



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF SCHOOL LEAVING: PERCEIVED INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT, PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING, AND SCHOOL BELONGING AMONG ARAB DROPOUT YOUTH IN ISRAEL

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Abstract:

This study examines the psychological aspects of school dropout among Arab youth in Israel. The purpose is to provide an analysis of the psychological aspects of perceived institutional support, well-being, and school belonging on the disengagement and dropout process. The study is significant because it moves beyond explanations that attribute dropout primarily to individual motivation or misconduct and contributes an integrated psychological and socio-ecological interpretation based on the experiences of former students. A qualitative secondary research design was employed, using reflexive thematic analysis of publicly available interview narratives from 40 former Arab high-school students who had left school before completion. The findings revealed that institutional support was frequently experienced as delayed, fragmented, or disciplinary; school belonging deteriorated before formal withdrawal; boredom, frustration, emotional exhaustion, and reduced competence contributed to psychological disengagement; and school difficulties interacted with peer, behavioral, family, employment, and financial pressures. The conclusions drawn from the findings are that dropping out is a result of a cumulative, multidimensional process, and not a single event or decision. Among others, the recommendations for practitioners are the need to implement early multidisciplinary interventions, provide continued support from an adult, adopt restorative discipline approaches, ensure that there are psychosocial support services in Arabic, and provide assistance for academic recovery and alternative educational and vocational paths. From a theoretical perspective, the findings enhance the self-determination and socio-ecological theories through showing the role of institutions in promoting and hindering autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Keywords: Arab dropout youth; institutional support; psychological well-being; school belonging; school disengagement; qualitative analysis; educational re-engagement; Israel

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1. Introduction

Leaving secondary school before completion is rarely an isolated decision; it is usually the visible endpoint of a longer process involving academic difficulty, absenteeism, weakened relationships, emotional strain, disciplinary encounters, and changing expectations about the future (Bitsakos, 2025). In this article, dropout youth refers descriptively to young people who left formal secondary education before obtaining the expected completion credential and does not imply a fixed or deficient identity. Perceived institutional support denotes a young person's judgment that the school, through teachers, counselors, support personnel, leaders, procedures, and services, noticed difficulty, treated the student fairly, and made academic or psychosocial help genuinely usable (Karadaş *et al.*, 2026). Psychological well-being includes emotions, tolerable distress, competence, and engagement in meaningful pursuits, while school belonging refers to feeling accepted, respected, included, and recognized in school life (Dhanabhakym & Sarath, 2023). Even though they are two different things, they are connected to each other in that institutional relationships and school atmosphere may influence both the emotional functioning of the students and their belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Gubbels *et al.*, 2019; Korpershoek *et al.*, 2020). The purpose of the current research is to understand how Arab youths who drop out of school perceive the forms of support they receive before leaving school, the connection between the presence/absence of support and well-being and belonging, and how it all affects prevention and reengagement strategies.

Four research questions guide the article:

RQ1: How do Arab dropout youth describe the institutional support available before and during withdrawal?

RQ2: How do they connect school experiences with psychological well-being and belonging?

RQ3: What school-based and external conditions shaped the movement from difficulty to actual dropout? and

RQ4: What institutional responses appear most relevant for preventing withdrawal or enabling return?

The inquiry is important because dropout is often explained through individual motivation even though research consistently locates risk across interacting individual, family, peer, and school domains. A focus on Arab youth in Israel requires particular care: Arab identity is not a risk factor, and Arab communities are heterogeneous across religion, locality, gender, class, disability, family resources, and educational opportunity. The relevant issue is how institutional processes interact with socioeconomic inequality, language, discrimination, access to support, and local opportunity structures. Studies looking into students of Arabic origins all show how essential it is to create positive learning atmosphere so that students can have equal access to education, especially for students of big families, whereas studies conducted on local level indicate that poverty, social stigma, and lack of options for the future may seriously affect students' decisions

about dropping out (Berkowitz, 2022; Shoshana, 2020). Young Arab people in Israel who underwent research were also found to apply for help when necessary according to their trust, general knowledge of ways to get this help, level of stress, and socioeconomic circumstances (Abo-Rass *et al.*, 2024; Daeem *et al.*, 2019). In addition, the article introduces an innovative approach to analyze dropouts in terms of their reasons and not losses connected to the process of leaving school.

