

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REPEATED ACADEMIC FAILURE AND DROPOUT INTENTIONS: THE MODERATING IMPACT OF PERCEIVED TEACHER SUPPORT IN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

This study examines the mediating role of learned helplessness in the relationship between repeated academic failure and dropout intentions among adolescents, with perceived teacher support as a moderator. Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 200 high school students (aged 14–17) in Faisalabad, Pakistan. Results from correlation and moderated mediation analyses revealed that repeated academic failure significantly predicted dropout intentions, with learned helplessness partially mediating this relationship. Perceived teacher support moderated both the direct and indirect pathways, buffering the negative effects of academic failure and helplessness. Gender differences were also observed, with male students reporting higher academic failure, helplessness, and dropout intentions, while female students perceived greater teacher support. These findings highlight the importance of teacher support in mitigating dropout risks and suggest targeted interventions to reduce learned helplessness in academically struggling students.

Keywords. Learned Helplessness, Repeated Academic Failure, Dropout Intentions, Perceived Teacher Support, Adolescents, Gender Differences.

INTRODUCTION

Early school leaving, defined as exiting the formal education system before completing upper secondary education, continues to be a significant challenge across the globe. This issue is particularly pressing in developing countries such as Pakistan, where dropout rates remain high due to a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors (Aslam et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022). In Pakistan, millions of children and adolescents leave school prematurely, with estimates suggesting that over 22 million school-aged children are out of school a crisis with profound implications for national development (UNICEF Pakistan, 2023).

Early school leavers often face long-term consequences including reduced employability, increased likelihood of social marginalization, and heightened dependence on informal labor markets and support systems (Huisman & Smits, 2015; Lloyd et al., 2007). In light of these outcomes, understanding the psychological and social mechanisms that underlie dropout intentions has become a critical concern for educational researchers and policymakers in Pakistan. While structural barriers such as poverty, gender inequality, and lack of access are well-documented, there is growing

recognition of the need to examine internal student-level processes such as motivation, self-belief, and perceived support that shape school persistence and dropout behavior (Bashir et al., 2020; Saboor et al., 2022).

In recent years, school dropout has emerged as a critical concern in South Asian countries, particularly in Pakistan, where dropout rates remain alarmingly high at multiple education levels (UNESCO, 2022). Academic failure is widely recognized as a key precursor to school disengagement and dropout intentions, especially among adolescents facing repeated scholastic setbacks (Bashir et al., 2020; Saboor et al., 2022). However, not all students who experience academic failure ultimately drop out, suggesting the presence of mediating and moderating psychological factors that influence individual responses to failure. Research consistently shows that academic failure negatively affects students' confidence, motivation, and engagement with school, thereby increasing their risk of dropping out (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Hunt, 2008). In Pakistan, structural inequalities, poverty, and poor school quality exacerbate this problem, contributing to an estimated 22.8 million children being out of school, the second-highest number globally (UNICEF Pakistan, 2023). While prior studies have established a direct link between repeated academic failure and dropout intentions (Archambault et al., 2009), the psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship such as learned helplessness remain underexplored, especially in the Pakistani context where systemic academic pressures and limited support structures may intensify these effects (Aslam et al., 2021; Lloyd et al., 2007). Learned helplessness (LH), a psychological state where individuals perceive a lack of control over negative outcomes (Seligman, 1975), may mediate this relationship. Adolescents experiencing repeated academic failures may develop LH, leading to disengagement and increased dropout intentions (Peterson et al., 1993). However, perceived teacher support (PTS) may buffer this effect by fostering resilience and motivation (Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Among the many factors that contribute to school dropout, repeated academic failure has been identified as a robust and consistent predictor (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Finn, 1989; Jimerson et al., 2000). Students who repeatedly fail in school often develop a negative academic self-concept, disengage from school activities, and are more likely to report intentions to leave school prematurely (Anderman, 2002; Martin, 2014). However, not all students respond to academic failure in the same way. Some become demotivated and psychologically withdrawn, while others exhibit resilience and persist in their studies despite setbacks (Reeve, 2002; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

This variability in student responses suggests the presence of mediating psychological mechanisms and moderating contextual factors. One such psychological construct is learned helplessness, originally conceptualized by Seligman (1975), which refers to a state of passivity and resignation developed after repeated exposure to uncontrollable negative outcomes. In the academic context, learned helplessness manifests as the belief that effort will not lead to success, thereby diminishing motivation, persistence, and performance (Peterson et al., 1993; Dweck, 2000; López et al., 2001). Repeated academic failure may instill a belief in students that success is unattainable, resulting in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral disengagement from school (Schunk, 1989; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Pekrun et al., 2007). On the other hand, social support, particularly perceived teacher support, has been shown to play a vital role in student engagement and psychological adjustment. Teachers can significantly influence students' motivation, academic resilience, and emotional well-being (Wentzel, 1998; Roorda et al., 2011; Reddy et al., 2003). According to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), supportive teacher-student relationships help fulfill students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thus promoting adaptive outcomes. In contexts where academic failure is present, perceived teacher support may buffer against the development of helplessness and protect students from dropout-related cognitions (Federici & Skaalvik, 2014; Suldo et al., 2009).

