

How Do Arab Higher Education Students In Israel Perceive The Role Of The School Principal In Encouraging Academic Aspirations And Guiding And Preparing Students Toward Pursuing Higher Education?

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Abstract

This research investigates how Arab higher education students in Israel understood the role of their high school principals in developing academic aspirations and encouraging them to continue to post-secondary education. A qualitative approach was taken using semi-structured interviews to conduct an inquiry with 40 Arab Bachelor's degree students regarding the emotional, strategic, and motivational leadership of their principals in the Arab education system. The findings present evidence that principals served a continuum of influential roles as motivators, strategic navigators, and emotional anchors, especially in areas of social and economic deprivation. Principals who exhibited culturally relevant leadership made an improvement to Arab students' decisions to pursue higher objectives and motivation to maintain their academic activity. This study contributes to the understanding of the significant role of principals not only as academic leaders in schools, but also as leaders of equity and social mobility for underprivileged rural and middle-class communities. The study provided seven specific implications for action for the benefit of developing topics related to principal leadership and principal leadership development to bring together empathy, agency, and vision to support students in the reconceptualization of their education or decision-making for future careers.

Keywords: High Education Arab students, academic aspirations, school principals, educational leadership, Israel, culturally responsive leadership, student motivation, educational equity, qualitative research, marginalized communities, post-secondary guidance.

1. Introduction

This study examines how Arab higher education students in Israel perceive the role of their high school principals in nurturing their academic aspirations and directing their objectives toward post-secondary education. The study's main aim is to understand how principals influence students' motivation, preparation, and immediate decision-making about their future pathways and post-secondary education. Using a qualitative methodology, and themes from 40 interviews with Bachelors' Arab students, the study concluded that principals were perceived to have a strong influence on the students' decision-making pathways and academic aspirations, especially principals who demonstrated emotional support in addition to their instructional leadership. This study, therefore, adds to the research literature about how school leadership in minority communities and specifically the Arab educational sector in Israel can play a vital role in closing systemic gaps and enhancing the potential for higher levels of educational attainment.

The research exists in the context of academic aspirations theory and the school leadership literature. Academic aspirations are defined by Pasumathi (2017) as articulations of future-oriented goals grounded in self-definition and personal growth; whereas Khattab (2015), highlights how aspirations in marginalized populations are more likely to be shaped by culture than economic means. The study emphasized the school principal's role to be not simply as a manager of teachers and infrastructure, but as a lever for opportunity, emotional resilience and

academic identity. The research sites will focus specifically on the Arab student population in Israel, a population that is uniquely disadvantaged in the academic systems of Israel due to social, economic, and political differences. Grissom and others (2021) and Maas and others (2022), point to school principals in low-density, urban environments, leverage environments to enable a better alignment of students' academic aspirations and actual and potential academic trajectories when support structures are weak or absent.

The importance of this study lies in the potential to shape educational policy and leadership development for the Arab education system in Israel. The evidence suggests that culturally relevant or socially conscious leadership practices have a real effect on student outcomes and goals for the future. The qualitative methodology, which includes semi-structured interviews and was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) thematic analysis, provided rich, student-centered stories, and offered nuanced understanding of how students experience leadership. The study concluded that principals act as motivators, strategists, and emotional support providers for their students, which has an ongoing result through the students' experiences in higher education. The study highlighted the need to have leadership development initiatives that prepare principals to respond compassionately and with cultural consciousness to the social context of their students, while creating an equitable environment. In conclusion, the findings emphasized the vital function of school leadership in developing educational resilience and social mobility for Arab students in Israel.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Students' Academic Aspirations*

Students' academic aspirations can often be described as hopes, wishes, and goals formed throughout their academic life, which represents their long-term intentions and potentially their career paths. Pasumathi (2017) states: Academic aspirations are best seen as not only where a student is at some point in time, but also who they are in relation to their future, which is a component of both their purposeful behaviors and self-development. This embodies the 'level of aspiration' which Schultz and Ricciuti (1954) regarded as a combination of expectations, hopes and satisfaction associated with performances. There are many nuances to aspirations and their use in relation to expectations, aspirations are not predicated on expectations and aspirations are idealistic as opposed to realistic, because they are based on personal and cultural values and not socio-economic (Khattab, 2015). Aspirations also have a strong role in student engagement and academic achievement as noted by Lacey and others (2022), where career goals and aspirations formed motivational aspects of students' studies. Understanding aspirations as motivations, and as indicators of behaviors that will occur in the future, helps to highlight the importance of aspirations in the academic and personal development of students (Pasumathi, 2017).

