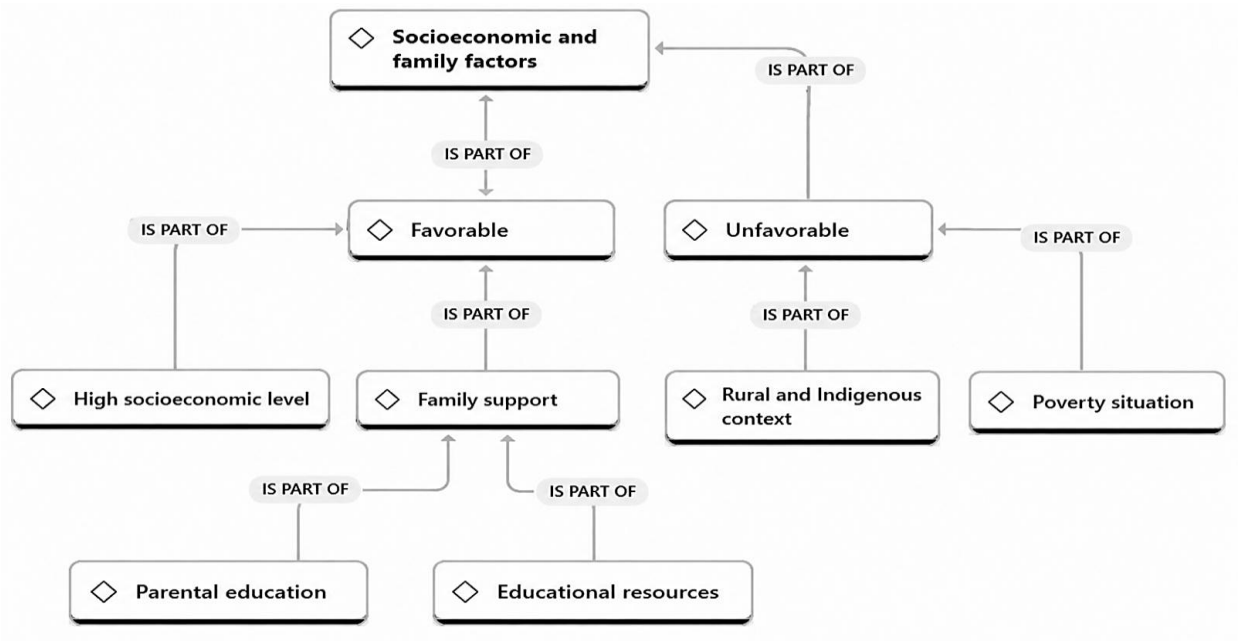

Figure 2. Socioeconomic and family factors and their relationship with school success.

These results show a high degree of agreement with other studies (Abramo Acuña et al., 2025; Real-Delor et al., 2024; Tene-Tenempaguay et al., 2024), which highlight the importance of family support and the availability of educational resources at home, as well as economic factors and parents' educational attainment. However, a relevant finding identified in this study is the importance of the mother's educational attainment (Abramo Acuña et al., 2025; Lombana & Cabeza, 2024; Muñoz & Mendoza, 2023). This may be associated with the role that mothers generally assume within the household: performing domestic work and being more closely involved in supporting their children, unlike fathers (men), who generally work outside the home.

The influence of socioeconomic and family factors poses a challenge for public policies, given the characteristics of Latin American countries, with their high levels of inequality, poverty (Krüger, 2020), and family dysfunction. It also reveals another reality: schools cannot accomplish everything on their own and require external factors that contribute to achieving educational objectives.

Personal and Emotional Factors

Various studies demonstrate the existence of personal and emotional factors that influence academic performance and involve both teachers and students, including self-regulated learning, students' attitudes, teachers' expectations, and students' age or maturity and sex (Figure 3).