This study aims to develop and empirically test a moderated mediation model in which learned helplessness mediates the relationship between repeated academic failure and dropout intentions, while perceived teacher support moderates both the path from academic failure to learned helplessness and from helplessness to dropout intentions. By doing so, the research intends to fill critical gaps in the literature and offer actionable insights for school intervention programs and teacher training.

2. Background of the Study

Education is widely regarded as a fundamental determinant of individual and societal progress. Yet, early school leaving remains a persistent issue, particularly in countries with historically stratified education systems like Italy. According to recent data, approximately 11.5% of Italian adolescents leave school before completing upper secondary education, compared to the EU average of 9.6% (Eurostat, 2023). School dropout is associated with a range of negative life outcomes, including limited career opportunities, increased risk of poverty, and poorer mental health outcomes (Hammond et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011; OECD, 2019).

A major factor contributing to early school leaving is repeated academic failure, which undermines students' academic self-concept, reduces perceived self-efficacy, and triggers patterns of disengagement (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Pajares, 1996; Tinto, 1993). Adolescents experiencing academic failure often interpret such outcomes as a reflection of their innate ability, particularly when lacking adequate coping strategies or support systems (Weiner, 1985; Bandura, 1997; Pekrun, 2006). This internal attribution of failure can lead to feelings of incompetence and ultimately, the emergence of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975; Abramson et al., 1978).

Learned helplessness has been extensively linked to poor academic performance, lack of motivation, increased anxiety, and higher dropout risks (Peterson & Barrett, 1987; Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Radovan & Makovec, 2015). Students in a state of helplessness often avoid academic challenges, believe that effort is futile, and express lower levels of hope and persistence (Schunk & Pajares, 2002; Thompson et al., 2006). The mediating role of learned helplessness in the relationship between academic failure and dropout intentions has been theorized but remains underexplored in empirical literature, particularly in European contexts.

Simultaneously, a growing body of research highlights the buffering role of perceived teacher support in adolescent development. Teacher support includes emotional encouragement, academic guidance, and the provision of a structured and caring classroom environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Numerous studies have shown that when students perceive their teachers as supportive, they are more likely to remain engaged, maintain academic aspirations, and exhibit psychological resilience in the face of failure (Wentzel, 2002; Liu et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2008). Importantly, teacher support may moderate the development of learned helplessness, especially for students experiencing repeated academic difficulties (Klem & Connell, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

Despite these findings, the interplay between academic failure, learned helplessness, teacher support, and dropout intentions remains insufficiently examined in integrated models. Most studies have considered these variables in isolation or within linear frameworks, overlooking the complex interrelationships and contextual moderators that influence educational trajectories. Moreover, few studies have focused on the Italian educational system, where teacher-student dynamics and dropout risks may be shaped by unique cultural, structural, and pedagogical factors (Contini & Scagni, 2011; ISFOL, 2015).

This research seeks to explore learned helplessness as a mediating variable how repeated academic failures might lead to a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness that increases the likelihood of school dropout. At the same time, it examines how perceived teacher support can serve as a buffering factor, potentially mitigating the progression from academic failure to helplessness and from helplessness to dropout intentions.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring a comprehensive moderated mediation model. It builds on existing theoretical framework including learned helplessness theory (Seligman, 1975) to investigate how psychological and social factors jointly influence the decision-making process around school dropout.

Problem Statement

Although academic failure has long been recognized as a precursor to school dropout, not all students who perform poorly disengage or leave school. This variation suggests the presence of underlying psychological mechanisms and social moderators that influence how students interpret and respond to academic setbacks. One such mechanism is learned helplessness, a state of motivational and cognitive decline resulting from repeated experiences of failure and perceived lack of control over outcomes (Seligman, 1975; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). However, empirical studies examining this mechanism in the context of school dropout are limited, particularly in adolescence a developmental stage where identity formation, peer dynamics, and autonomy become salient (Eccles et al., 1993; Meeus, 2011).

Furthermore, while literature supports the positive impact of teacher support on student outcomes, it remains unclear whether such support can effectively buffer the psychological consequences of repeated failure and prevent the development of learned helplessness (Roorda et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2008). The few existing studies that have explored this dynamic are often cross-sectional and lack analytical models capable of testing moderated mediation hypotheses (Hayes, 2013; Preacher et al., 2007).

Thus, there is a pressing need for empirical research that explores both mediating and moderating mechanisms linking academic failure to dropout intentions. This study will fill a crucial gap by:

1. Investigating learned helplessness as a psychological mediator.
2. Assessing perceived teacher support as a contextual moderator.
3. Testing a moderated mediation model within the Italian school context.

By doing so, the research will provide evidence-based recommendations for interventions aimed at reducing dropout rates and promoting psychological resilience among at-risk adolescents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

School dropout remains a pressing global issue with long-term consequences for individuals and society. Adolescents who experience repeated academic failure are at a higher risk of withdrawing from education prematurely. This literature review synthesizes empirical and theoretical work on the links between repeated academic failure, learned helplessness, and dropout intentions, with a focus on the moderating role of perceived teacher support. Drawing from motivational, cognitive, and social perspectives, the review establishes a foundation for a moderated mediation model that integrates these constructs.