Students' academic aspirations are influenced by several factors, including characteristics of themselves and, as in this example, their families. Usually individual characteristics such as gender, previous academic performance, and the academic ambitions of peers will play important roles in estimating students' aspirations. Women's aspirations exceed those of men, to a significant extent and possibly because they have been benefitting from gender and equality legislation and policies enacted over the past several decades. Academic performance is critical in that students with better grades have a greater likelihood of pursuing higher education (Wicht et al., 2020). Peers also influence academic aspirations, as students with ambitious academic peers will aspire to set higher educational goals themselves. This reinforces the understanding of student aspirations as limited by the resources and capabilities of their environment, including their peers (Rizzica, 2020).

Family background is also important to student aspirations. Ganie (2022) points out that the level of parental education and socio-economic status (SES) are influential factors. That is, students whose parents are educated and/or have higher income are much more likely to aspire to and obtain higher levels of education. Parents with a higher level of education often put a lot more emphasis on their children benefiting from educational success, as they are also able to foster a better academic environment and motivate their children to reach advanced degrees. However, financial constraints and lower education levels may work against aspirations, similar to families who underestimate the utility of higher education. These findings show the role of individual and familial roots in expressing higher educational goals (Harrison & Waller, 2017).

2.2 The School Principal's Role

The impact of the school principal on students' academic aspirations and achievements is fundamental. As Khattab (2015) indicates, the principal can substantially influence pupils' performance by creating a context where students' aspirations and expectations can be aligned with achievable aspirations and expectations. The skill (or ability) to create opportunities that positively affect aspiration is essential because it assists students developing realistic conceptions of success and minimizing potential frustrations and disengagement that can occur when aspirational goals do not equate with actual achievements (Grissom et al., 2021). In addition to supporting students socially and academically, school principals can also facilitate support systems that enable students to pursue opportunities to fulfil aspiration, particularly for students whose family or community structures do not provide sufficient care or support (Maas et al., 2022).

In addition, school principals are leaders in their own right, shaping the tone for parental involvement and community engagement which are vital components to improved student performance. As Khattab (2015) reminds us, parental role and expectation is significant in their education. Principals do not only expect them to have an expectation when asking for their parents to engage in their child's learning, but they are supporting parents with addressing the gaps on their behalf by their socio-economic status. Principals are not only concerned with increased aspirations but also with preparing our students with the tools optimally for success and for long engagement and motivation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

The principal of a school plays a crucial role in promoting student achievement and in fostering a positive learning community. Principals are the chief executive of school, motivate teachers to engage in learning experiences and facilitate long-range improvements in instructional delivery and student achievement. Strong school principals (Terziu, et al., 2016) will connect with teachers, students and parents to create programs or initiatives that promote innovative instructional practices and the use of new technologies, including gamification, to enhance and transform learning. Additionally, school principals inspire, support and guide teacher professional development and also create opportunities for teachers, staff, and students to be inspired or motivated to increase their level of hard work in student learning (Nachshoni, 2024). In completing these initiatives, the principal may be the one to coordinate them, but, the principal is no longer participating in only administrative tasks, they are agents of change who promote innovative practices and instilled academic achievement in their colleagues and students, and promote some level of success for all involved (Parveen et al., 2022).