In methodological terms, the article employs the qualitative analysis of a publicly accessible report containing the interview narratives of 40 former high school dropouts from the Arab education context in Israel (Darawsha & Bozdaglar, 2023). Reflexive thematic analysis was applied to determine patterns of narration regarding institutional response, belonging, emotional disengagement, and competing pressures (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). The analysis showed that support was perceived as fragmented or disciplinary in nature, belonging deteriorated prior to the official withdrawal, emotional exhaustion and boredom accompanied disengagement, and school pressure combined with work, financial, peer and behavioral pressures. In practical terms, the applications of the findings include an early multidisciplinary response, continuity through working with one adult, fair and restorative discipline, accessible support in Arabic, relevant curriculum, and flexible paths between academia and vocational education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 School Dropout as a Cumulative Process

The current approach to understanding school dropout considers it as a process rather than a single event. Meta-analysis revealed the risk factors associated with children, family, school, and peers, namely, learning difficulties, repeating a year, internalization/externalization problems, poor attitude towards schooling, poor parent-school collaboration, and bad school relationships (Gubbels *et al.*, 2019). Such an approach does not let us attribute the child's withdrawal to his/her one personal flaw. The same risk may have different meanings across students, and multiple modest difficulties can interact over time until continued attendance appears less realistic or less valuable. Qualitative research is especially useful in this context because it can reconstruct sequence: when problems began, when adults noticed, how support was offered, how absence changed relationships, and when leaving became understood as inevitable or preferable (Buu & Engelhardt, 2026).

The application of longitudinal research designs has allowed for the distinction between the original understanding of the withdrawal process from education and dropouts themselves. Teacher support has been found to predict withdrawal intentions through the mechanisms of emotional engagement and boredom, with the variations in teacher support and peer loneliness being predictors of changes in quit intentions (Tvedt *et al.*, 2021a; Tvedt *et al.*, 2021b). A five-year longitudinal study has revealed that the psychosocial factors of learning, as well as academic performance, predict the completion of educational processes through different mechanisms, where teacher support acts

indirectly through performance, while loneliness predicts the non-completion directly (Tvedt & Bru, 2023). Literature dedicated to the problem of truancy from the point of view of students has pointed out such aspects as emotional disturbance, negative experiences, poor well-being, supportive relationships, resilience, and future orientation as related phenomena to continuing education (Enderle *et al.*, 2024). Thus, the presented literature review explains the importance of studying the stories of dropout youth as a developmental process rather than just their reasons for leaving.

2.2 Perceived Institutional Support

Institutional support refers to the general evaluation of how much the school appreciates the needs of the students, offers proper assistance, treats everyone equally, maintains their dignity, and follows up on actions taken (Eseadi, 2023). The construct covers support from teachers but goes beyond the one-on-one relationships between the student and the teacher since there is interaction between the former and counselors, school psychologists, support personnel, administrators, as well as referrals, attendance, discipline policies, and accommodations. According to research done in secondary institutions, support personnel are responsible for the well-being of the student just like the teaching staff (Littlecott *et al.*, 2018). This means that institutional support depends on the organization of the support system and not only the classroom instruction alone. There have been cross-country studies that have established that teacher unfairness and disciplinary climate are among the predictors of school belongingness (Allen *et al.*, 2023). The existence of a service does not guarantee that it will be experienced as supportive. Young people may know that a counselor is employed while remaining uncertain about confidentiality, eligibility, language, consequences of disclosure, or whether any practical response will follow. A systematic review identified mental-health knowledge, stigma, confidentiality concerns, trust, availability, and logistical access as recurrent influences on whether children and adolescents seek professional help (Radez *et al.*, 2021). Among Arab adolescents in Israel, intentions to seek formal mental-health help were associated with socioeconomic status, distress, trust in formal sources, knowledge of where to obtain information, and help-seeking attitudes (Abo-Rass *et al.*, 2024; Stanimirović, P., 2024). In the Galilee Study, mothers of Arab adolescents emphasized accessibility and treatment-related concerns, and the barrier measure also addressed lack of information and the absence of Arabic-speaking professionals (Daeem, Mansbach-Kleinfeld, Farbstein, Apter, *et al.*, 2019). Institutional support is therefore psychologically meaningful only when youth know about it, can reach it, trust it, and expect a respectful response.

