



HOW DO ARAB HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN ISRAEL WHO GRADUATED FROM PRIVATE SCHOOLS PERCEIVE THE LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF THEIR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS AND THEIR IMPACT ON TEACHERS' PERFORMANCE AND STUDENTS' READINESS FOR UNIVERSITY LIFE

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Abstract:

School leadership is one of the main factors in improving the quality of the educational process, as it plays a role in developing the performance of teachers and enhancing students' readiness to join university education. This study aimed to explore the perceptions of Arab higher education students in Israel, who are graduates of private schools, about the leadership skills of their former school principals, and the impact of these skills on teachers' performance and readiness for university life. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach, and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from an intentional sample of (30) male and female students. The data were then analyzed using objective analysis to derive the main themes. The results showed that effective school leadership contributes to building a positive school climate based on trust, communication, justice, and teacher empowerment, which reflects positively on the quality of teaching and the development of students' academic and personal skills. The results also showed that readiness for university life is not limited to academic achievement, but also includes critical thinking skills, self-learning, time management, teamwork, and effective communication. The study recommended strengthening educational leadership, developing programs for the preparation and qualification of school principals, and supporting the professional development of teachers, in a way that contributes to building collaborative learning environments that improve education outcomes and enhance students' readiness for success in higher education.

JEL: I21, I23, M12, J24

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1. Introduction

School leadership is one of the most important factors affecting the quality of education and achieving sustainable development in educational institutions, as the role of the school principal is no longer limited to administrative and organizational aspects, but has become centered on leading learning and teaching processes, building a supportive school culture, empowering teachers, and promoting a stimulating learning environment that contributes to improving learning outcomes. Contemporary Educational Leadership: Effective principals contribute to school improvement not only through administrative decision-making, but also by fostering a culture of collaboration, supporting teachers, and creating positive learning environments (Hickey *et al.*, 2022; Changsu, 2023).

The educational literature suggests that school leadership indirectly influences student achievement and academic and personal growth through its impact on teacher performance and school climate. Principals who encourage collaboration, promote effective communication, and provide ongoing professional support create the conditions that enable teachers to provide high-quality education, which is reflected in students' learning, academic achievement, self-confidence, responsibility, and ability to learn independently, all of which contribute to their success in higher education (Zhang *et al.*, 2025).

In light of the rapid transformation witnessed by education, the need to prepare students for university life by developing critical thinking, self-learning, communication, teamwork, and time management skills has emerged to enable them to adapt to the demands of higher education and the labor market. The school principal plays a pivotal role in building the learning environment that helps teachers develop these skills in students, making school leadership a key element in enhancing students' readiness for a successful transition to university.

This issue is particularly important in Arab private schools in Israel, which operate within distinct cultural, social, and educational contexts, and often have a degree of organizational flexibility compared to public schools, providing their principals with greater opportunities to adopt diverse leadership practices that contribute to building supportive school cultures for learning. Studies show that leadership in Arab schools is not only reflected in academic achievement, but also has effects on enhancing students' well-being, empowerment, and life skills development (Al-King-Watad, 2025).

Although there is a growing number of studies on school leadership and its relationship to teacher performance or student achievement, most have focused on the perspectives of principals or teachers, while studies exploring the perceptions of school graduates after their transition to higher education are still limited. This category is an important source of information, as it allows us to assess the long-term impact of school leadership in preparing students for university challenges, such as independent learning, time management, critical thinking, and adaptation to new academic environments.

Based on this, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of Arab higher education students in Israel, who are graduates of private schools, about the leadership skills of their former school principals, and the impact of these skills on teachers' performance and readiness for university life. The results of the study are expected to contribute to providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between school leadership, teacher performance, and students' preparation for higher education, as well as provide scientific indicators that can be used to develop educational leadership programs, promote the professional development of teachers, and formulate educational policies that contribute to the development of educational leadership programs. Improve the quality and outcomes of education in the long term.