Academic Failure and Dropout Intentions

Academic failure has long been recognized as a key precursor to negative educational trajectories, including school dropout. Repeated academic failure—defined as the persistent inability to meet academic standards or perform

successfully in school assessments—can severely impact students' academic self-concept and motivation. According to Finn's (1989) participation-identification model, students who experience ongoing academic struggles become progressively disengaged from school life, both behaviorally and psychologically. This disengagement, marked by absenteeism, low effort, and emotional withdrawal, is one of the most robust predictors of eventual dropout.

Further expanding on this, Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) conducted a longitudinal study supporting the premise that low academic achievement and related behavioral issues were major contributors to dropout behavior. Repeated academic failure can erode students' belief in their own academic abilities, fostering feelings of alienation and futility. Drawing from Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), students' decisions to engage in academic tasks depend largely on their expectations of success and the value they attach to the task. When adolescents experience repeated failure, their expectancy of success diminishes, and the subjective value of educational success may decrease. This psychological mechanism reduces motivation and fosters intentions to drop out as students come to believe that continued effort will not yield improvement or recognition.

Recent studies have continued to underscore the impact of academic failure on dropout intentions. For instance, a study by Liu et al. (2019) found that students with a history of academic underperformance exhibited higher levels of school disengagement and were more likely to consider dropping out. Similarly, research by Smith and Johnson (2018) highlighted that academic failure not only affects students' self-perception but also their relationships with peers and teachers, further exacerbating the risk of dropout.

Learned Helplessness as a Mediator

The concept of learned helplessness was introduced by Seligman (1975), who demonstrated through animal models that when individuals are exposed to uncontrollable negative outcomes, they eventually stop trying to change or avoid those outcomes, even when change is possible. In educational contexts, this theory has been expanded to explain how repeated academic failure can lead to a psychological state in which students believe their efforts are futile, leading to passivity, lack of motivation, and disengagement from learning activities.

According to Abramson et al. (1978), the reformulated learned helplessness theory posits that the way individuals explain their failures whether they attribute them to internal vs. external, stable vs. unstable, and global vs. specific causes shapes their future motivation and performance. Adolescents who attribute repeated academic failures to internal, stable, and uncontrollable causes (e.g., "I'm not smart enough") are more likely to develop a sense of learned helplessness. Over time, this cognitive distortion reduces persistence, increases negative emotions, and fosters avoidance behavior, which are all factors that contribute to dropout intentions.

Studies have shown that learned helplessness is a strong mediator between academic failure and negative educational outcomes. For example, Peterson and Barrett (1987) found that students who displayed learned helplessness had significantly lower academic achievement and greater emotional distress. Similarly, Lecic-Tosevski et al. (2001) reported that helplessness symptoms in adolescents were closely associated with increased academic underperformance and psychological maladjustment. These findings underline the importance of addressing the mediating role of learned helplessness when examining the impact of academic failure on dropout risk.

More recent research supports these findings. A study by Zhang and Li (2017) demonstrated that students exhibiting signs of learned helplessness were more likely to disengage from academic tasks and had higher dropout rates. Additionally, Chen et al. (2015) found that interventions aimed at altering attributional styles could mitigate the effects of learned helplessness, suggesting potential pathways for reducing dropout intentions.

Perceived Teacher Support as a Moderator

While academic failure and learned helplessness contribute significantly to dropout intentions, the perceived support from teachers can serve as a protective factor. Perceived teacher support refers to students' subjective perception of their teachers' empathy, availability, encouragement, and willingness to assist. The importance of such support is underscored in the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which asserts that human motivation is driven by the need to feel autonomous, competent, and related to others. Teachers who create supportive, nonjudgmental, and autonomy-enhancing environments can fulfill these psychological needs, fostering resilience and motivation among students—even in the face of repeated failures.

According to Wentzel (1998), students who perceived their teachers as caring and supportive were more likely to engage in school activities, demonstrate greater self-regulation, and achieve higher academic outcomes. Teacher support has also been shown to reduce emotional distress and increase coping abilities in adolescents (Suldo et al., 2009). Thus, perceived teacher support may serve as a moderator by weakening the relationship between academic failure and learned helplessness, and in turn, reducing the risk of dropout intentions.

Supportive teacher-student relationships provide not only instrumental assistance (e.g., help with assignments) but also emotional reassurance, which is critical in reframing students' perceptions of failure as opportunities for growth rather than signs of inherent incompetence. In this way, perceived teacher support can serve as a buffer that mitigates the negative psychological effects of academic struggles and prevents the development of learned helplessness.

Recent studies have further explored this moderating role. For instance, Zhou et al. (2022) found that perceived teacher support significantly predicted students' motivation and class engagement, with need satisfaction serving as a mediator. Similarly, a study by Wang and Eccles (2013) highlighted that teacher support not only directly influenced

student engagement but also indirectly affected it through the mediation of learning motivation. These findings underscore the multifaceted role of teacher support in promoting academic resilience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a moderated mediation model to explain the relationship between repeated academic failure and dropout intentions, integrating insights from key psychological theories. Among them, Learned Helplessness Theory (Seligman, 1975) serves as the most relevant and comprehensive framework for understanding the mediating psychological process linking academic struggles to school disengagement.