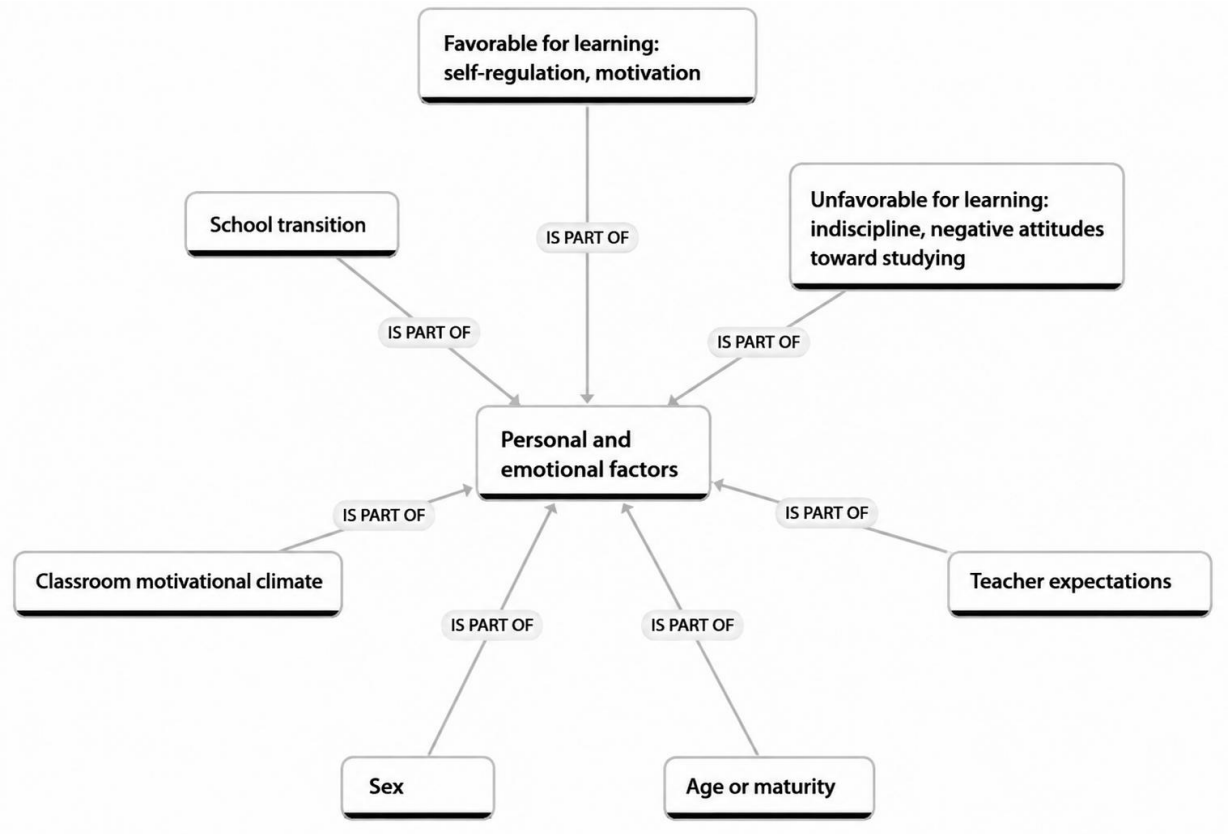

Figure 3. Personal and emotional factors influencing school success.

In the Chilean context, both Vera et al. (2021) and Sáez-Delgado et al. (2023) found that self-regulation correlates with learning. Vera et al. (2021) highlight the importance of academic self-concept, self-regulation strategies, and study monitoring as factors that influence learning. Conversely, indiscipline and the attribution of failure to external causes are associated with poor academic performance.

In Ecuador, Palacios et al. (2023) found that autonomous learning is more prevalent among female students than among their male counterparts. Muñoz et al. (2022) found a correlation between age-related

maturity and other factors such as family support, a history of academic excellence in previous studies, and motivation to achieve academic excellence.

Míguez (2023), for his part, concludes that student behaviors such as absenteeism and bullying negatively affect learning. Likewise, Reis and Nogueira (2021) maintain that:

> […] several factors affect students during this school transition, such as entering adolescence, adapting to a new school culture, the shift from having a single teacher to having multiple teachers, the demands of school subjects, the fragmentation of time and space, and relationships between students and teachers (p. 1).

In Chile, Gelber et al. (2021) found that language and other aspects such as race, discrimination, and prejudice were factors associated with the poor academic performance of students from Haiti, Bolivia, and the Dominican Republic. In contrast, with regard to students from Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela who achieved better performance in writing, the study showed that they had higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy and that their teachers had higher expectations of them.

