



THE IMPACT OF INFORMAL EDUCATION IN IDENTITY FORMATION, EMPOWERMENT, AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AMONG DRUZE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ISRAEL: A SOCIO-POLITICAL QUALITATIVE STUDY

Hoda Samih Halabiⁱ

Dr.,

Girne American University (GAU),

Northern Cyprus

Abstract:

This qualitative article explores how Druze students in Israel experience informal education as a learning environment for identity construction, empowerment and personal growth in a unique socio-political setting. While much has been written about the Druze as a minority group in Israel and specifically about their citizenship, their military service, and their formal and higher education, there is a paucity of research regarding informal education and the learning environments that Druze students experience. Utilizing a combination of Experiential Learning Theory, Social Identity Theory and Empowerment Theory, and integrating the empirical research on youth participation, and minority higher education (Dana, 2003; Firro, 1999; Halabi, 2023; Court & Abbas, 2010; Seginer & Halabi-Kheir, 1998), this qualitative article draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Druze participants from a variety of informal learning environments, including, formal and informal youth movements, community centers, leadership programs, academic preparatory frameworks, and volunteering projects– including medical and emergency volunteering, cyber programs, and other non-formal and informal learning frameworks and initiatives. Utilizing a process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022), four core themes were identified that encapsulated the ways in which the participants experienced informal learning: first, informal education as a site of belonging and identity work; second, informal education as empowerment and voice; third, informal education as personal development and acquisition of life skills; and fourth, informal education as a site of critical awareness and civic participation. The findings of this article indicate that for the Druze students in this study, informal education functioned as more than an add-on to formal education; rather, it provided a range of flexible, dialogical, and experiential sites through which participants were able to negotiate and work through a range of competing identities, as well as to increase their sense of self-efficacy, and to gain the

ⁱ Correspondence: email hoda-h@gmail.com

social and cultural capital that would enable them to take on a range of different roles – both within the Druze community and within wider Israeli society at large.

Keywords: informal education; Druze students; identity formation; empowerment; personal development; minority education; higher education; Israel

1. Introduction

New approaches to informal and non-formal education are gaining recognition and appreciation. They serve as contexts for learning, for the development of identity, for social participation and for civic involvement and for the empowerment of young people. Learning through informal or non-formal environments outside of the framework of formal education is becoming more and more significant as a supplement to school. Experiential learning that takes place in non-institutional frameworks for learning, in so-called non-formal environments, such as in youth movements, in community centers, in organizations and in voluntary groups, in sports clubs, in clubs and in organizations, in places of worship and in informal groups, as well as online, is becoming an increasingly important area for the acquisition of skills and for learning and for the development of identity and for social participation (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Corney, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). Formal education is typically confined to the framework of schools and is embedded in the institutional structures of schools. Formal education is therefore often confined to the framework of the curriculum, to the processes of assessment and to the institutional structures (Eraut, 2004; UNESCO, 2021).

The Druze community is a unique ethno-religious minority within the State of Israel. As citizens of Israel, Druze are caught between a closed, Druze community and its respective culture and religion, and the broader Israeli civic institutions. Furthermore, Druze are part of the Arab social field and of broader Israeli society. There is an increasing amount of research that examines the history of the Druze community, as well as their social structure and their unique education system. The focus of much of and serve in the military, as well as how they are integrated into broader civic life (Fine & Torrey, 2021; Ozer *et al.*, 2024; Yosso, 2005). The body of research that deals with Druze education and higher education is also growing. While much of this research points to a host of positive changes for the Druze community, it also identifies and describes the various challenges Druze students and their families face in their attempts to access higher education, including geographical and language-related challenges, as well as those that stem from social and gendered expectations (Dana, 2003; Firro, 1999; Swayd, 2006). In addition, Druze students and their families encounter a complex web of community norms and are impacted by various forms of institutional inequality (Amer & Davidovitch, 2020; Shams, 2024; Weissblai, 2016).