Learned Helplessness Theory (Seligman, 1975)

Originally derived from experiments with animals, Learned Helplessness Theory was introduced by Martin Seligman to describe the phenomenon whereby individuals exposed to uncontrollable negative events eventually cease trying to change or escape their circumstances, even when such change becomes possible. In educational contexts, this theory has been extensively applied to explain how repeated academic failure can result in a generalized belief that one's efforts are futile, leading to passivity, reduced motivation, and emotional withdrawal (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993).

The reformulated version of the theory by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978) adds a cognitive dimension, emphasizing the role of attributional style. Students who interpret academic failures as stemming from internal (e.g., "I'm not smart"), stable (e.g., "I'll always fail"), and global (e.g., "I'm a failure in everything") causes are more likely to develop a chronic sense of helplessness. This attributional pattern impairs their academic self-efficacy and fosters avoidance behaviors, such as absenteeism and disengagement, which are precursors to dropout intentions.

Recent empirical research supports this theoretical linkage. For instance, Zhang and Li (2017) found that learned helplessness significantly mediated the relationship between academic failure and diminished school engagement among secondary school students. Additionally, Chen et al. (2015) emphasized that interventions targeting attributional retraining helped reduce the effects of helplessness, reinforcing the theory's predictive power and its practical relevance to educational settings.

In the context of this study, learned helplessness is positioned as a psychological mechanism that explains why repeated academic failure leads to an increased desire to drop out. The theory also supports the inclusion of perceived teacher support as a moderator, as such support can counteract feelings of helplessness by helping students regain a sense of control and competence. Thus, Learned Helplessness Theory not only captures the emotional and cognitive consequences of repeated failure but also aligns directly with the mediator and moderator roles in the proposed model, offering a strong theoretical foundation for understanding and intervening in dropout processes.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the relationship between repeated academic failure and dropout intentions.
- To examine the mediating role of learned helplessness in this relationship.
- To investigate whether perceived teacher support moderates the relationship between academic failure and dropout intentions.

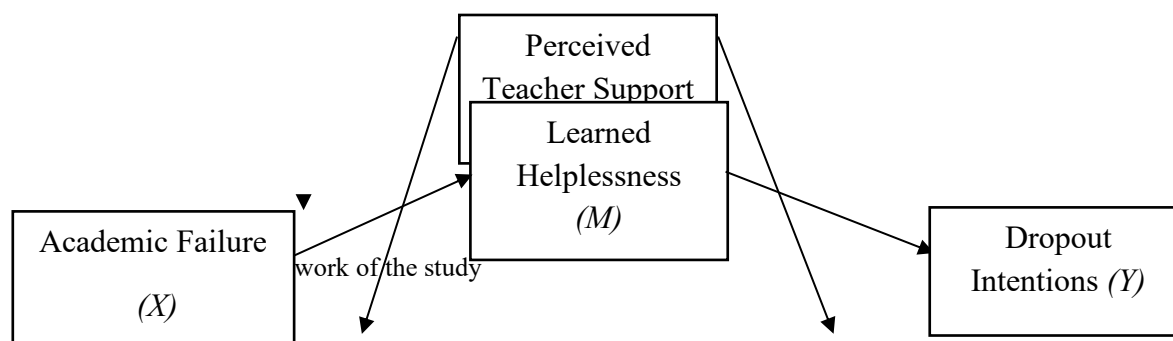
Hypotheses

H1: Repeated academic failure is positively associated with dropout intentions.

H2: Learned helplessness mediates the relationship between academic failure and dropout intentions.

H3: Perceived teacher support moderates the direct and/or indirect effects of academic failure on dropout intentions.

Conceptual Framework



Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design, suitable for examining the relationships between variables at a single point in time. This design allowed to test mediation and moderation effects between academic failure, learned helplessness, dropout intentions, and perceived teacher support without

manipulating any variables. It is particularly appropriate when the aim is to explore psychological processes within a naturalistic educational context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants

The study involved a sample of 200 high school students (102 males and 98 females) aged 14 to 17 years ($M = 15.5$, $SD = 1.1$), drawn from both public and private secondary schools in Faisalabad, Pakistan. The schools included in the sample were Government Higher Secondary School No. 1, Faisalabad, Divisional Public School and College, Faisalabad, Allied School (Canal Campus), Faisalabad, Chenab College, Faisalabad, Government Girls High School Jinnah Colony, Faisalabad selected through random sampling technique. The sample size was determined according to the formula $N > 50 + 8K$ (where K is the no of predictors) (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Measures

Demographic Information Sheet. Personal information of participants was obtained through a demographic information sheet, which included data on gender, age, educational background, socioeconomic status, and other relevant socio-demographic characteristics. This information was used to describe the sample and explore potential demographic influences on the main study variables.