Chiarino et al. (2024), for their part, use the concept of classroom motivational climate (CMC) and recommend further research into this area:

> Variables to be incorporated into future studies of CMC include student psychological variables (self-efficacy, academic emotions, psychological well-being, procrastination, academic persistence), teacher psychological variables (personal and collective teacher self-efficacy), and other dimensions of classroom climate (peer support climate). (p. 9)

Yupanqui-Lorenzo et al. (2023) maintain that self-efficacy has an impact on students' procrastination behaviors and recommend developing programs focused on stress management and improving self-regulation of learning.

Although several studies, such as those by Tene-Tenempaguay et al. (2024), Bonastre Ramírez (2023), and Abramo Acuña et al. (2025), mention aspects such as motivation, gender, and interpersonal and individual variables, they did not explicitly refer to self-regulation, self-efficacy, depression, anxiety, self-concept, disposition and attitudes toward school, age […], which were identified as determinants of academic performance in the present study.

Discussion

Education, as well as academic performance, constitutes a complex reality in which multiple factors converge. These factors generally do not operate in isolation but rather correlate and interact with one another in determining students' school success. Therefore, this reality requires a holistic approach involving not only the State but also families and society as a whole.

One of the factors influencing school success is the school context and its internal realities, that is, the school itself: its infrastructure, library, laboratory, and internet access; teachers, their training, working conditions, and the teaching techniques they employ; the organization of instructional activities, the use of spaces, and classrooms. Several studies identify this factor (Abramo Acuña et al., 2025; Tene-Tenempaguay et al., 2024). However, the present study identifies additional elements that broaden this perspective, such as teachers' working conditions, student segregation, and the number of students per class.

Another decisive factor in school success is the socioeconomic and family variable, in agreement with studies conducted by Tene-Tenempaguay et al. (2024), Bonastre Ramírez (2023), Abramo Acuña et al. (2025), and Real-Delor et al. (2024), which have identified family and socioeconomic factors as variables associated with school success. In other words, students who belong to families of high socioeconomic status and receive family support achieve better academic outcomes.

In addition, personal and emotional factors constitute another variable that has an impact on school success: students' own motivation, the attitudes they

adopt toward studying, self-regulation, self-concept, age, maturity, among others. In this regard, Bonastre Ramírez (2023) notes that motivation, setting clear goals, planning one's studies, effective time management, a positive attitude, and sustained dedication are factors that contribute to academic performance.

The various studies analyzed in this research provide certain guidelines that may be considered when developing improvement initiatives and implementing educational policies at both the macro and micro levels. Therefore, based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Strengthen schools, particularly those located in geographically and socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts; provide them with better infrastructure, improve teachers' working conditions, and strengthen teacher training through continuing professional development. In addition, collaborative work among teachers should be implemented in educational institutions in order to foster what Álvarez and Sepúlveda (2024) refer to as *collective efficacy*.
2. Prevent school segregation and implement mechanisms to involve families in their children's education, thereby supporting schools and creating an environment conducive to school success (*positive parenting*).
3. Address personal and emotional factors affecting academic performance through psychological support, programs, and projects that promote the development of autonomy, self-regulation, and self-esteem, particularly during critical and transitional periods such as adolescence.
4. Take students' mother tongue into account in classroom instruction, particularly in Paraguay, which is characterized by its bilingualism and where other non-official Indigenous languages are also spoken. Furthermore, early childhood education coverage should be strengthened or expanded, considering that it is also a factor that influences academic performance at higher educational levels (Miranda & Treviño, 2020).
5. Finally, it is important to take into account the context and the particular realities of each country, region, and school before implementing any action aimed at promoting school success.

Author contributions

Luciano Román Medina: Research coordination, writing of the final report. Manuel Octavio Sánchez Avilés: Methodological framework, development of the systematic search equation, review and revision of the article. Alexis Franco Benítez: Literature review, systematization of information, and preparation of references. Paola Beatriz Gaona: Literature review, systematization of information, and preparation of references.

Research data availability

The data analyzed are available and may be requested from the lead author.

Peer review comments

This article underwent an anonymous peer-review process in accordance with the journal's editorial transparency policy. The reviewers, who participated anonymously in this process, consented to the publication of the comments issued during the review.

Reviewer Comment 1: The manuscript requires major revision, and the authors are encouraged to address these issues comprehensively, following the recommendations provided in the review (see attached file), before it can be published. The revisions recommended following the review of the manuscript are intended to strengthen its potentially valuable contribution to the field.

Reviewer Comment 2: Publish once the author has made the revisions outlined in the review recommendations.

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