While the literature on Druze education in Israel is abundant, and so too is the literature on informal and non-formal education, there is still a void in the knowledge we

have on the specific ways in which Druze students experience and make sense of the informal and non-formal frameworks of education, and how these frameworks can promote the students' personal, social and community development and contribute to their growth and learning in general (Ferrer-Fons *et al.*, 2022; Nash *et al.*, 2024; Zimmerman, 2000). While most of the research on informal and non-formal education views formal education as the core of the learning process, and regards the informal and non-formal frameworks of education as supplementary frameworks that compensate for the failures of formal education, the present study regards informal education as a unique framework of education, which has the potential to contribute to the development of its participants, and to promote processes of growth, learning and identity, which are not necessarily characteristic of the frameworks of formal education (Court & Abbas, 2010; Dana, 2003; Firro, 1992).

This study was designed to understand the experience of Druze students in informal educational settings and the impact that these programs have on students' identities, empowerment and personal growth. The study has three goals: 1) to study Druze students in informal education settings, 2) to study the processes of informal learning and 3) to study the empowerment of youth in general and of Druze students in particular. Informal education is viewed by this study as a sufficient arena for the full development of Druze minority students (Kolb, 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Yosso, 2005). The present study therefore asks: How do Druze students in Israel experience informal education as a space for identity development, empowerment, and personal development within their specific social and political context?

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Informal Education and Experiential Learning

There are many differing perspectives on how to define and describe the process of learning in informal settings, and while there is certainly much debate in this area, most people agree that there are many instances of learning that take place on an informal basis through daily life as well as in a variety of formalized yet non-school settings such as non-formal programs of study that are offered in community centers, youth centers, organizations that work with children and young people, as well as through the process of learning that takes place on an informal basis through the many activities that young people are involved in on an everyday basis in order to cultivate learning, dignity, responsibility to other people, and to the community at large in order to foster all round development (Corney, 2024; Ferrer-Fons *et al.*, 2022). As UNESCO (2021) posits education should be viewed as an ongoing process of learning that is taking place in a variety of sites and settings and through cooperation and solidarity between individuals and groups as well as between different generations and between different communities and countries.

Experiential Learning Theory. Experiential Learning Theory describes learning as a process in which a person goes through a cycle of experiences. This cycle includes: (1) a concrete experience, i.e. a learning situation or experience; (2) a reflective observation of that experience, i.e. thinking back on what happened during the experience; (3) an abstract conceptualization of that experience, i.e. trying to make sense of the experience by translating it to abstract concepts; and (4) an active experimentation with new ideas, i.e. putting the newly acquired concepts into practice (Kolb, 1984). The settings of informal education studied here in the research of Druze students offer them a variety of opportunities for going through the different stages of learning. First, they can have a concrete experience, i.e. be involved in different kinds of activities, such as volunteering, leading a group of young people, community work, etc. They can then go on to reflect on the experience that they had, and try to make sense of it. Finally, they can test out new ways of thinking about the experience that they had, and put the new ideas that they acquired into practice. In this way, the informal settings of education can serve the Druze students as an arena in which they can work through the different stages of learning and develop new ways of thinking about their experiences. The experiences that they have in these settings can help them to develop and to work through the different identities that they hold (Amer & Davidovitch, 2020; Shams, 2024).

2.2 Identity Formation and Minority Students

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) explains how individual and group identities are formed. Belonging to different social groups is an important part of an individual's identity or self-concept. The more a person belongs to a group, the higher their self-esteem within that group. When individuals compare their group to another, they tend to value their own group more highly. This means that members of an internal group are viewed more positively than members of other groups. For Druze students, formal and informal educational experiences can evoke a complex mix of identity elements, including Druze religious and community identities, as well as Israeli, Arab, school, gender, and local (village) identities. Not all of these identities are viewed positively; rather, they are subject to tension, negotiation, and change within both formal and informal educational frameworks. Formal and non-formal education can illuminate these tensions and mitigate the complexities of identity formation (Court & Abbas, 2010; Dana, 2003; Firro, 1999).