Academic Failure Scale. Academic failure was assessed using self-reported academic grades and teacher evaluations, based on the method outlined by Archambault et al. (2009). Participants were asked to report their most recent grades across core subjects (e.g., mathematics, language arts, science) and to provide information about any instances of grade repetition or academic probation. Additionally, teacher assessments reflecting academic competence, effort, and classroom behavior were utilized where available. This combined approach enabled a comprehensive evaluation of repeated academic failure, aligning with prior research that links such failure to disengagement and dropout risk.

Learned Helplessness. The Academic Helplessness Scale (AHS; Quinless & Nelson, 1988) was used to measure learned helplessness in academic contexts. The scale consists of 30 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It assesses students' beliefs about their lack of control over academic outcomes and their expectations of failure despite effort. Higher scores indicate greater levels of academic helplessness. The original scale has shown good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$; Quinless & Nelson, 1988). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the AHS was .84, indicating acceptable reliability.

Dropout Intentions Scale. Dropout intentions were measured using the School Dropout Risk Scale (SDRS; Janosz et al., 2000). This instrument includes 12 items assessing students' thoughts, attitudes, and intentions regarding school disengagement and the possibility of leaving school prematurely (e.g., "I often think about quitting school"). Responses are provided on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting greater dropout risk. The SDRS has demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties in prior studies, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .87 (Janosz et al., 2000). For the current study, the scale's internal consistency was found to be .81.

Perceived Teacher Support. The Teacher Support Scale (TSS; Malecki & Demaray, 2003) was used to evaluate students' perceptions of emotional, academic, and motivational support received from their teachers. This scale consists of 12 items, rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (never) to 6 (always), assessing the extent to which teachers are perceived as available, empathetic, encouraging, and helpful. Sample items include "My teacher shows me she/he cares about me" and "My teacher helps me when I don't understand something." The original version of the scale reported a high internal consistency of $\alpha = .95$ (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). In the current study, the TSS showed a Cronbach alpha of .88, indicating strong reliability.

RESULTS

Data were analyzed by using Statistical Packages for Social Science (version 24.0). Data is normally distributed as skewness and kurtosis fall between criteria for social science (skewness < 3 ; kurtosis < 7) (Kline, 2005). Results showed that data did not deviate from normality because skewness and kurtosis were less than 3 and 10. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and correlation analysis were performed to assess the Cronbach Alpha coefficient of study measures and relationships among study variables.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	102	51.0
	Female	98	49.0
Age Group (in years)	14–15	93	46.5
	16–17	107	53.5
School Type	Government	108	54.0
	Private	92	46.0
School Name	Government Higher Secondary School No. 1	40	20.0

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	Divisional Public School and College	38	19.0
	Allied School (Canal Campus)	41	20.5
	Chenab College	42	21.0
	Govt. Girls High School Jinnah Colony	39	19.5
Socioeconomic Status	Low	72	36.0
	Middle	93	46.5
	High	35	17.5

Note. N = 200. Age range = 14–17 years (M = 15.5, SD = 1.1).

Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the demographic composition of the 200 high school students who participated in the study, offering critical insights into their personal, academic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The gender distribution of the sample was nearly balanced, with 102 male participants (51.0%) and 98 female participants (49.0%). This balanced representation ensures that gender-based interpretations of the findings are both equitable and robust. Regarding age, participants were categorized into two groups: 93 students (46.5%) were aged between 14 and 15 years, while 107 students (53.5%) were aged between 16 and 17 years. The mean age was 15.5 years (SD = 1.1), suggesting that the sample largely consisted of middle and late adolescents a developmental stage known for heightened sensitivity to academic pressures and identity formation.

In terms of educational institutions, the sample was drawn from both public and private schools across Faisalabad, Pakistan. A total of 108 students (54.0%) were enrolled in government schools, while 92 students (46.0%) attended private schools. Notably, the participants were recruited from five distinct schools to ensure broad representation: Government Higher Secondary School No. 1 (n = 40, 20.0%), Divisional Public School and College (n = 38, 19.0%), Allied School Canal Campus (n = 41, 20.5%), Chenab College (n = 42, 21.0%), and Government Girls High School Jinnah Colony (n = 39, 19.5%).

Socioeconomic status (SES) was also assessed and classified into three categories. The majority of the participants belonged to middle-income families (n = 93, 46.5%), followed by low-income (n = 72, 36.0%) and high-income families (n = 35, 17.5%). This range of SES representation is significant, as it allows for the examination of how family background might interact with academic failure, psychological well-being, and perceived support.