2. Literature Review

2.1 School Leadership and the Shift to Transformational Leadership

School leadership has evolved from an administrative function to a multidimensional process that shapes teaching quality, school culture, and student learning, and contemporary leadership theories assert that effective leadership is rooted in organizational relationships rather than focusing solely on the principal's authority (Changsu, 2023; Hickey *et al.*, 2022; Okumuş *et al.*, 2019).

Transformational leadership has emerged as a mainstream view in educational research because it recognizes leadership as a shared responsibility among principals, teachers, and other stakeholders in schools. This collaborative approach fosters professional learning communities, improves communication, and fosters collective responsibility for school improvement (Hickey *et al.*, 2022; Nadeem, 2024). However, transformational leadership is only effective when schools establish mutual trust, clearly defined responsibilities, and supportive organizational cultures.

In this perspective, managers primarily act as facilitators who create conditions that encourage collaboration, innovation, and continued professional growth rather than just as managers.

2.2 Leadership Skills of School Principals

Leadership skills represent the practical application of instructional leadership in the daily practice of a school. Effective managers demonstrate competencies such as strategic vision, communication, trust building, decision-making, teacher empowerment, conflict management, and instructional support (Jong Yong, 2024).

Research suggests that teachers' perceptions of managers' leadership behaviors significantly influence organizational commitment, professional satisfaction, and teaching effectiveness (Lechka & Webster, 2020). Rather than simply fulfilling managerial responsibilities, successful managers cultivate supportive environments that encourage collaboration, motivation, and ongoing professional development.

Leadership skills should be evaluated based on their impact on school improvement and educational outcomes rather than the principal's formal authority.

2.3 Teacher Performance as a Mediate-Centered Experience

Teacher performance represents the primary mechanism by which school leadership influences students. Although students rarely observe administrative processes directly, they experience their outcomes through teacher instructional practices, classroom management, academic support, and interpersonal relationships.

Previous studies have shown that supportive leadership improves teacher performance by enhancing professional collaboration, motivation, self-efficacy, and teaching quality (Lokman *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2025). Thus, teacher performance acts as an important mediating variable that connects leadership practices to students' learning experiences.

From a qualitative perspective, effective education extends beyond content delivery to include critical thinking, student engagement, collaborative learning, and the development of independent learning skills.

2.4 Preparing for College Life

College readiness encompasses much more than just academic achievement. A successful transition to higher education requires students to develop independent learning, critical thinking, self-regulation, time management, communication skills, teamwork, and flexibility.

Schools contribute significantly to these competencies through supportive learning environments and student-centered learning practices. Leadership that encourages participation, responsibility, and collaborative learning enables students to acquire the competencies necessary for university success (Ling *et al.*, 2023; Sachar, 2025). However, college readiness is influenced by multiple contextual factors, including family support, socioeconomic conditions, institutional characteristics, and students' personal experiences. Therefore, leadership should be considered an important contributor and not the only determining factor for college readiness.

2.5 Arab Students in Israel and the Context of Private Schools

The educational experiences of Arab students in Israel are shaped by unique linguistic, cultural, and social contexts. Their transition to higher education often involves academic adjustment, language challenges, and integration into diverse university environments (Mansour, 2024).

Private schools often have greater organizational flexibility and autonomy than public schools, allowing principals to establish distinct learning cultures and practices. However, differences between private schools suggest that the quality of leadership, not just the type of school, determines students' educational experiences and readiness for higher education (Al-Malak-Watad, 2025).

Understanding alumni perceptions in this context provides valuable insight into how leadership practices impact students after high school.

2.6 Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

This study is based on the leadership skills of principals and their impact on the school climate and teachers' professional performance, which subsequently influences students' educational experiences and preparation for university life. Through the study, we seek to understand how graduates interpret these relationships based on their life experiences. Accordingly, the conceptual framework places school leadership as a primary factor, teacher performance as a mediating factor, and students' readiness for university life as a perceived educational outcome within the context of Arab private schools in Israel.