Moreover, communication and collaboration are important aspects of a principal's role. Successful principals communicate and collaborate with teachers and students to identify needs and take actions that assist with needs. They regularly meet and discuss multiple topics to establish trust and share responsibilities, which builds teamwork with teachers (Rostini et

al., 2022). As an abundance of research suggests, schools with a proactive principal and communication are likely to have better academic results and school culture, indicating it is an important factor of educational leadership (Talaumbauna et al., 2023).

2.3 The School Principal and the Students' Achievement

The principal plays an important role in the influence on student success. Research shows that the principal's instructional leadership; such as getting to know the school, getting into classrooms, providing the means for teachers to collaborate, and keeping the attention focused on student-centered actions; relates to student learning.

Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) specifically cited behaviors like getting into classrooms and acknowledging student success as behaviors that related to higher student achievement. These actions further support the principal being an active player on the academic journey, not an administrator on the sideline (Rozak et al., 2020).

In addition to this, the management skills of school principals, including their supervision of resources provided, promoting a positive vibe in the school climate, and communicating with stakeholders, also contribute indirectly to a student's educational achievement (Tang, 2023). Research shows that principals create a favorable environment for student learning and positively impact academic and nonacademic outcomes when they assist teacher performance and professional development (Dalton & Arpon, 2024). This indirect contribution to student outcomes further supports the role of the principal as a facilitator of the complex educational ecosystem.

Lastly, although there is a disagreement over the direct connection between principal leadership and school performance, the consensus shows that there is a connection if effective leaders influence a culture of excellence. To illustrate, Rozak and others (2020) noted that principals committed to actively leading and stimulating their schools are leaders in school-based academic performance and beyond. By aligning school purposes and goals in relation to the needs of students and staff members the principal can motivate the team to stay motivated and on task for the endeavor to be repeated and sustained over time (Yuni et al., 2025).

3. Material and Methods

This study was carried out using qualitative methodologies to examine the perspectives of Arab higher education students in Israel as it relates to the role of school principals in fostering academic aspirations and motivation towards higher education. A qualitative design was selected so personal experiences, perspectives, and beliefs could be examined comprehensively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a qualitative design also allowed the research to capture rich accounts and provide perspectives (Ugwu & Eze, 2023) into how students make sense of the role of school principals in the educational landscape of their particular socio-cultural contexts. The interpretivist paradigm was at the foundation of the study's framework, with emphasis on the participants' experiences and through the seemingly complex interplay among leadership, aspirations, and student development (Pervin & Mokhtar 2022).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were the main instrument used for data collection. This instrument offered flexibility to explore different aspects of the lived experiences of the participants as well as helped ensure consistency in addressing the research topics. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore the individual perspectives in-depth, while also adapting to emerging themes (Elhami & Khoshnevisan, 2022). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions focusing on students' reflections on the principals' leadership behavior, motivation strategies, and the orientation they received in terms of their

academic pathway. Interviews were conducted in Arabic to ensure participants' linguistic and cultural comfort; and all sessions were audio-recorded, with participants' consent, to facilitate accurate transcription and analysis.

The participants in this study were Arab students who were at the bachelor's degree level of study at higher education institutions in Israel. The participants were Arab students who had completed secondary schooling and were able to reflect meaningfully on their principals' role during that phase of their life. Purposive sampling was the most suitable option, since we looking for participants with knowledge of their principals' role. The final sample was composed of 40 Arab students in higher education, from different locations and fields of study. Snowball sampling was the recruitment strategy used. The researcher began recruiting with a few known contacts as the initial participant and requested they referred students that fell into the criteria described. This was an effective means of accessing a range of social and economic backgrounds amongst students, and was crucial in capturing the dynamics of leadership (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The data analysis involved following a thematic analysis process using the six- phase process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019), and which started by reading and coding the transcripts and identifying key patterns and relevant themes about the role of principals in impact academic motivation and aspirations. Because this analysis intersects with cultural and socio-economic contexts in the Arab sector, careful consideration was taken. The trustworthiness included member checking, triangulation, and an audit trail. The study went through an ethics procedure before being started, and all participants signed informed consent. The clearly defined method assisted in examining how principals enact leadership practice at the school level to influence the academic pathways and aspirations of Arab students for university education.