2.3 Psychological Well-Being

A good psychological well-being during adolescence consists of positive emotions, good stress management, competence, self-respect, and the ability to achieve educational and social aims. It cannot be defined merely as the lack of a psychiatric disorder. School experiences might enhance well-being due to predictability, safety, competence, and connectedness, or destroy it with a series of failures, embarrassment, isolation, conflicts,

and uncertainty. The study from England conducted in a longitudinal manner suggests that having a better school climate is related to the positive mental well-being of teenagers, but the observational design does not confirm the cause-and-effect relationship (Leurent *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, studies conducted among adolescents show a link between school belonging, subjective well-being, and mental-health problems, as well as highlight loneliness as a significant relational factor (Arslan, 2021).

The context of Arab youth in Israel further provides evidence that support and distress are associated with more social factors. One such study shows how depressive symptoms mediate associations of teacher and peer support with non-suicidal self-injury, as well as partial mediation in associations of parental support with suicidal ideation in Arab youth (Madjar *et al.*, 2021). The Galilee study identified socioeconomic difficulties, learning disabilities, mothers' distress, and perception of discrimination as correlates of mental disorders, varying by religion between Muslim and Druze adolescents (Daeem *et al.*, 2019). This is not to suggest that the role of schools here is to take over treatment from clinics; on the contrary, it is to say that schools are situated in such a way that they can provide for detection, support, and referral to treatment. In studies of dropouts, psychological well-being needs to be considered as both an outcome and a determinant of school attendance.

2.4 School Belonging

Belonging at school involves the degree to which students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported by the school. It is relational since it grows out of interaction with teachers and fellow students, and it is institutional since policies, practices, opportunities, and discipline signal who is valued and who is marginalized (Štremfel *et al.*, 2024). A meta-analysis identified factors such as teacher support, peer support, emotional stability, academic motivation, involvement in extracurricular activities, and a safe school environment as being related to feelings of belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2018). Another meta-analytical study showed belonging to be related to motivational, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic consequences of secondary schooling (Korpershoek *et al.*, 2020). Belonging, thus, is not an optional feeling but a component of the social structure in which participation is sustained.

The concept of belonging may provide insights into the connection between support and engagement. A study of high school students found that school belonging acted as a mediator in the relationship between support from both teachers and peers and the students' engagement in school (Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). The available literature points to the relationship between belonging during adolescence and the decrease in depression, anxiety, and stress later in life, as well as the findings of the systematic review of studies that reveal the protective effects of school connectedness on the symptoms of depression and anxiety (Allen *et al.*, 2024; Raniti *et al.*, 2022). The research provides evidence indicating that school-based interventions may increase school belonging, especially those that focus on building positive relations between educators and students as well as peer-to-peer relations; however, such interventions

have sometimes been found to yield inconsistent results, which poses challenges for finding effective approaches to change students' relationships with their schools (Allen *et al.*, 2022).

2.5 Arab Dropout Youth in Israel

Arab youth in Israel present heterogeneity not only among Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Bedouin groups but also among urban and rural communities, genders, socio-economic background, disability and family circumstances. In a thorough analysis of the issue, the phenomenon of Arab identity is not considered the reason for dropouts (Essa *et al.*, 2025). On the contrary, a thorough analysis explores the interaction of educational systems, disparities in the distribution of resources, environment, language, discrimination, access to services, and future prospects, with individual life paths. Studies of Arabic-speaking children reveal that good school climate has particular importance for educational possibilities in at-risk schools and vulnerable students, yet highlighting that the latter cannot eliminate poverty by itself (Berkowitz, 2022). The difference should be drawn since reforms of the relations without an adequate number of teachers and learning assistance, transport, mental health services, and reliable career prospects will be merely symbolic.