To understand this, this study started from a set of research questions that aimed to explore the perceptions of Arab higher education students in Israel who are graduates of private schools of previous school leadership practices, and their impact on teachers' professional performance and students' readiness for university education. The study questions were as follows:

- 1) How do Arab higher education students in Israel perceive the leadership skills of their former school principals in the context of the school climate?
- 2) How do school principals' support for teachers, as perceived by alumni, affect their educational experience during school?
- 3) What is the impact of teachers' performance as a mediator between school leadership and the student's learning experience as perceived by graduates?
- 4) How do graduates assess their level of readiness for university life in light of their previous school experiences?
- 5) How does the context of Arab private schools in Israel influence the formation of graduates' perceptions of school leadership and its impact on learning?

These questions formed the guiding framework of the study and the subsequent exploratory questions related to the topic, which aimed to explore the perceptions of Arab higher education students in Israel who are graduates of private schools towards school leadership, and their impact on teachers' educational performance and students' readiness for university life. These questions have been organized into main axes that reflect the conceptual dimensions of the study, in order to ensure the comprehensiveness and depth of the analysis by focusing on five main themes:

- **The first theme:** It included the school climate and organizational relations, by exploring the nature of interactions within the school, including methods of dealing with disputes between students, dealing with individual differences, and supporting students with different abilities, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the prevailing social and educational environment within the school.
- **The second theme:** included the role of the principal in supporting teachers and the extent of the impact of school leadership on the performance of teachers in the

classroom, and their role in supporting students and helping them face challenges, in addition to how they deal with the different levels and abilities of students, reflecting the relationship between educational leadership and classroom practice.

- **The third theme:** It included the nature of the relations between the administration, teachers and students, and this axis addressed the questions related to the way the school is run, the leadership attitudes and the general atmosphere within it.
- **The fourth theme:** It includes the personal and academic development of students, by studying the impact of the school environment on the development of academic and personal skills, and the role of extracurricular activities in shaping students' awareness, in addition to the development of language and communication skills and their reflection on self-confidence and university life later.
- **The fifth theme:** Focused on preparing for university education and the transition phase, where the role of the school in guiding students to choose their university majors, the challenges they faced when moving to the university, and how they deal with it, in addition to the extent to which these challenges are related to their previous school experiences.

With this objective organization of the questions, comprehensive coverage of the different fields of study was ensured and linked to the theoretical framework, in order to enhance the accuracy of the qualitative analysis and the depth of interpretation of the results.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how Arab higher education students in Israel perceive the leadership skills of former private school principals and the impact of these skills on teacher performance and readiness for university life. This approach is considered appropriate because it allows for a deep understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations within their real educational contexts (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018).

3.2 Study Population and Sample

The study sample consisted of (30) Arab students enrolled in postgraduate studies in Israeli universities who graduated from Arab private high schools during the year 2024-2025. They were selected using the targeted sample, which allows recruiting individuals with direct experience related to the research objectives. The sample included participants from various academic disciplines, as shown in Table 1, which shows the distribution of the study sample according to the following specializations:

Table 1: Distribution of the study sample by specialization

Specialization	Number of Students	Percentage
Engineering (Civil/General/Architectural)	3	10.0%
Medicine	2	6.7%
Pharmacy	2	6.7%
Nursing	2	6.7%
Psychology	2	6.7%
Business Administration	2	6.7%
Accounting	2	6.7%
Economy	2	6.7%
Law	2	6.7%
Media	2	6.7%
Information Technology	2	6.7%
English	2	6.7%
Education	2	6.7%
Political Science	2	6.7%
Nutrition	1	3.3%
Total	30	100%

3.4 Data Analysis

The transcripts of the interviews were analyzed using objective analysis, and the analysis followed several methodological stages: repeated reading of written texts, initial coding, classification of similar answers, identification of key topics, and interpretation of results related to the study objectives and existing literature.

To enhance the reliability of the results, coding procedures were systematically performed, topics were reviewed frequently, and participant citations were used to support the interpretation of the results.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical standards adopted for qualitative research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that the information collected would be used exclusively for academic research purposes, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

4. Results

The objective analysis of the semi-structured interviews identified five key themes that describe participants' perceptions of school principals' leadership skills and their impact on teacher performance and students' readiness for university life. Overall, participants saw effective leadership as an indirect but influential factor that shaped the quality of teaching and their readiness for higher education.