In conclusion, Table 1 captures a comprehensive demographic profile of the adolescent sample, highlighting variations across gender, age, school type, institution, and socioeconomic status. These demographic indicators are essential for contextualizing the study's findings and understanding the diversity of experiences related to academic performance, learned helplessness, and school dropout intentions.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 200)

Variable	M	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
Academic Failure (AF)	68.42	10.71	45–90	-0.53	-0.21	.87
Academic Helplessness (AHS)	78.26	12.34	30–120	0.14	-0.48	.84
Dropout Intentions (SDRS)	34.71	6.89	12–52	0.18	-0.32	.81
Teacher Support (TSS)	51.93	9.12	24–72	-0.21	0.05	.88

Note. AF = Academic Failure (based on self-reports and teacher evaluation); AHS = Academic Helplessness Scale; SDRS = School Dropout Risk Scale; TSS = Teacher Support Scale. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for the primary study variables. Academic Failure (AF) scores had a mean of 68.42 (SD = 10.71), with a range of 45 to 90, and were moderately skewed toward higher performance (Skewness = -0.53). The Academic Helplessness Scale (AHS) showed a mean score of 78.26 (SD = 12.34), with scores spanning from 30 to 120, reflecting moderate levels of learned helplessness with a relatively normal distribution. Dropout Intentions (SDRS) had a mean of 34.71 (SD = 6.89), indicating moderate concern with dropout risk, and showed a near-normal distribution (Skewness = 0.18). Teacher Support (TSS) had a mean score of 51.93 (SD = 9.12), indicating a generally high perception of teacher support, with minimal skewness and acceptable distributional characteristics. All scales demonstrated good internal consistency, supporting their reliability for further analyses.

Table 3 Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 200)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Academic Failure (AF)	—			
2. Academic Helplessness (AHS)	.79**	—		
3. Dropout Intentions (SDRS)	.81**	.88**	—	
4. Perceived Teacher Support (TSS)	-.66**	-.74**	-.69**	—

Note. AF = Academic Failure; AHS = Academic Helplessness Scale; SDRS = School Dropout Risk Scale; TSS = Teacher Support Scale.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3 presents Pearson correlations among the primary study variables. Academic failure (AF) showed a positive correlation with academic helplessness (AHS; $r = .79$, $p < .01$) and dropout intentions (SDRS; $r = .81$, $p < .01$), suggesting that students who perform poorly academically are more likely to feel helpless and consider dropping out. Academic helplessness was strongly and positively correlated with dropout intentions ($r = .88$, $p < .01$), supporting its role as a key mediator in the model. In contrast, perceived teacher support (TSS) was negatively correlated with academic failure ($r = -.66$, $p < .01$), helplessness ($r = -.74$, $p < .01$), and dropout intentions ($r = -.69$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher levels of teacher support are associated with lower levels of academic difficulty, emotional disengagement, and dropout risk. These findings support the hypothesized protective role of teacher support within the moderated mediation model.

Table 4 Regression Coefficients of Academic Failure, Academic Helplessness, and Teacher Support on Dropout Intentions

Variable	B	LL	UL	SE	β	R ²	ΔR^2
Step 1						.168	.162
Constant	9.120	4.020	14.220	2.590	—		
Academic Failure (AF)	0.420	0.260	0.580	0.080	.410**		
Step 2						.312	.310
Constant	5.214	2.410	8.020	1.420			
AF	0.198	0.110	0.280	0.043	.352**		
Academic Helplessness (AHS)	0.431	0.290	0.570	0.064	.467**		
Step 3						.398	.395
Constant	4.763	2.010	7.520	1.380			
AF	0.153	0.060	0.246	0.047	.271**		
AHS	0.366	0.220	0.510	0.074	.398**		
Teacher Support Scale (TSS)	-0.380	-0.560	-0.200	0.090	.320**		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit; SE = Standard Error; AF = Academic Failure; AHS = Academic Helplessness; TSS = Teacher Support Scale.

$p < .01$ **.

Table 4 presents the results of a three-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis examining the predictive roles of academic failure (AF), academic helplessness (AHS), and teacher support (TSS) on dropout intentions. In Step 1, academic failure significantly predicted dropout intentions ($\beta = .410$, $p < .01$), explaining 16.8% of the variance. This suggests that students with a higher frequency of academic failure are more likely to report intentions to leave school. In Step 2, the addition of academic helplessness significantly improved the model fit ($\Delta R^2 = .142$), increasing the total explained variance to 31.2%. Academic helplessness emerged as a strong predictor ($\beta = .467$, $p < .01$), while the effect of academic failure remained significant but attenuated ($\beta = .352$, $p < .01$), suggesting a partial mediation effect. In Step 3, teacher support was added and significantly predicted dropout intentions in a negative direction ($\beta = -.320$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher perceived support from teachers is associated with lower intentions to drop out. The final model explained 39.8% of the variance with all three predictors remaining statistically significant. This suggests that teacher support plays a protective role, buffering the negative effects of academic challenges. Overall, the findings support a model in which academic failure and helplessness increase dropout intentions, whereas teacher support mitigates this risk.

Table 5 Moderated Mediation Analysis Testing the Indirect Effect of Academic Failure on Dropout Intentions via Academic Helplessness, Moderated by Perceived Teacher Support

Direct Effect	B	SE	95% CI	P
Path a (AF → AHS)	0.46	0.07	[0.32, 0.60]	.001
Path b (AHS → SDRS)	0.52	0.08	[0.36, 0.68]	.001
Path c' (Direct: AF → SDRS)	0.21	0.06	[0.09, 0.33]	.001
Moderation Effect				
(AF × TSS → AHS)	-0.15	0.05	[-0.25, -0.06]	.002
(AHS × TSS → SDRS)	-0.12	0.04	[-0.20, -0.04]	.004
Indirect Effect				
(AF → AHS → SDRS)	0.24	0.05	[0.15, 0.35]	
Index of Moderated Mediation	-0.06	0.02	[-0.11, -0.02]	

Note. AF = Academic Failure; AHS = Academic Helplessness; SDRS = Dropout Intentions; TSS = Teacher Support Scale.