Education in Israel in general, and formal education in particular within the Druze context, contributes to shaping Druze students' identity and citizenship, and is integrated within the framework of state institutions and policies. Within informal and community organizations, Druze students redefine their identity in diverse contexts, develop their leadership skills, and express their opinions. Research on higher education among minorities highlights the pivotal roles of family, community, cultural capital, and institutions in shaping the educational paths of minority students (Shams, 2024; Yosso, 2005).

The community-based cultural wealth perspective is one approach used to understand marginalized youth (Yosso, 2005). This term represents an alternative to “deficit models” that attempt to explain the failure of minority students to succeed in formal educational institutions. Instead of focusing on the “deficiencies” of young people and their families, researchers argue that marginalized communities possess a range of “resources” that are not always adequately recognized or optimally utilized by formal education systems. For example, Druze students may benefit from diverse pathways, both formal and informal, to higher education (Amer & Davidovitch, 2020). Within the framework of informal education, young people can draw upon the richness of their cultural community and transform it into diverse resources that support leadership, social welfare, and community service. In this sense, young people can fulfill their community obligations while simultaneously gaining a sense of empowerment and having their voices heard.

2.3 Empowerment, Voice, and Agency

There are many definitions of empowerment. From a psychological perspective, Zimmerman (1995, 2000) defined it as the ability to control one's life, understand the causes of current events, and participate in decision-making in all its aspects. In this sense, empowerment goes beyond simply having high self-esteem; it is a fundamental human right. Youth empowerment can be viewed through the opportunities available to them to participate, the recognition they receive, their sense of belonging to the community, their feeling that adults take them seriously, and their ability to influence all areas of life (Fair-Fons *et al.*, 2022; Fine & Torrey, 2021; Ozer *et al.*, 2024).

In addition to formal and non-formal education, youth from minority groups can be empowered through participation in activities and decision-making processes. However, the extent to which a young person is allowed to interact with and lead others as part of their non-formal education depends on others' willingness, including adults, to grant them this opportunity. This, in turn, depends on the social boundaries of the community to which they belong, as well as broader social structures, including the civic structures of the state in which they live. This study addresses the issue of empowerment from a critical perspective, examining participants' experiences of gaining empowerment through their engagement in non-formal education, and how social boundaries and broader structures have influenced these experiences (Nash *et al.*, 2024; Zimmerman, 2000).

2.4 Personal Development, Belonging, and Life Skills

Informal education programs enable young people in higher education to develop personal and life skills that will benefit them in their studies and future career paths. These skills include, for example, communication, responsibility, teamwork, decision-making, resilience, coping with stress and emotions, time management, public speaking, and problem-solving (Mao *et al.*, 2023; Nagshbandi *et al.*, 2024; Shams, 2024). While formal

education helps students achieve academic success and gain the confidence to handle any situation and overcome any challenge, informal education equips students with skills that enable them to work independently and adapt to unfamiliar situations and environments.

Recent studies have indicated that a sense of belonging, self-confidence, good guidance, and appropriate social capital, which enable students to envision their future paths, are crucial factors in their higher education experiences (Mao *et al.*, 2023; Nagshbandi *et al.*, 2024). This study concluded that non-formal education provides Druze participants with a sense of direction and prepares them for higher education. It thus contributes to a better understanding of non-formal education and how it can serve as a bridge between the community and higher education.

The research areas provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the experiential learning process among Druze youth, through which their community membership develops within non-formal education. This process is analyzed from the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as well as through the process of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000), which includes expressing opinions, influencing others, and achieving effectiveness within and outside the community. Through this internal community, Druze youth benefit from the cultural richness of their community (Yosso, 2005), which is often overlooked by formal educational institutions.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Methodology and Rationale

This study employs qualitative research methods. The analysis of its results focuses on the participants' experiences, perceptions, and meanings in light of the research questions. Therefore, qualitative research methods were preferred to gather information that participants could explain through their experiences and descriptions of the situations and events that occurred (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022; Saldana, 2021).

