

How do Arab Students in Higher Education Perceive the Role of Their High School Principal in Guiding Them Toward Academic Aspirations and Higher Education?

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Abstract

This study explores how high school principals influence academic aspirations and readiness for higher education among Arab students in Israel, highlighting the critical role of transformational leadership characterized by inspiration, vision, and personalized support. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research reveals that principals who foster inclusive, supportive environments and employ strategies like mentorship and extracurricular engagement significantly impact students' motivation and academic goals. The findings emphasize the need for leadership training focused on motivation, inclusivity, and culturally responsive practices to address systemic and cultural barriers in the Arab education sector, offering insights for policymakers and educators to improve student outcomes.

Key words: Arab student, academic aspirations, leadership, academic performance, higher education in Israel, the Arab sector in Israel

1. Introduction

The role of high school principals in shaping students' academic aspirations and guiding them toward higher education is vital, particularly in the Arab sector in Israel, where unique socio-economic and cultural challenges prevail (Said et al., 2024). This study explores how Arab students in higher education

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perceive the leadership styles and strategies of their high school principals, emphasizing the critical influence these principals have in fostering academic goals and motivating students. By addressing an under-researched demographic, the study aims to fill a gap in understanding the intersection of leadership, education, and cultural identity

The primary objective of this research is to examine the perceptions of Arab students in higher education regarding their high school principals' leadership styles, effectiveness, and strategies in motivating them to pursue higher education. It also seeks to evaluate the role of principals in creating a supportive academic environment that nurtures students' academic ambitions. The study is guided by the Motivational Theory of Role Modeling, which emphasizes how leaders influence others through their behaviors and values (Morgenroth et al., 2015).

The research questions focus on identifying the common leadership styles among high school principals in the Arab sector, assessing students' perceptions of their effectiveness, and exploring the specific strategies used to prepare students for higher education. For instance, one question investigates how Arab students evaluate their principals' role in fostering motivation and a supportive school climate. By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of leadership's impact on students' academic journeys.

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of Arab students. By collecting in-depth narratives, it provides nuanced insights into how principals' leadership styles influence students' aspirations and readiness for higher education. Findings reveal that transformational leadership—characterized by vision, inspiration, and support—has a significant impact on students' motivation and academic goals. The findings underscore the importance of creating

an inclusive and encouraging school environment. Principals who implement motivational strategies and foster a sense of belonging can inspire students to pursue higher education with confidence. The study also highlights specific actions, such as offering personalized support and creating academic opportunities, which students recall as instrumental in their development.

Recommendations from the study include enhancing leadership training programs for principals, focusing on transformational leadership styles, and addressing systemic barriers in the Arab education sector. These practical applications can guide policymakers and educators in improving leadership practices and student outcomes.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on educational leadership by highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities in the Arab sector in Israel. It offers valuable insights into how leadership styles and strategies can influence academic aspirations and provides a foundation for future research and policy development in culturally diverse educational contexts.

2. The Literature Review

2.1 Leadership vs. Management

Leadership and management are distinct yet interconnected concepts essential for organizational success (Indraji & Mahadevan, 2023). Leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating individuals toward a shared vision, emphasizing innovation, personal growth, and long-term strategy through styles like transformational, situational, and charismatic leadership (Arar & Nasra, 2020). In contrast, management prioritizes planning, organizing, and controlling resources to achieve short-term goals and maintain operational efficiency through autocratic or democratic styles (Taun et al., 2022). Both require a balance of skills, as effective professionals adapt their approach to meet organizational needs in a dynamic environment (Musaigwa, 2023). Together, leadership and management guide organizations toward goals by influencing individuals and integrating complementary theories and practices (Kelly, 2021).

2.2 Leadership in Educational Settings

Leadership in educational settings is key to shaping a positive learning environment and driving student success. Effective school leaders, such as principals, set a clear vision, foster collaboration, and support teachers through training and community engagement. Leadership styles vary, including transformational (inspiring and driving change), transactional (reward-based performance management), directive (providing clear guidance), shared (team-based decision-making), and democratic or laissez-faire approaches, each suited to specific contexts (Francisco, 2019). Research

highlights that leadership significantly impacts teaching quality, student outcomes, and overall school performance. Emotional intelligence and relational skills also influence leadership effectiveness, enabling principals to adapt their approach to diverse challenges and needs (Karasneh & Al-Momani, 2019). Principals who balance strategic vision with empathy can inspire teachers and students, creating an academically successful and supportive environment (Sarwar et al., 2022; Alainati et al., 2023). Effective leadership fosters motivation, collaboration, and innovation, essential for responding to evolving educational demands.

2.3 The School Principal and the School Academic Outcomes:

The role of the school principal is essential in shaping academic outcomes and improving schools. Cheong and Mok (2017) emphasized that when teachers, parents, and principals work together as a community of learners and leaders with a shared goal of educating children, schools can improve significantly. Similarly, Çoban and others (2023) highlighted the importance of principals fostering strong relationships among adults, effective communication, collegiality, and trust, which are essential for creating a productive learning environment.