4.1 Topic 1: Leadership as a School Climate

The results of the analysis showed that the participants did not view school leadership through formal administrative decisions as much as they evaluated it through the daily practices of the school principal and their reflection on the learning environment. In their view, effective leadership was associated with the principal's ability to build a school environment based on trust, cooperation, mutual respect, and psychological well-being, which contributes to providing an organized and supportive learning environment. The results also showed that principals whose practices were characterized by fairness, transparency, open communication, and the promotion of positive relationships within the school contributed to the creation of a stimulating school environment that reflected positively on the motivation of teachers and students, encouraging them to improve their performance and participate actively in the educational process.

4.2 Topic 2: The Role of the Principal in Supporting Teachers

The results of the analysis showed that the participants considered the support of principals to teachers as one of the main factors affecting the quality of the educational process. Although the students were not directly aware of the administrative procedures and processes within the school, they realized the impact of school leadership through what they saw in the teachers' motivation, their level of professionalism, their organization of the classroom environment, and their keenness to provide academic support to students. The results also showed that principals who paid attention to the professional development of teachers, fostered constructive communication with them, and enabled them to perform their roles efficiently, they contributed to the development of more effective teaching practices and increased teachers' commitment to the performance of their educational mission, which reflected positively on the quality of student learning.

4.3 Topic 3: Teacher Performance as the Closest Experience for Students

The results of the analysis showed that teacher performance was the most obvious indicator on which participants relied to assess the effectiveness of school leadership. Participants indicated that teachers who received support and guidance from the school administration were better able to employ active learning strategies, encourage dialogue and discussion within the classroom, boost students' self-confidence, and create positive and stimulating learning experiences.

The results also revealed that the majority of participants viewed teachers as the main mediator through which the effects of school leadership are transmitted to students, as effective leadership practices are reflected in teachers' performance, which in turn is reflected in the quality of students' learning. Thus, the improvement in the quality of teaching and the learning experience is considered as a reflection of the effectiveness of school leadership as much as it is a product of the professional efforts made by teachers.

4.4 Topic 4: Preparing for College Life as a Composite Outcome

The results of the analysis showed that participants viewed university readiness as a multidimensional concept that goes beyond academic achievement, as it includes a set of competencies and skills necessary to succeed in higher education. The most prominent of these competencies were independent learning, time management, communication skills, critical thinking, teamwork, and self-confidence.

The results also showed that the majority of participants attributed the acquisition of these competencies to their educational experiences in school, especially in light of the presence of supportive school environments, collaborative classroom practices, and teachers who encouraged responsibility, independence in learning, and active participation in the educational process. On the other hand, some participants noted that schools that focused mainly on academic achievement and test results provided limited preparation for university life and did not contribute sufficiently to the development of the necessary personal and academic skills to adapt to the requirements of higher education.

Topic 5: Context of Private Schools and Arab Students in Israel

The results of the analysis showed that participants indicated that their educational experiences varied between private schools, reflecting that the type of school, in itself, was not a guarantee of the quality of the educational process. A number of participants described private schools as being organized, academically supportive, and providing a stimulating learning environment, while others felt that an excessive focus on academic achievement and test scores sometimes came at the expense of developing the personal aspects, life skills, and abilities needed to succeed in higher education.

The results also showed that participants viewed the effectiveness of school leadership as a product of interaction with the cultural, educational, and social context in which Arab schools operate in Israel, rather than as isolated administrative practices. They emphasized that social, linguistic, and institutional factors play an important role in shaping students' educational experiences and their readiness to transition to higher education, reflecting the complex and multidimensional nature of the relationship between school leadership and educational outcomes.

5. Discussion

The results of this study show that school leadership goes beyond management to affect teachers' professional performance and students' readiness for university life. Participants were consistently aware that effective principals are leaders who have created supportive school environments characterized by trust, fairness, collaboration, and open communication. These findings reinforce the contemporary view that educational leadership is a relational and organizational process rather than a formal position of authority (Changsu, 2023; Hickey *et al.*, 2022).