3.2 Population and Sample

The study sample, comprised of 31 Druze participants aged 18 to 50, is defined as Druze citizens residing in Israel who participate in various informal and community-based educational programs. The participants come from several Druze towns and communities, including Daliyat al-Karmel, Usfiya, Maghar, Rama, Beit Yan, and other northern communities. Within these programs, the young people engage in diverse activities such as after-school clubs, community centers, volunteer work, Magen David Adom (MDA), youth councils, e-learning courses, hospital volunteering, and various programs that prepare students for higher education and academic studies, in addition to other personal development activities. This sample was selected for this study to

examine in depth the experiences of young people from Druze communities in informal educational programs (Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2021).

3.3 Study Tools and Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, in which participants described their formal and non-formal education, explained their reasons for joining different programs, described their experiences in these programs, and expressed their views on non-formal education in general. We used an interview guide to gather as much information as possible from participants about their formal and non-formal education, their participation in non-formal education, their experiences in different programs, how these experiences contributed to their development, the difficulties they encountered, and their views on formal and non-formal education systems. Using semi-structured interviews allowed for asking similar questions of all participants while simultaneously allowing them to describe their experiences in as much detail and depth as they wished, using their own words and language (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.4 Data Analysis and Ethics

The study included 31 young Druze men and women (15 males, 16 females) from Israel, aged 18–50 (mean = 27.10, standard deviation = 7.85). They came from various Druze communities in northern Israel, including Daliyat al-Karmel, Isfiya, Maghar, Rama, and others. All participants had experience with informal learning programs and environments and were currently enrolled in formal higher education. Several studies using similar data collection methods have investigated concepts of belonging, trust, and perseverance among Druze students in STEM fields, such as computer science and engineering (Mao *et al.*, 2023; Nagshbandi *et al.*, 2024). In these studies, informal learning took place through extracurricular programs, either as an extension of formal education, as a standalone program, or as a project group. Online platforms were also available where students engaged in independent learning challenges. The current study has investigated informal learning in the context of the community's social and political environment and how this has affected higher education, academic achievement and future career life of Druze youth (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022).

4. Results

The data analysis revealed four key themes: First, informal education environments provide a space for participants to feel a sense of belonging and identity; second, informal education provides a space for participants to be empowered, express their opinions, and develop their leadership skills; third, a wide range of life skills are learned in informal education environments, skills that contribute to the personal development of participants; fourth, the informal education environments we studied (as researcher) provide a space for participants' critical awareness and civic engagement.

4.1. Informal Education as a Space for Belonging and Identity Formation

Druze youth and young adults develop their sense of belonging through informal settings. Some of the places where young people develop their sense of belonging to the community are: a youth center, a local authority (municipality, etc.), and settings where they are involved in community work. Research participants described how volunteering (in informal settings and activities) is “rooted in identity” or “part of identity.” Thus, through the variety of settings, a stronger sense of connection to their community developed. Druze students acquire awareness of their identity and the connection between education and a sense of responsibility towards the community and the Druze people. Participants felt that in these informal settings, they could express their identity in an environment where other people of different beliefs and cultures learned, played, volunteered, etc. In some cases, despite being asked about Druze customs and practices and even the Druze way of life in general, the Druze participants in this study did not feel threatened by others who were different from them. On the contrary, these situations led to growth, greater self-awareness, and allowed participants to better express, defend, and explain their identity and way of life. There were even participants who said they were proud to be Druze and others who said they discovered a new sense of belonging to their community. It was also clear that Druze identity is not something that is given to an individual simply as a birthright, but something that an individual can practice in a variety of settings. Thus, Druze identity is realized by the individual through their involvement in a variety of formal and informal settings, including community centers, where volunteers and individuals from the community at large learn and practice their Druze customs and traditions, including periods of observing ascetic observances on certain holidays, wearing traditional clothing, and adhering to religious commandments and laws.