4. Results

The results of this research provide a deep insight into how Arab higher education students in Israel understand the influences from their school principals that impact their academic trajectories. The qualitative analysis of participants' lived experiences led to five main themes that capture the importance of the principal in students' academic motivation, preparing students for pathways into higher education, support in navigating their personal and structural barriers, decisions to pursue higher education, and their long-term academic identity confidence. These findings highlight the value of understanding the principal's role not only as an educational leader but as a key contributor to equity, resilience, and aspiration for underrepresented and socio- economically marginalized communities.

Theme 1: School Principals as Motivators of Academic Success

Participants consistently mentioned school principals as key players who could promote academic achievement, especially when there are not many external motivations for students to learn at home or in the community. One student said: *"Our principal used to say, 'There is nothing that is stopping you from reaching university, only your will,' that stuck with me."* Another reported: *"He always believed in us more than we believed in ourselves."* These examples are in line with Githinji and Nyangoma (2025) study which showed that motivational leadership is one of the strongest predictors of student success, particularly for students in marginalized communities. Similarly, Smith and others (2020) stated that effective principals influence student motivation by creating high expectations and fostering a school climate where students felt they were being encouraged and supported to develop their potential..

Theme 2: Strategic Leadership Practices in Preparing Students for Higher Education

Participants mentioned specific strategies principals directly guided students for postsecondary preparation like academic counseling sessions, exposure to university environments, and inviting guest speakers from higher institutions. One participant recalled, *"Our principal made us go to a university. That is when I realized I could see myself there too."* Another participant noted, *"He set up different workshops on how to apply to university and how to apply for scholarships—there would've been no way for me to know where to start without these."* Nabirye, K. H. (2025) supported these experiences when they noted that culturally responsive school principals as leaders in minority districts had a propensity to be active in bridging access to higher education. Likewise, Liu (2025) established the emphasized the role of leadership in establishing support systems and networks that directly influence students' preparedness for post- secondary education

Theme 3: Principals as Support Systems in Overcoming Educational Barriers

Participants in this study expressed that their principals frequently played an important role in supporting when they faced personal, academic, or socio-economic challenges. To illustrate, one student recalled, *"When I was going through a hard time at home, the principal noticed and provided some time for me to talk — only then, could I see that I, as a person mattered and not just as an academic."* Another similarly added, *"She created a way to support me through the school fees, and I still was able to continue, and she even encouraged me not to give up when I failed a math exam. Without her I probably would have dropped out."* Both of these student accounts illustrate a principal who acted both as an advocate, and an emotional support figure for the student, and particularly in the context of the Arab education system in Israel, which exposes Arab students to additional layers of stress due to the combined effects of their socio-economic status, political marginalization, and a lack of educational resources. Küçükgöz (2021) emphasize that school principals in Arab communities oftentimes utilize paternalistic or maternalistic leadership in addressing students from an approach that emphasized care, personal attention, and being sensitive to students' life circumstances. Saffuri (2025) further reiterates that Arab schools operate within structural constraints that push school leaders to intervene in students' lives as a result of need and mitigate the social inequality that exists. The findings in the current study indicate that principals that were emotionally engaged and proactive for students will have a high potential for reduced dropout risk, and increased student resilience.

Theme 4: Principal Influence on Post-Secondary Decision-Making

Multiple participants indicated their decision to pursue higher education was unequivocally impacted by the ongoing support of their school principal. One student stated, *"If my principal didn't push me, I wouldn't have even thought about applying to university."* Another participant commented, *"She never stopped talking about how important it was for as many of us to continue to study as possible. I felt like I didn't want to disappoint her"*. This is supported by Grissom and others (2021) who found these indirect roles played by a principal on a student's longer-term education pathways, based on the academic climate principals develop to foster ambition. Similarly, Sahito and others (2025) highlighted the importance of school leadership when encouraging aspirations and decision making during key educational transitions.