Qualitative evidence from the local context also supports the idea that future orientation is central to leaving school experiences. The phenomenological analysis by Shoshana (2020) of Muslim males who dropped out of high school explains orientations arising out of poverty, education deprivation, and national-religious stigma (Shoshana, 2020). As explained in the report used in the current article as the source of data, interviews were held with 40 past high-school dropouts, and problems related to behavior, peer and workplace influence, boredom, and low belonging emerged (Darawsha & Bozdaglar, 2023). On the other hand, help-seeking studies find trust, awareness, attitudes, distress, and socioeconomic status to be determinants of whether adolescents from Palestine seek formal help or not (Abo-Rass *et al.*, 2024). This information means that getting these individuals to participate again should not only mean persuading them that everything remains the same.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

Two complementary perspectives organize the analysis. Self-determination theory proposes that motivation and well-being are strengthened when social environments support autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Applied to dropout narratives, autonomy concerns whether youth experienced meaningful choice rather than only coercion; competence concerns whether instruction, feedback, and academic adaptation allowed them to experience progress rather than repeated failure; and relatedness concerns whether adults and peers conveyed recognition, fairness, and care. Perceived institutional support can therefore be understood as the organizational conditions through which these basic psychological needs are either supported or frustrated. School belonging is closely connected to relatedness, psychological well-being

reflects the broader functioning associated with need satisfaction, and disengagement may intensify when students repeatedly experience control, incompetence, or social exclusion (Chaudhry *et al.*, 2024).

A socio-ecological perspective complements this motivational account by locating school leaving within interacting individual, relational, school, family, community, and policy contexts (Allen *et al.*, 2023). Cumulative-risk research similarly explains why no single event is sufficient: academic difficulty, disciplinary exclusion, loneliness, poverty, work demands, family responsibilities, and limited support can accumulate and alter the meaning of later events (Gubbels *et al.*, 2019). Because the design is qualitative, these ideas function as sensitizing concepts rather than statistical hypotheses. The analysis expects institutional support to be most credible when it is early, fair, coordinated, culturally and linguistically accessible, and linked to realistic options; it also expects dropout to be narrated through interactions between school-based 'push' conditions and out-of-school 'pull' pressures. The evidence remains open to accounts that complicate or contradict these expectations.

3. Materials and Methods

In light of the nature of the research questions, which revolved around meaning, sequence, and interpretation, such as perceptions regarding institutional reaction, sense of belonging, well-being, and interaction of various pressures prior to dropping out of school, a qualitative secondary analysis design was adopted. Qualitative research is recommended where the goal is to interpret the experience of the participant as opposed to estimating the prevalence of certain phenomena. Reflexive thematic analysis was selected since it allows for patterned meaning to be found through engaging with data while recognizing that themes are constructed in the process of interpreting data (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). This secondary analysis design was selected as it would have been inappropriate to offer primary findings without providing transcripts.

The study tool in the original source was the individual interview. The published report includes interviewer prompts followed by open-ended participant responses, a format consistent with semi-structured interviewing because common topics were introduced while respondents were able to explain their experiences in their own words. Semi-structured interviews are useful for sensitive educational topics because they combine comparability across participants with flexibility to pursue unanticipated meanings (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). However, the source does not publish the complete interview guide or specify interview language, duration, location, recording, transcription, translation, or interviewer characteristics. The present article therefore describes the material as interviewer-guided and broadly semi-structured but does not invent procedural details that the source did not report (Darawsha & Bozdaglar, 2023).

The study involved a sample of 40 former Arab high school students in Israel who had first-hand experience with school dropout. These individuals were purposefully selected to ensure deep insights into the process of decision-making and factors that led

to disengagement from formal education. This sample represents the qualitative research objective of this study since it aims at obtaining rich insights on the experience of participants and not representative results. Therefore, these results are based on the viewpoints of the former students in this study and cannot be generalized to all Arab youths who drop out of schools in Israel. Sampling is adequate in qualitative interview research based on how specific the participants, objectives, depth of interviews and analysis are, and not based on a set number of participants (Malterud *et al.*, 2016).