One of the most significant findings is that participants rarely associated leadership with managerial responsibilities only. Instead, they evaluated principals by their apparent influence on the school climate and professional practices. This finding supports the principles of transformational leadership, which affirm that leadership becomes effective when responsibility is shared and professional collaboration is encouraged throughout the school (Nadeem, 2024). The results suggest that leadership effectiveness is reflected in the learning environment created by the principal rather than in the managerial functions themselves.

The study also emphasizes the central role of teachers as a mediator between leadership and student outcomes. Participants consistently described teachers as the primary source through which they experience school leadership. Principals who invested in teacher support, communication, and professional development were seen as indirectly improving classroom instruction and student learning. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies that have reported positive relationships between leadership practices, teacher motivation, teaching quality, and self-professionalism (Lockman *et al.*, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2025).

Another important contribution relates to the concept of university readiness. Participants saw readiness as a multidimensional process that encompasses independent learning, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, self-confidence, and time management, rather than just academic achievement. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that effective school leadership contributes to the development of broader competencies that facilitate a successful transition to higher education (Ling *et al.*, 2023; Shaqour *et al.*, 2020). However, participants also emphasized that schools that focused primarily on exam performance were less successful in preparing students for university life, highlighting the importance of balancing academic excellence with personal and social development.

The results also show that the educational context of Arab private schools in Israel influences how driving is experienced. Although many participants reported positive learning experiences, others noted that the differences between schools reflected differences in the quality of leadership rather than the type of school itself. This observation is supported by previous research suggesting that successful leadership depends on the organization's culture, contextual response, and the ability to meet the academic and social needs of students (Al-King-Tad, 2025; Mansour, 2024).

This study contributes to the literature by presenting alumni perspectives as an important source for evaluating school leadership. Unlike many previous studies that focused on principals or teachers, this research examined how former students explained the long-term impact of leadership after entering higher education. This retrospective perspective expands the current understanding of educational leadership by linking school experiences to subsequent academic adjustment and college readiness.

Future research should adopt multi-modal designs that include larger and more diverse samples from public and private schools. Inclusion of principals, teachers,

parents, and students in future investigations will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership practices impact the quality of education and students' long-term academic success.

This study expands existing knowledge by showing that the impact of school leadership continues beyond secondary education. Rather than just influencing school performance, effective leadership contributes to the development of personal, academic, and social competencies that support a successful student transition to university. The findings highlight the importance of leadership development programs that strengthen teacher capacity, foster collaborative school cultures, and prepare students for lifelong learning.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the perception of Arab higher education students in Israel who are graduates of private schools about the leadership skills of former school principals, and the impact of these skills on teachers' professional performance and students' readiness for university life. The results showed that effective school leadership is not limited to administrative roles, but extends to the formation of an inclusive learning environment that contributes to the growth of both teachers and students.

The results showed that participants were aware of school leadership through a supportive school environment, supporting teachers' professional development, establishing principles of justice, promoting effective communication, and building collaborative relationships. These practices reflected positively on teachers' performance, which subsequently contributed to enhancing students' academic engagement, developing their independence, and raising their readiness for higher education.

The study also confirmed that the concept of university readiness is multidimensional in nature, and includes, in addition to academic achievement, critical thinking skills, communication, self-confidence, teamwork, and self-learning. It has been shown that these competencies develop gradually through positive school experiences rather than being related to academic achievement alone.

The results also indicate that the effectiveness of school leadership is more related to educational practices than to the type of school, as the excellence of schools depends not only on whether they are private or public, but also on the ability of school leaders to build a collaborative organizational culture that supports teachers and students.

On a practical level, the study recommends that policymakers and leaders of educational institutions invest in school leadership development programs to enhance communication skills, empower teachers, activate instructional leadership, and promote participatory decision-making, as this directly impacts improving school performance and preparing students for higher education and lifelong learning.

Finally, the study recommends that future research should be expanded through larger, more diverse samples, comparisons between public and private schools, and the

adoption of blended research designs, with the aim of providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between school leadership, teacher performance, and student learning outcomes.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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