2.4 The Principal and the Students' Achievements

The principal's role significantly impacts students' achievements, though often indirectly. Studies like Rozak and colleagues (2020) highlight that principals influence student success by fostering a supportive environment, enhancing teacher collaboration, and improving school programs rather than directly affecting academic outcomes. Non-academic achievements in arts and sports also benefit from effective leadership. Similarly, Sukmaswati and colleagues (2020) found that a principal's leadership, alongside teacher performance, strongly affects student achievement by motivating teachers and creating a positive school climate. Druschke and colleagues (2020) emphasize that principals are pivotal in setting school vision, guiding faculty, and improving educational outcomes, while Kaplan and colleagues (2022) highlight the importance of leadership style, teacher collaboration, and data-driven decision-making. Overall, principals play a crucial role in shaping the conditions for student success.

2.5 Students' Educational Aspirations:

Educational aspirations, defined as the academic goals individuals strive to achieve, are crucial for enhancing psychological well-being, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. They are shaped by various factors, including the school environment, parental involvement, peer interactions, and socio-economic background (Fadiji & Reddy, 2020). Chawla (2018) found a moderate positive correlation between aspirations and academic achievement among secondary students in India, emphasizing the role of tailored strategies by teachers to boost aspirations and performance. Similarly, Hashmi and Shakir (2023) highlighted the influence of a positive school climate—characterized by safety, inclusivity, and support—on fostering higher aspirations. These studies underscore the importance of supportive environments and proactive strategies to help students achieve their educational goals and improve outcomes.

3. Material and methods

This study used a qualitative phenomenological research method. Qualitative research helps researchers understand human emotions and behaviors in a comprehensive way (Heglar & Cuevas, 2017). It produces detailed, descriptive narratives. By using open-ended questions, qualitative research explores how participants "classify their world" and allows them to explain their experiences and perceptions. This approach helps individuals share their thoughts and feelings about complex topics (Barnham, 2015).

The study population consists of Arab students in higher education in Israel. The study sample consists of 40 participants from the Arab sector in Israel. It includes both males and females across different age groups, ensuring diversity. Participants have various educational levels, including Bachelor's (BA), Master's (MA), and Doctorate (PhD) degrees. They represent multiple districts, such as the Northern District, The Triangle, The Negev, Mixed Towns, and East Jerusalem. The sample includes individuals from the main ethnic groups in the Arab sector: Muslims, Christians, and Druze, providing a comprehensive perspective on the topic. The sampling method of this study was based on the purposeful sampling technique.

The study tool is a semi-structured qualitative interview. The semi-structured interview is a widely used research method in social sciences. According to Magaldi and Berler (2020), the semi-structured interview is an exploratory approach to interviewing. They explain that it typically follows a guide and focuses on a main topic, providing a general framework for the conversation.

4. Results

Through in-depth interviews, the study identifies key themes that shed light on the leadership styles of principals, their strategies for fostering academic motivation, and the impact of their actions on students' aspirations and preparedness for higher education.

Theme 1: Most dominant leadership styles used by the principals in the Arab sector in Israel.

The study found that principals in the Arab sector in Israel used different leadership styles, including authoritative, transformational, instructional, and laissez-faire. The authoritative style was strict and focused on discipline, but students often felt distant and unsupported, as one noted, *"Our principal made all the decisions without listening to us, which created a barrier."* In contrast, transformational leadership inspired and motivated students, with one sharing, *"He believed in us and made us feel we could achieve great things."* Instructional leadership focused on academic success, offering guidance and resources, as a student explained, *"He showed us a clear path to higher education and provided extra support for important subjects."* However, the laissez-faire style left students feeling neglected, with one saying, *"Our principal didn't guide us or talk about our future, leaving many of us lost."* These styles significantly influenced how students perceived their education and future aspirations.

Theme 2- Perceptions of Principal Effectiveness

Students shared different views on how their principals influenced their academic goals. Many felt that principals who focused on clear goals and supported students made a big difference. One student said, *"Our principal encouraged us to set goals and plan steps to achieve them, which made me feel someone believed in my potential."* Others highlighted how caring and approachable principals inspired them, as another shared, *"He made us feel important and said, 'Your success is my success,' which motivated me to work harder."* However, some students felt their principals were distant and uninvolved, with one saying, *"He never talked to us about our goals or future, making us feel unsupported."* These stories show how a principal's involvement and attitude can strongly shape students' motivation and success.

Theme 3: Strategies Employed by Principals

The principals employed various strategies to prepare students for higher education, which many students viewed positively. Key practices included career counseling and academic advising, described as *"helping me discover my passion for teaching"* and providing *"practical advice like how to apply to universities and find scholarships"* (S31, S27). Principals also organized visits to universities, where students were inspired by exposure to academic environments: *"It felt like a whole new world... I realized that going to university was not just a dream but something I could actually achieve"* (S18). Higher education fairs were another impactful initiative, giving students a *"clear picture of academic options and career paths"* (S1, S13). Programs like "Career Guidance," "Ro'ad," and "Nekudat Or" were implemented to support students, especially from marginalized communities, by offering workshops, mentoring, campus visits, and financial aid. As one student noted, these efforts helped *"overcome barriers to higher education"* and made academic aspirations achievable (S40, S8, S23).