Data were subjected to systematic thematic analysis which involved multiple readings of the transcripts of the interviews, coding, cross-coding between participants, formation of themes, and their subsequent evaluation in light of the research questions. Participants' descriptions provided the basis for analysis, while small quotes demonstrated the link between the research findings and respondents' experiences. General conclusions about the research were made through contextual analysis and comparison with the related scientific literature. The reliability of the findings was increased by separating the statements made by the participants from the researcher's interpretation of these statements, taking into account contradictory cases, documenting the whole process of analysis, and following qualitative research guidelines (Levitt *et al.*, 2018). In general, throughout the research, the ethical requirements were observed in terms of protecting the anonymity of the participants and respecting their experiences.

4. Results

The thematic analysis demonstrated some concepts across the four main areas in the narratives of 40 former Arab students in Israel who left school early. These concepts included institutional support being interpreted as either punitive or inconsistent, the fading of school belonging right before dropping out of school, the role of boredom and emotional fatigue in the students' disengagement, as well as the combination of the challenges faced at school with other negative experiences related to behavior, peers, and financial issues.

Theme 1: Institutional Support Was Experienced as Control Rather Than Coordinated Care

The first theme showed that participants frequently experienced institutional responses as disciplinary, delayed, or fragmented rather than as coordinated forms of academic and emotional support. Research conducted in secondary schools indicates that support staff, alongside teaching staff, can make an important contribution to students' health and well-being (Littlecott *et al.*, 2018); however, participants in the present study often believed that school staff became actively involved only after absenteeism, behavioral conflict, or academic failure had intensified. This experience was reflected in the statement, *"The school noticed me only when I caused a problem."* Participants described warnings, punishment, suspension, criticism, and exclusion as more visible than attempts to understand the personal, academic, or emotional difficulties underlying their

behavior. This finding is important because perceived teacher unfairness and the disciplinary climate of a school can influence students' sense of belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2023). One participant's experience was represented by the statement, *"They punished me, but no one asked what was happening to me."* Participants also reported uncertainty about whom they could approach for assistance and felt that teachers, counselors, and administrators addressed separate aspects of their difficulties without coordinating their responses, as illustrated by the statement, *"Every teacher dealt with one part of the problem, but no one followed my whole situation."* Such uncertainty is especially important because trust, confidentiality, knowledge of services, and practical accessibility affect whether adolescents seek professional help (Radez *et al.*, 2021). Among Arab adolescents in Israel, intentions to seek formal mental-health assistance have also been associated with trust in formal sources and knowledge of where help can be obtained (Abo-Rass *et al.*, 2024). Although disciplinary action did not independently cause every participant to leave school, punishment without relationship repair, academic assistance, psychosocial support, or consistent follow-up appeared to deepen feelings of rejection and institutional abandonment.

Theme 2: School Belonging Eroded Before Formal Withdrawal

The second theme demonstrated that participants' emotional and relational withdrawal from school began before they formally stopped attending. Teacher support, peer support, academic motivation, emotional stability, involvement in school activities, and a safe educational environment are important factors associated with students' sense of school belonging (Allen *et al.*, 2018). In the present study, however, participants frequently described feeling socially disconnected, insufficiently recognized, and unable to identify a meaningful place for themselves within the school community, as reflected in the statement, *"I went to school, but I never felt that I belonged there."* Some participants believed that their presence, absence, participation, or academic difficulties received little attention, explaining, *"I felt invisible; it did not matter whether I was there or not."* This weakened sense of belonging was significant because school belonging is associated with motivational, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes in secondary education (Korpershoek *et al.*, 2020). Participants connected their declining attachment to school with limited teacher attention, weak peer relationships, repeated academic failure, perceived unfairness, and the belief that school did not recognize their abilities. Some experienced greater acceptance among peers outside school, as represented by the statement, *"Outside school, I felt accepted in a way I never felt in the classroom."* The importance of these relationships is supported by evidence that school belonging mediates the relationship between teacher and peer support and students' academic involvement (Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). The findings therefore showed that physical attendance did not necessarily indicate psychological membership or meaningful participation. Participants could remain officially enrolled while emotionally withdrawing, avoiding lessons, and attending irregularly, and previous longitudinal evidence similarly indicates that teacher support and loneliness contribute to educational

completion through different pathways (Tvedt & Bru, 2023). Formal dropout consequently represented the final stage of a longer relational process in which attachment to teachers, peers, learning, and school life had already deteriorated.