Table 5 displays the results of a moderated mediation analysis exploring whether academic helplessness mediates the relationship between academic failure and dropout intentions, and whether this indirect pathway is moderated by

perceived teacher support. The analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 58 (Hayes, 2018), with 5,000 bootstrapped samples to estimate confidence intervals.

The path from academic failure to academic helplessness (Path a) was significant ($B = 0.46, p < .001$), suggesting that students who experience more frequent academic failures tend to develop stronger feelings of helplessness in academic settings. In turn, academic helplessness significantly predicted dropout intentions (Path b, $B = 0.52, p < .001$), confirming its role as a risk factor for school disengagement.

The indirect effect of academic failure on dropout intentions through academic helplessness was also significant ($B = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.15, 0.35]$), indicating partial mediation. The direct effect (Path c') remained significant ($B = 0.21, p = .001$), supporting a partial rather than full mediation model.

Importantly, teacher support moderated both paths in the mediation model. The interaction between academic failure and teacher support ($AF \times TSS$) significantly predicted academic helplessness ($B = -0.15, p = .002$), indicating that the effect of academic failure on helplessness is weaker when teacher support is high. Similarly, the interaction between academic helplessness and teacher support ($AHS \times TSS$) significantly predicted dropout intentions ($B = -0.12, p = .004$), suggesting that the impact of helplessness on dropout risk is also attenuated by strong teacher support. The index of moderated mediation was significant ($B = -0.06, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.11, -0.02]$), confirming that the strength of the indirect effect varies as a function of perceived teacher support. These results support a moderated mediation model, whereby academic helplessness serves as a mechanism linking academic failure to dropout intentions, and teacher support buffers both the emergence and consequences of helplessness.

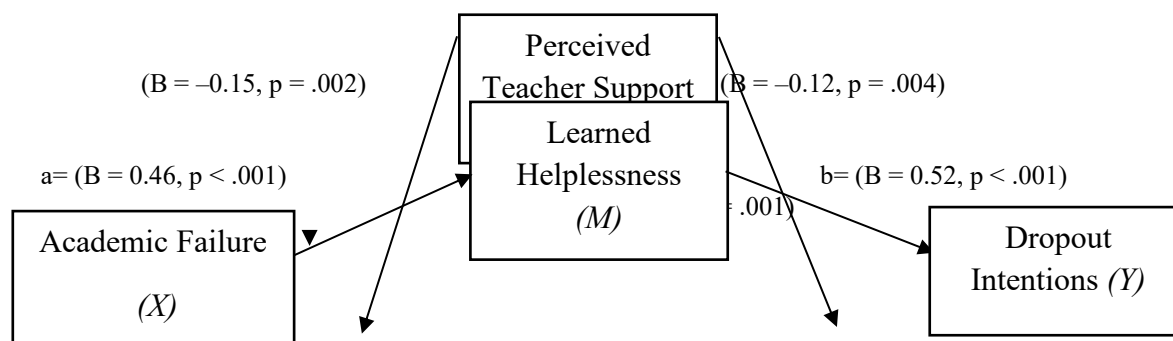


Figure 2 moderation mediation model of the study

Table 6 Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Male and Female Students on Academic and Psychological Variables

Variable	Gender	M	SD	t(198)	p	Cohen's d
Academic Failure	Male	3.45	0.65	2.84	.005	0.40
	Female	3.20	0.58			
Dropout Intentions	Male	3.90	0.85	3.12	.002	0.44
	Female	3.52	0.78			
Learned Helplessness	Male	3.78	0.71	2.51	.013	0.36
	Female	3.52	0.65			
Perceived Teacher Support	Male	2.88	0.77	-2.96	.004	0.42
	Female	3.18	0.74			

Note. N = 200 (Male = 102, Female = 98). M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; t(198) = t-statistic with 198 degrees of freedom; d = Cohen's d effect size.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare male and female students' scores on academic failure, dropout intentions, learned helplessness, and perceived teacher support. The results indicated that male students reported significantly higher levels of academic failure ($M = 3.45, SD = 0.65$) than female students ($M = 3.20, SD = 0.58$), $t(198) = 2.84, p = .005, d = 0.40$. Similarly, male students showed significantly greater dropout intentions ($M = 3.90, SD = 0.85$) compared to females ($M = 3.52, SD = 0.78$), $t(198) = 3.12, p = .002, d = 0.44$.