Throughout the discussions about their Druze identity, participants did not see their Druze identity as a fixed entity that they were “them” and “unchangeable.” Instead, they perceived their Druze identity as practiced in various activities and the different roles they assumed in the community. Thus, informal education frameworks allow participants to practice their identity in order to strengthen and affirm it, as opposed to changing it.

4.2 Informal Education as Empowerment, Voice, and Leadership

The second theme identified in the findings of this article is how participants felt empowered through their informal education experiences. Participants described the informal learning environment in several ways, including increased self-confidence, opportunities to express their opinions, and participation in projects and activities. Furthermore, they reported that leadership played a crucial role in helping them experience various aspects of these themes. This means that their participation in informal education provided them with diverse opportunities not available in formal settings, such as school and home. Participants described these opportunities in terms of

assuming leadership roles, guiding others, and making decisions. They also described how they were able to express their opinions and organize various activities with others, including leading discussions and persuading others of their viewpoints.

Leadership was another key dimension of the participants' experiences. Many young people described acting as "youth mentors" in various informal settings. They led groups of young people in organizing and managing events, facilitating dialogues, and encouraging others to participate and share their perspectives. Some young people became involved in managing and leading diverse projects, while others described how they volunteered in emergencies. Some worked in the medical field, and others became involved in local and regional youth councils. Engaging in these activities required young people to make decisions and take responsibility for others. Thus, in addition to feeling empowered, these young people put this empowerment into practice. The empowerment process is highly interactive. The young Druze man mentioned above derived his empowerment from the trust others placed in him, his ability to help younger students, the elderly, and families in need, and from the recognition he received from various community organizations for his skills.

4.3 Informal Education and Personal Development

The third theme was personal development and the numerous skills young people gained through their experiences in non-formal education. Participants described how, through these experiences, they learned communication, teamwork, patience, time management, responsibility, discipline, and how to cope with various emotions and difficult situations. One young person summarized the skills they acquired through their participation in a local youth center, saying, *"I learned how to work as part of a team, communicate with others, take responsibility, manage my time, face challenges with greater confidence, and solve problems creatively."* Non-formal education for Druze youth also contributes to their academic and professional development. Many participants described how this education helped them prepare for higher education. Some even mentioned that they didn't hesitate in choosing their major or even continuing their studies, and thanks to the non-formal education they received, they knew how to make decisions. Participants who enrolled in academic preparation programs emphasized that they learned self-discipline, how to study independently, and how to take responsibility for their education. Many young people indicated that their non-formal education influenced their career choices, and that they aspire to work in social work, education, healthcare, engineering, or public services.

The main difference between formal and non-formal education is that formal education focuses on tests, grades, and curricula, while non-formal education focuses on real-life situations, relationships, and values. Therefore, in addition to the skills acquired in formal education, which enable individuals to be independent and continue learning, non-formal education also develops skills and tools that help individuals take responsibility in life and participate effectively in society.

4.4 Informal Education as a Socio-political Space

The findings indicate that the participants acquired knowledge about different social groups, became aware of the problems facing society, and became aware of the needs of their local community. The participants were involved in volunteering, youth council activities, local surveys, emergency mapping, meetings with people from different social backgrounds, and more. In conclusion, non-formal education provided participants with an awareness of society in a completely different way than formal education.

Some of how informal education contributed to the sense of connection and/or disconnect between the needs of the Druze community and the way institutions respond to those needs were highlighted by participants in this study. For example, some participants spoke of their attempts to explain Druze identity to others, while others spoke of their work in local councils and other community settings, which involved dealing with people from diverse backgrounds. Finally, several participants spoke of their attempts to represent the Druze community in various participatory settings, in an effort to articulate the needs of the community.

Our research findings further suggest that informal environments can serve as a basis for developing critical awareness of various complex issues that affect society and communities. Thus, although informal environments do not promote critical awareness to the extent necessary to promote full empowerment, they can enable growth and link it to social responsibility.