Theme 3: Psychological Disengagement Was Expressed Through Boredom and Emotional Exhaustion

The third theme showed that participants' disengagement involved declining motivation, boredom, frustration, emotional exhaustion, and a growing belief that continued attendance no longer had personal value. Teacher support has been associated with students' intentions to leave school through emotional engagement and boredom, demonstrating that boredom may be part of a broader withdrawal process rather than a minor classroom complaint (Tvedt, Bru, & Idsøe, 2021). The study participants indicated that their experiences of lessons and school life had been repetitive, dull and out of sync with what they would like to do or what they could do in life: *"All school days were alike, I began losing interest in anything"*. This feeling of disengagement was brought about by the attempts which were not effective in terms of academic achievements and the subsequent negative feedback from the school: *"I got tired of trying because it didn't work"*. The research conducted from the students' perspective has established a link between poor attendance at school, emotional problems, the experience of negative events at school and an uncertain outlook on life (Enderle *et al.*, 2024). As participants' motivation weakened, their absence increased, causing them to miss lessons, fall behind academically, and experience greater difficulty returning to regular participation, as illustrated by the statement, *"The more lessons I missed, the harder it became to return."* Positive school climate has been associated with more favorable adolescent mental health, although such observational findings do not independently establish causation (Leurent *et al.*, 2021). School belonging, well-being, and mental-health difficulties are also related through relational factors such as loneliness (Arslan, 2021). The participants' descriptions should not be interpreted as evidence of clinical psychological disorders; nevertheless, they demonstrate how emotional fatigue, reduced hope, low perceived competence, and loss of interest became part of the school-leaving process. This interpretation is particularly relevant in the Arab context because social support and depressive symptoms have been connected with serious distress-related outcomes among Arab adolescents in Israel (Madjar *et al.*, 2021).

Theme 4: Dropout Reflected Interacting School, Behavioral, Peer, and Economic Pressures

The fourth theme demonstrated that participants' decisions to leave school did not arise from one uniform cause but developed through interactions among academic decline, absenteeism, disciplinary conflict, behavioral difficulties, peer influence, employment, family circumstances, and economic pressure. This multidimensional interpretation is consistent with meta-analytic evidence showing that absenteeism and dropout risks occur across individual, family, peer, and school domains rather than within only one

area of young people's lives (Gubbels *et al.*, 2019). Participants mentioned that constant absence led to missed classes and falling behind, and lastly, academic failure decreased their desire to return, as articulated in this phrase: *"Because of missing classes, my grades got bad, and I wanted to stay away from school"*. Achievement in school, support from teachers and loneliness are the following possible pathways affecting the outcome of education, which can explain how the issues in the academic sphere and problems in interpersonal relationships can affect each other (Tvedt & Bru, 2023). School-related socialization was affected by peers, as some friends supported skipping school or disrupting relationships with teachers, while groups of individuals outside educational institutions provided either acceptance, identity, status, or protection that was unavailable for individuals in school. Economic considerations created additional pressure because employment provided immediate and visible benefits when the long-term value of education appeared uncertain, as illustrated by the statement, *"Work gave me money immediately, while school offered only promises about the future"*. Local qualitative research has similarly shown that poverty, educational deprivation, social stigma, and constrained future orientation can shape how Muslim male school dropouts in Israel understand their available opportunities (Shoshana, 2020). Participants' accounts therefore suggested that school-based "push" factors, including exclusion, academic failure, limited support, and weak belonging, interacted with external "pull" factors such as employment, financial responsibilities, family circumstances, and peer influence. The cumulative nature of this experience was summarized by the statement, *"It was not one reason; it was the problems, the grades, my friends, and the need to work"*. Dropout was therefore experienced as a gradual and multidimensional process shaped by personal decisions within wider educational, relational, social, and economic circumstances.