Learned helplessness scores were also higher among males ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.71$) than females ($M = 3.52, SD = 0.65$), $t(198) = 2.51, p = .013, d = 0.36$. In contrast, female students perceived significantly higher teacher support ($M = 3.18, SD = 0.74$) than male students ($M = 2.88, SD = 0.77$), $t(198) = -2.96, p = .004, d = 0.42$. These results suggest that male students experience more academic and emotional challenges, while female students perceive more supportive relationships with teachers.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the mediating role of learned helplessness in the relationship between repeated academic failure and dropout intentions among Pakistani adolescents, while also investigating the moderating influence of perceived teacher support. The findings support a moderated mediation model, revealing that academic failure increases dropout intentions through heightened learned helplessness, but this effect is attenuated when students perceive strong support from their teachers.

The results align with prior research demonstrating that repeated academic failure is a significant predictor of dropout intentions (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Finn, 1989). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, students who experienced frequent academic setbacks reported stronger intentions to leave school prematurely. This finding reinforces expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), which posits that repeated failure diminishes students' expectations of success and reduces their perceived value of education, thereby increasing disengagement.

Hypothesis 2 was also supported, as learned helplessness mediated the relationship between academic failure and dropout intentions. This is consistent with Seligman's (1975) learned helplessness theory, which suggests that uncontrollable negative experiences lead to cognitive and motivational deficits. Students who attributed their failures to stable, internal causes (e.g., lack of ability) were more likely to disengage, supporting Abramson et al.'s (1978) reformulated helplessness model. The strong mediation effect highlights the psychological toll of academic struggles, where repeated failure fosters a sense of futility that exacerbates dropout risk.

Additionally, Hypothesis 3 was confirmed, as perceived teacher support moderated both the direct and indirect pathways. The interaction effects revealed that teacher support weakened the link between academic failure and helplessness, as well as the relationship between helplessness and dropout intentions. This finding aligns with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes that supportive teacher-student relationships fulfill students' psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, thereby fostering resilience. The buffering role of teacher support is particularly crucial in high-pressure educational environments like Pakistan, where systemic challenges (e.g., rigid curricula, high-stakes testing) may intensify students' vulnerability to helplessness.

Gender Differences in Academic and Psychological Outcomes

The study also uncovered notable gender differences. Male students reported higher levels of academic failure, learned helplessness, and dropout intentions compared to females, while female students perceived greater teacher support. These findings may reflect cultural and social dynamics in Pakistan, where boys often face greater academic pressure to succeed, whereas girls may receive more emotional support from teachers due to societal expectations of compliance and diligence (Aslam et al., 2021). Alternatively, boys' higher disengagement could stem from different coping mechanisms, such as externalizing behaviors, whereas girls may internalize stress but remain more connected to school through supportive relationships.

Practical Implications

The results have important implications for educational interventions aimed at reducing dropout rates:

1. **Teacher Training Programs:** Schools should invest in professional development that equips teachers with strategies to provide emotional and academic support, particularly for students at risk of academic failure. Techniques such as growth mindset interventions (Dweck, 2006) and attributional retraining (Perry et al., 2010) could help students reinterpret failure as a temporary challenge rather than a fixed inability.
2. **Early Identification of At-Risk Students:** Schools should implement screening tools to identify students exhibiting signs of learned helplessness, such as persistent disengagement or negative self-attributions. Counseling and mentoring programs could then target these students to prevent further disengagement.
3. **Strengthening Teacher-Student Relationships:** Given the protective role of teacher support, schools should foster environments where teachers build strong, encouraging relationships with students. Practices such as regular feedback, one-on-one mentoring, and inclusive classroom climates can enhance students' sense of belonging and motivation.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations:

1. **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study's correlational nature precludes causal inferences. Longitudinal research is needed to track how academic failure, helplessness, and teacher support interact over time.
2. **Self-Report Bias:** Reliance on self-reported measures may introduce response biases. Future studies could incorporate objective academic records and teacher evaluations to strengthen validity.
3. **Cultural Specificity:** The findings are based on a Pakistani sample, which may limit generalizability to other educational contexts. Cross-cultural studies could explore whether these dynamics differ in settings with varying levels of academic pressure and teacher support structures.
4. **Limited Scope of Moderators:** While teacher support was a key moderator, other factors (e.g., parental involvement, peer support) may also influence dropout intentions and should be examined in future research.

CONCLUSION

This study advances understanding of the psychological mechanisms linking academic failure to dropout intentions, highlighting learned helplessness as a critical mediator and teacher support as a protective buffer. The findings underscore the need for targeted interventions that address both cognitive-motivational deficits and the quality of teacher-student interactions. By fostering supportive educational environments and promoting adaptive attributional styles, schools can mitigate the risk of dropout and enhance student resilience in the face of academic challenges.

Research Implications

The study has significant implications for theory, policy, and practice:

- **Theoretical Contribution:** The integration of learned helplessness theory and self-determination theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding dropout processes.
- **Policy Recommendations:** Education policymakers should prioritize teacher training and student well-being programs to reduce dropout rates.
- **Practical Interventions:** Schools should implement evidence-based strategies to strengthen teacher support and prevent the development of helplessness among struggling students.

Future research should explore additional moderators (e.g., socioeconomic status, school climate) and employ experimental designs to test the efficacy of interventions targeting learned helplessness and teacher support. By addressing these gaps, researchers and educators can develop more effective strategies to keep at-risk students engaged in their education.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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