5. Discussion

Involvement in informal education functions as a multidimensional developmental space, where Druze students in Israel develop their identity, feel empowered, grow, and acquire awareness of social and political reality. The findings of the current article are consistent with the integrated theoretical framework and extend the existing research on Druze education, which focuses primarily on formal education and the experience of Druze students in formal education (Court & Abbas, 2010; Shams, 2024).

5.1 Identity as Negotiated Belonging

This study aims to understand and examine how the participants' various identities develop and are negotiated within different informal learning environments, and how these identities are influenced by these environments. It is based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which posits that individuals acquire their identities as members of social groups, and that these identities are significant and meaningful to them. Research into the processes of identity formation and negotiation that occur within and between different informal learning environments offers new insights into the study of identity processes in general, and the process of identity development and negotiation in informal learning environments in particular (Yosso, 2005).

As the discussion reveals, the theme of informal education aligns with previous research (Court & Abbas, 2010). This study explores how education can assist Druze students in their pursuit of identity and citizenship. This article highlights the identity-building process that Druze students undergo outside of formal education. Formal education can facilitate the exploration and development of identity through school activities; However, these spaces are often less closely tied to the curriculum. Consequently, Druze students are able to express their true selves (Sewell, 1992) in these environments. The issue of minority students' belonging in school settings is another area of research that has been explored by other scholars (Mao *et al.*, 2023; Naghshbandi *et al.*, 2024; Shams, 2024).

5.2 Empowerment Beyond Self-confidence

The second key finding of this study relates to the participants' sense of empowerment or maturity. These young people have matured and become more self-aware. To discuss this finding, it is necessary to refer to Zimmerman's (1995, 2000) definition of empowerment. This definition includes three dimensions: (1) perceived control, (2) critical awareness, and (3) active participation. In other words, for an individual to be considered empowered, they must feel in control of their life, have acquired critical awareness, and be able to participate in various activities. In the context of this study, it was clear that the participants not only felt more confident but were also able to apply their newly acquired skills. For example, some led student groups, organized various events, helped younger students with their homework, volunteered in medical or emergency services, expressed their opinions publicly, or made decisions.

Furthermore, the findings support a critical perspective on the concept of empowerment and how non-formal education is influenced by societal and community expectations, as well as by formal and informal institutions. For example, participants were able to express their opinions and assume responsibilities, but this expression and these responsibilities were not limited to the existing structures alone; they also encompassed the broader context of the society and state in which they live. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the processes of Druze youth empowerment in Israel, it is essential to examine empowerment as a form of negotiation that is, as the actions and opinions of participants influenced by the existing structures and the society and state in which they live. This perspective aligns with numerous recent studies on youth empowerment that frame this phenomenon within the context of participation, critical awareness, and the opportunities available to young people to exert influence (Ferrer-Fons *et al.*, 2022; Nash *et al.*, 2024; Ozer *et al.*, 2024).

5.3 Experiential Learning and Personal Development

In addition to the previous points, the informal education space allowed Druze students to undergo processes of personal growth and learning. These experiences were translated into different learning stages, according to the experiential learning model presented by

David Kolb (1984). The model begins with a concrete experience; then, there is a reflection stage, in which people try to understand the experiences they have had. In the third stage, new concepts are developed, which allow people to understand the experiences being learned. Finally, there is an application stage, in which people are able to apply what they have learned in a variety of situations.

According to the aforementioned study, this type of learning also occurs in the Druze community through participation, through personal connections and through practical experience (Corney, 2024; Ferrer-fons *et al.*, 2022).

The informal educational environment, therefore, is also a means to bridge between school and life and to prepare the Druze youth in the best possible way for the challenges they will encounter in academic as well as in professional environments. Given the complex of linguistic, geographical and cultural obstacles that Druze students are facing in their attempts to succeed in higher education (Amer & Davidovitch, 2020; Shams, 2024; Weissblai, 2016), the informal educational environment can play a crucial role in supporting them in their endeavors to become academically oriented and to develop into mature and responsible life-oriented individuals.