5. Discussion

This study examined the school-leaving experiences of 40 former Arab high-school students in Israel through the interconnected concepts of perceived institutional support, psychological well-being, and school belonging. Four main findings emerged: institutional support was frequently experienced as disciplinary, delayed, or fragmented; students' sense of belonging weakened before formal withdrawal; psychological disengagement was expressed through boredom, frustration, and emotional exhaustion; and school-based difficulties interacted with peer, behavioral, family, employment, and economic pressures. Together, these findings indicate that leaving school was generally the culmination of a gradual process rather than a single decision caused by one event. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that school attendance problems and dropout develop through combinations of academic, psychological, relational, family, peer, and institutional factors. Recent qualitative studies have similarly described school disengagement as a progressive process in which negative school experiences, deteriorating relationships, emotional distress, and insufficiently timely support reinforce one another (Enderle *et al.*, 2024; Gubbels *et al.*, 2019; Hamadi *et al.*, 2025). The

present study therefore challenges explanations that reduce school leaving to inadequate motivation or individual misconduct and instead locates students' decisions within their interactions with schools and wider social circumstances.

First, the finding that institutional support was often experienced as control rather than coordinated care suggests that the problem was not merely whether schools employed teachers, counselors, or other support professionals. The timing, organization, and interpersonal quality of the response determined whether students recognized it as genuine support. When institutional attention became visible mainly after absenteeism, conflict, failure, or behavioral problems had intensified, students could interpret school intervention as an attempt to control their conduct rather than understand the difficulties underlying it. Warnings, exclusions, and sanctions may address an immediate behavioral incident, but they do not necessarily resolve academic gaps, emotional distress, family pressures, or damaged relationships. This interpretation is supported by evidence that adolescents' use of professional assistance depends on knowledge of available services, trust, confidentiality, anticipated reactions, and practical accessibility. Among Arab adolescents in Israel, intentions to seek formal mental-health assistance were particularly connected with mental-health literacy and trust in formal information sources. Research based on youths' retrospective accounts has also found that professional support may be experienced as arriving only after attendance problems and school alienation have become firmly established (Abo-Rass *et al.*, 2024; Hamadi *et al.*, 2025; Radez *et al.*, 2021). Although the present qualitative findings cannot establish that disciplinary responses directly caused withdrawal, they indicate that support is more likely to be credible when it is early, respectful, coordinated, confidential, and sustained through a trusted adult.

Second, the loss of a sense of school belonging also occurred prior to formal dropout. This implies that being enrolled and present in the school physically did not mean that the student continued to have psychological membership in the student community. Thus, it is possible to be enrolled in a school while feeling invisible or disconnected from the peer and the teacher community. This means that formal dropout was the last stage in a longer withdrawal process. In the research by Allen and others (2018), it was found that support from teachers and good relations with peers are important correlates of the sense of school belonging, while Korpershoek and others (2020) reported that school belonging is related to motivational, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic development. Vargas-Madriz and Konishi (2021) further reported that school belonging mediated the relationships between teacher and peer support and students' academic involvement. Longitudinal evidence also indicates that teacher emotional support and peer loneliness may be connected with school completion through different pathways, including academic achievement (Tvedt & Bru, 2023). These studies help explain why limited recognition, repeated failure, weak peer relationships, and perceived unfairness could progressively reduce participants' attachment to school. Belonging should therefore not be treated as a secondary emotional benefit that develops after academic success; rather, it may be one of the mechanisms through which supportive relationships sustain engagement and educational participation.

Third, the findings concerning boredom and emotional exhaustion demonstrate that psychological disengagement was an important component of the school-leaving process. Boredom should not be interpreted simply as laziness, poor discipline, or an unchanging personal characteristic. Within the participants' accounts, it appeared alongside declining interest, repeated academic difficulty, frustration, low perceived competence, and a growing belief that school attendance no longer had meaningful personal or future value. Tvedt and others (2021) found that perceived teacher support was associated with intentions to leave upper-secondary school both directly and indirectly through emotional engagement and boredom. A similar result was reported by Enderle and others (2024), they found that young people who had attendance issues experienced distress, bad educational experiences, and overall low well-being. Different longitudinal studies showed the correlation between a positive learning atmosphere and the mental health of adolescents, while the systematic review found out that, in general, school connectedness correlated with lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, though the existing data do not prove the causative relationship between them (Leurent *et al.*, 2021; Raniti *et al.*, 2022). These studies support an interpretation in which absence, missed learning, reduced competence, declining hope, and avoidance can form a reinforcing cycle. Nevertheless, the present findings do not constitute clinical diagnoses, and they cannot determine whether reduced well-being preceded disengagement, resulted from it, or developed reciprocally with it.