Theme 5: The Impact of Principals' Leadership on Future Opportunities

Students indicated that, for them, their principals inspired their leadership long after they departed the secondary school, influencing their attitude towards and confidence in postsecondary education. One participant shared, *“Even in university, I remember the things my principal told me. They are still something that guides me today.”* Another said, *“The leadership I saw at school made me believe I could be someone.”* These comments parallel the research of Supriyadhi and others (2023), who found the impact of ongoing visionary principal leadership on the students’ academic identity and resilience lasted beyond the school experience. The principal is particularly important in the Arab sector, where students may be facing structural inequities. Alzoraiki and others (2024) explained that transformational leadership in Arab schools must seek to influence mobility and achievement.

5. Discussion

This study investigated how Arab higher education students in Israel perceive the role of school principals in promoting academic aspirations towards the goal of higher education. The results suggest that school principals appear to play an important and multi-faceted role in shaping students’ academic aspirations particularly within the Arab sector where there are cultural, social, and structural barriers in attaining higher education, specifically. The subsequent discussion examines the main findings in relation to existing literature, providing a thorough understanding of the implications of school leadership in this context.

To begin with, students identified their school principals as significant motivators that helped them achieve their academic potential. They emphasized principals who showed faith in their potential, emphasized high academic standards, and fostered a successful school culture; these principals consistently empowered students and worked to advance their student’s academic achievement potential. Thelma and others (2024) have also identified motivational leadership as an important attribute of school leaders particularly with regards to positively impacting student achievement in low resourced or marginalized schools. In the case of Arab students in Israel, where systemic or habitual support from outside the school for the student’s education has not been shown, the principal’s motivation may be more significant than in a typical school or for students with different demographic backgrounds. Dichoso (2023) write that effective school leaders galvanize a positive school climate, create student confidence through consistent emotional/academic support, influence student attitudes towards learning, and support or develop student attitudes towards success..

Apart from motivation support, participants highlighted the strategic actions taken by principals to actively prepare students for post-secondary education. Speaking of which, the educational experiences involved organizing university visits, providing information about scholarships, and running mentorship programs. These experiences were imperative in helping students know what was needed towards accessing post- secondary education and cultivate the idea that going to college was attainable. This aligns with Myers' (2024) conclusion on the meaning of culturally responsive school leadership practices within communities of color. When principals are willing to utilize their position in a way that makes the students feel they are being prepared, as well as to provide information and resources, they can contribute to bridges toward educational equity. Additionally, Plaku and Leka (2025) found that principals who develop strong social and professional networks are more effective in developing a college-going culture in their schools.

Also critical is the support the principals provide to students with personal, financial and academic challenges. The research shows that the principals often provided emotional support, assisted the students in accessing financial aid, and became involved in difficult family

situations. This was particularly salient to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The outcomes are consistent with Ryu and others (2020) who studied principals in Arab schools and found that principals' leadership style was often characterized as caring and responsive, emphasizing empathy and student welfare. In addition, it has been argued that principals have to assume other roles in the Arab education system in Israel due to insufficient institutional support, serving as advocates and problem-solvers for their students in disadvantaged communities (Arar, 2018). Such leadership practices are critical for reducing dropout risks and promoting student persistence.

The influence of principals extended to students' post-secondary decisions as well. Many participants shared that their decision to pursue higher education was impacted by their principal's support and guidance. Principals who consistently promoted the benefits of pursuing education beyond high school, provided information about opportunity for study or study pathways and conveyed confidence in their students' abilities, shaped future aspirations with their students. This finding is consistent with the summary described by Grissom and others (2021) when they noted that principals can exert a powerful indirect influence on students' educational trajectories by nurturing aspiration and clarity about academic possibilities. Also aligned with this study, Sideridis and Alghamdi (2024) reported that the emphasis placed on future planning and education progression by principals significantly increased students' commitment to pursuing post-secondary education in contexts marked by disadvantage.