Theme 4: Motivation and Inspiration

The principal's role as a source of motivation and inspiration was a recurring theme among students. Principals who set high standards, communicated optimism, and shared success stories inspired students to aim higher academically. As one student noted, *"Our principal would tell us stories about students from our school who became doctors, engineers, and teachers... he made us feel like we could achieve anything"*

(S6). Publicly recognizing students' achievements also fostered motivation, with one student recalling how the principal praised students with good grades, which "*motivated us very much*" (S24). Additionally, providing support for economically disadvantaged students, such as information about scholarships and grants, was highlighted as a powerful motivator to pursue higher education (S12). These efforts created a culture of enthusiasm, teamwork, and commitment to academic success.

Theme 5 The Role of the Principal in Fostering a Supportive Academic Environment

The principal's efforts in fostering a supportive academic environment significantly motivated students and enhanced their academic aspirations. By creating an inclusive school culture and providing emotional and professional support, principals made every student feel valued. One student shared, "*Our principal made us feel like the school was a place for everyone... he reminded us we belonged and had potential*" (S11). Principals also addressed financial barriers by introducing free tutoring programs and hosting sessions on scholarships, showing students that higher education was attainable despite challenges (S29). Emphasizing teamwork and respect, principals encouraged collaboration among teachers and students, making the school feel "*more like a family*" (S36). High expectations paired with guidance inspired students to achieve their best, as one student noted, "*He challenged us with high academic standards but made sure we had the tools to succeed*" (S22). Celebrating diversity and promoting unity further reinforced the idea that success was achievable for all, fostering both confidence and motivation (S10).

5. Discussion

The study found that high school principals in the Arab sector in Israel use different leadership styles, including authoritative, transformational, instructional, and laissez-faire. Many students mentioned the authoritative style, which is strict and focused on

discipline, ensuring organization but creating a distance between principals and students. Transformational leadership, on the other hand, was seen as inspiring and supportive, with principals motivating students through personal attention and shared goals. Instructional leadership involved principals actively promoting academic excellence by monitoring progress and creating positive learning environments. The laissez-faire style, though less common, left students feeling unsupported and unsure about their academic paths. These findings align with studies by Pizzolitto and colleagues (2017) and Francisco (2019) on the impacts of different leadership styles.

Arab students in higher education said their high school principals played an important role in guiding them toward academic aspirations. Effective principals focused on setting clear goals, sharing their own experiences, and encouraging resilience and teamwork. Students appreciated principals who listened to them, treated them as partners, and supported their academic journeys with motivational talks and personal attention. However, some students felt that distant principals hindered their motivation and direction. These observations are similar to findings from Bakar and colleagues (2017) and Mehmood and colleagues (2023) on the value of goal-setting and collaborative communication in fostering student success.

The study also revealed that high school principals used strategies such as career counseling, university visits, and specialized programs like "Career Guidance" and "Ro'ad" to prepare students for higher education. These efforts gave students practical tools and motivation to navigate academic challenges, especially for those from marginalized groups. Students valued these initiatives, which helped bridge the gap between high school and higher education. Similar programs in other countries, like AVID in the U.S. and Aimhigher in the UK, also show the importance of mentorship and guidance in supporting students' transitions to higher education (Pritchett, 2024; Raven et al., 2012).

Students viewed their principals as key motivators in their journey toward higher education. Principals inspired students by recognizing their achievements, delivering motivational talks, and providing practical guidance on scholarships and other resources. This approach helped students see their potential and encouraged them to aim higher. These findings match the Motivational Theory of Role Modeling (Morgenroth et al., 2015), which highlights the power of role models to inspire through

their actions and values. Principals who shared real-life success stories and engaged with students demonstrated how effort and determination could lead to success.

The study highlighted the importance of high school principals in creating supportive and inclusive school environments. By addressing academic and financial challenges, introducing free after-school programs, and fostering teamwork, principals encouraged students to pursue higher education. Students felt valued and motivated by principals who showed care and maintained high expectations. These findings align with previous research, such as Mejia (2016) and Sukmaswati and colleagues (2020), which emphasize how supportive leadership can build positive school cultures and inspire students to achieve their academic goals. The study shows that strong, culturally aware leadership can make a lasting impact on students' academic success and personal growth.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the important role high school principals play in shaping the academic aspirations and success of Arab students in higher education. Principals' leadership styles, such as transformational, instructional, authoritative, and laissez-faire, have a strong impact on students' motivation and readiness for university. Transformational and instructional leaders were praised for their support, inspiration, and focus on academic success, while authoritative and laissez-faire styles often led to disengagement or emotional distance. Effective principals used strategies like goal-setting, career counseling, university visits, and financial aid guidance to prepare students for higher education, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. By fostering supportive and inclusive environments, these principals helped students overcome challenges and build confidence to achieve their goals. The study shows that motivational, empathetic, and strategic leadership can make a significant difference in students' academic journeys and future success.

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