5.4 Socio-political Implications

The fourth key finding concerns the informal education space as a socio-political space. The study found that through the informal frameworks and activities in which they were involved, the participants dealt with different groups of people, with diverse social problems, with local needs, and with a series of issues concerning life in Israel. In general, the participants acquired knowledge and experience in a variety of frameworks, which enabled them to better understand the complex reality of Israeli society and the various issues and problems concerning the country and its various communities (Dana, 2003; Firro, 1999; Swayd, 2006).

This study contributes to minority education by studying learning environments outside of formal settings. It shows how Druze students develop, negotiate, and strengthen their identities and thus gain empowerment. Their voices are expressed in unique and diverse ways. Using youth studies perspectives and a participatory approach, this article explores and analyzes Druze students' diverse voices and experiences of belonging and critical perspectives on institutions and structures. In this sense, this article adds to existing youth studies research by Fine & Torrey (2021), among others, and provides new insights (Fine & Torrey, 2021; Nash *et al.*, 2024; Ozer *et al.*, 2024).

5.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, due to its qualitative nature, its findings cannot be statistically generalized to all Druze students in Israel. Second, the results are based on the participants' experiences, which may be more positive than those of other Druze students who did not participate. Third, this study relies on participants' self-reported experiences and is therefore subject to the general limitations of research based on self-

reported data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Future studies would benefit from using additional methodologies, including observation and a review of a variety of documents. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to follow up with the participants in this study to understand how different aspects of non-formal education affect them in the long term. Finally, this study is limited to one minority group in one country and therefore does not allow for comparisons with other minority groups in different countries. The qualitative research described in this article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the phenomena under investigation, determine the validity of the findings, and contribute to the existing body of knowledge on this topic.

6. Conclusion

This article presents a qualitative study of the experiences of Druze students and young people pursuing higher education in Israel. Through their experiences in informal education, the study examines the ways in which such settings can foster identity building, empowerment, and personal growth. The study found that through informal education, Druze students experience a sense of belonging and identify with different identities. They acquire confidence, leadership skills, and a variety of practical life skills. They also become more aware of the socio-political reality in which they live and experience through experiential, relational, and communal learning. This study contributes to the existing knowledge about the role that informal education can play for Druze students aged 18-50, beyond its role as a supplement to formal education. Their experiences in informal education can be very significant for the personal development of Druze students and for the identification of their personal identity, community belonging, academic aspirations, and civic duties. This study focuses on the voices of Druze students in informal education settings in order to show how these settings can facilitate both inclusion and critical agency in complex minority contexts.

Further research could include a deeper exploration of gender experiences in relation to informal education. It would also be very interesting to follow a group of Druze students in formal and informal education settings and compare their experiences with those of other minority groups. Also, long-term follow-up of young people who have undergone informal education over the years and examining the impact it has on them to persist in higher education, choose a job or civic service, and engage in civic activities. Informal education programs, which are responsive to culture and include voice, observation, and action, offer a powerful developmental pathway that helps young people to forge their identity, grow, and contribute to social change. Such programs and frameworks should be supported by policies and by formal and informal education systems, and more specifically, for Druze young people in Druze communities, through a variety of youth leadership opportunities. In addition, these informal education programs should be connected to formal higher education institutions in order to improve access to higher education.

Creative Commons License Statement

This research work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>. To view the complete legal code, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.en>. Under the terms of this license, members of the community may copy, distribute, and transmit the article, provided that proper, prominent, and unambiguous attribution is given to the authors, and the material is not used for commercial purposes or modified in any way. Reuse is only allowed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Amer, A., & Davidovitch, N. (2020). The case of Druze society and its integration in higher education in Israel. *International Education Studies*, 13(8), 68-79. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v13n8p68>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE. Retrieved from <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/thematic-analysis/book248481>
- Brinkmann, S., & kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (3rd ed.). SAGE. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=zcAbnwEACAAJ&printsec=copyright#v=onepage&q&f=false>
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, 56, 1391-1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>
- Corney, T. (2024). Youth work as social pedagogy. *Child & Youth Services*, 45(1), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2023.2218081>
- Court, D., & Abbas, R. (2010). The role of Druze high schools in Israel in shaping students' identity and citizenship. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 5(2), 145-162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197910370725>
- Dana, N. (2003). *The Druze in the Middle East: Their faith, leadership, identity and status*. Sussex Academic Press. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_Druze_in_the_Middle_East.html?id=NXxtAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Eraut, M. (2004). Informal learning in the workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(2), 247-273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/158037042000225245>