In addition, the research showed that the effects of school principals' work did not stop at graduating students in high school, but followed students to university. The participants acknowledged that attributes such as discipline, persistence and belief in one's ability to accomplish academic goals, values reinforced by principals in a school, continued to travel with them. Elaborating further, these conclusions align with the claims made by Candrasasari and others (2023), who concluded that dynamic and visible school leadership produces an imprint that stays with students, allowing them to remain resilient to the academic challenges they face, and establishing a plausible identity as a student. For the Arab sector, who must contend with structural inequality throughout their education trajectory, these early experiences can act as levers of educational success later in life. Schechter and Halevi (2023) recognized that transformational leadership in Arab schools makes a considerable contribution toward succession in academic outcomes for broader social mobility.

These findings show that principals hold a unique and powerful position in the educational path of Arab students in Israel. While some of the characteristics of effective leadership, for instance motivation, support, and strategic thinking are common or universal, the specificities of the Arab sector bring particular responsibilities for school leadership. This study also confirms other research that argues school leadership in minority communities must go beyond traditional administrative leadership to also include elements of social advocacy leadership and culturally responsive leadership (Johnson et al., 2024). Therefore, educational policy developers need to acknowledge the value of fully developing and supporting principals in the Arab sector, to allow them to meet the diverse and complex needs of their students. When this happens, schools can be transformational places of learning, not only active spaces of academic achievement, but potential harbingers of social equity and social opportunity.

6. Conclusion

The findings from this study indicate that the school principal remains a critical and multifaceted role for advancing academic aspirations, as well as increasing access to higher

education pathways, for Arab students in Israel. In this study, the findings confirmed what the students said in the interviews - they characterized their principal not only as motivating them and instilling them with belief and aspiration, but as providing strategic help by guiding them in their next steps and re-sourcing them with emotional supports at critical junctures along their academic pathways. In a context where students face various social, economic, and cultural challenges, the role of the principal took on characteristics beyond an administrative role, to a more sophisticated role of being a mentor, advocate and change agent. As described by Khattab (2015), principals can create a school experience for students that aligns their aspirations with achievable goals that they can realistically visualize and ambitiously wish for their futures. Grissom and others (2020) also discussed the impact of principal leadership on creating a school climate that promotes sustainable academic motivation, which this study validates for participants. The verbal accounts of participants illustrated that when there were no systemic supports for students, the principal was quite often the only person offering encouragement and resilience throughout their educational journey.

From the five main themes that emerged: motivation, strategic preparation, support intervention, influence on post-secondary decisions and lasting impact; it became clear that these are representative of the students lived experience, as well as the existing literature on principal leadership interventions and impacts. For example, Maas and others (2022) described the role of the principal as being able to support systems for students from families who might not have the capability to support them academically, which is particularly relevant in the Arab communities of Israel. Haïet and others (2021) talked about the principal preparing each student with tools for potential future motivation, and long-term academic engagement as well in the context of students. By synthesizing the student experiences with theoretical perspectives of principal leadership, it was evident that the effective school principals employed both instructional leadership and emotional leadership from the context of a mentor, advocate and change agent to provide culturally responsive leadership, acknowledging the social realities of their students. That illustrates the potential for school leadership to be transformative when approached with empathy, vision and community responsiveness.

Nonetheless, this study raised more questions than answers. While the qualitative nature achieved a measurable depth, it would certainly be useful to know how these dynamic leadership characteristics and dynamics may differ between areas, gender, or other types of school within the Arab sector. There remains a large gap in the understanding of how principals are provided with the training and the support required so that the role can be impactful. Despite the measures of principal effectiveness discussed in Terziu and others (2016) or Nachshoni (2024) where principalship must shift from a subsequent admin role, to be the implanted leader for innovation and systemic equity, the role of leadership remains a vague organizational function in terms of professional development. Future studies must help identify how professional development programs can better prepare school leaders in their future leadership roles - notably, around cultural responsiveness, and in socio-economically vulnerable communities.

In conclusion, if educational policymakers are really serious about addressing inequities and improving the academic achievement of marginalized sectors, investing strongly and deeply in culturally responsive, visionary school leadership is not a choice

- it is essential to the changes they are looking for.

7. References

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