- Ferrer-Fons, M., Rovira-Martinez, M., & Soler-i-Marti, R. (2022). Youth empowerment through arts education: A case study of a non-formal education arts centre in Barcelona. *Social Inclusion*, 10(2), 85-94. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i2.4923>
- Fine, M., & Torrey, M. E. (2021). *Essentials of critical participatory action research*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Essentials_of_Critical_Participatory_Act.html?id=ZggxzgEACAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Firro, K. (1999). *The Druzes in the Jewish state: A brief history* (Vol. 64). Brill. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_Druzes_in_the_Jewish_State.html?id=owhg2R8Ndy8C&redir_esc=y
- Halabi, R. (2023). Palestinian students in an Israeli-Hebrew University: obstacles and challenges. *Higher Education*, 86(3), 661-673. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00920-x>
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235701029_Experiential_Learning_Experience_As_The_Source_Of_Learning_And_Development
- Mao, K., Ferguson, S., Magarian, J., & Olechowski, A. (2023). 'Just a little bit on the outside for the whole time': Social belonging confidence and the persistence of machine learning and artificial intelligence students. <https://doi.org/10.18260/1-2--42325>
- Naghshbandi, M., Ferguson, S., & Olechowski, A. (2024). Social capital and persistence in computer science of Google's Computer Science Summer Institute (CSSI) students. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2407.13910>
- Nash, A., Kennedy, H., Abraczinskas, M., Suleiman, A. B., & Ozer, E. J. (2024). Examining the intersection of sociopolitical development and transformative social and emotional learning outcomes: An integrated approach in youth participatory action research. *Youth*, vol 4. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth4020046>
- Ozer, E. J., Abraczinskas, M., Suleiman, A. B., Kennedy, H., & Nash, A. (2024). Youth-led participatory action research and developmental science: Intersections and innovations. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, vol. 6. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-devpsych-010923-100158>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods (4th ed.)*. SAGE. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/Qualitative_Research_Evaluation_Methods.html?id=FjBw2oi8El4C&redir_esc=y
- Saldana, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers (4th ed.)*. SAGE. Retrieved from https://books.google.ro/books/about/The_Coding_Manual_for_Qualitative_Researcher.html?id=RwcVEAAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y

- Seginer, R., & Halabi-Kheir, M. (1998). Adolescent passage to adulthood: Future orientation among Israeli Druze, Arab, and Jewish youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 27(5), 577–595. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(98\)00010-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(98)00010-8)
- Sewell Jr, W. H. (1992). Introduction: Narratives and social identities. *Social Science History*, 16(3), 479-488. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171392>
- Shams, D. (2024). 'You don't have to be educated to help your child': Parental involvement among Druze students from the Golan Heights in Israeli higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12525>
- Swayd, S. S. (2006). *Historical dictionary of the Druzes*. Scarecrow Press. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798216412458>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). *The social identity theory of intergroup behavior*. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed., pp. 7-24). Nelson-Hall. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.4324/9780203505984-16>
- UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/reimagining-our-futures-together-new-social-contract-education>
- Weissblai, E. (2016). *The Druze education system and integration in higher education*. Knesset Research and Information Center.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 581-599. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02506983>
- Zimmerman, M. A. (2000). *Empowerment theory: Psychological, organizational and community levels of analysis*. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of community psychology* (pp. 43-63). Springer. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2000-03855-002>