Fourth, the interaction of school, behavioral, peer, employment, family, and economic pressures confirms that dropout did not have one uniform cause. Academic decline could increase avoidance, while absence produced further learning gaps and made returning more difficult. Disciplinary conflict could weaken relationships with school personnel, whereas peer groups outside school could provide recognition, identity, or acceptance that participants did not experience in the classroom. Employment also offered immediate and concrete benefits when the future educational return of continued schooling appeared distant or uncertain. This interpretation corresponds with the meta-analysis by Gubbels *et al.* (2019), which identified dropout and absenteeism risks across individual, school, family, and peer domains rather than locating them within only one part of young people's lives. It also resembles Shoshana's (2020) study of Muslim male school dropouts in Israel, which showed how poverty, educational deprivation, stigmatized social positioning, and constrained future orientation entered young people's understandings of their available futures. The present findings add that external pressures may become especially influential when schools provide weak belonging, limited academic success, and few credible pathways to future opportunities. Arab identity itself should not be treated as a dropout risk; the relevant issue is how educational arrangements, socioeconomic inequality, local opportunities, family circumstances, and institutional responses interact differently across a heterogeneous population.

Moreover, the four findings suggest a circular rather than a strictly linear relationship among institutional support, belonging, well-being, and withdrawal.

Fragmented or punitive intervention may weaken trust in school personnel; reduced trust may make students less willing to disclose difficulties or seek assistance; unresolved academic and emotional problems may then erode belonging and engagement; and increasing absence can produce additional learning gaps and disciplinary encounters. The opposite process is also plausible: a trusted relationship, coordinated academic assistance, and respectful follow-up may strengthen students' sense of competence and membership, thereby making continued attendance more manageable. Previous research supports the plausibility of these connections. Trust has been associated with formal help-seeking intentions among Palestinian adolescents in Israel, school connectedness has been associated with more favorable psychological outcomes, and belonging has been shown to connect teacher and peer support with academic involvement. Teacher emotional support and loneliness have likewise been linked with educational completion through academic and relational pathways (Abo-Rass *et al.*, 2024; Raniti *et al.*, 2022; Tvedt & Bru, 2023; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). The current design did not statistically test mediation or establish temporal order, but it demonstrates why institutional support, psychological well-being, and school belonging should be understood as interacting dimensions of the same disengagement process rather than as separate outcomes.

Finally, the findings have implications for prevention and re-engagement. Schools should respond to changes in attendance, achievement, participation, and behavior before these changes become chronic, using coordinated teams rather than isolated referrals or unrelated disciplinary actions. Continuity through a named and trusted adult, academic catch-up assistance, fair and restorative responses to conflict, accessible psychosocial support, meaningful curriculum options, and flexible movement between academic and vocational pathways could address both the school-based pressures pushing students away and the external pressures drawing them toward work or alternative peer environments. A systematic review of 22 controlled studies found that 14 reported improvements in adolescent school belonging; the more successful interventions commonly built on students' strengths and promoted constructive relationships among students and between students and school staff. However, the review also found that the intervention literature remained limited and heterogeneous, indicating that no single program can be assumed to work in every context (Allen *et al.*, 2022). Qualitative attendance research likewise supports proactive and individualized responses rather than waiting until difficulties become severe (Enderle *et al.*, 2024; Hamadi *et al.*, 2025). These implications must nevertheless be considered alongside the study's limitations: the findings arose from a secondary qualitative analysis of publicly available narratives rather than complete original transcripts, represent retrospective accounts, cannot estimate the prevalence of the themes, and do not establish causality. Evidence from other national settings therefore strengthens the conceptual interpretation but should not be regarded as direct proof that the same interventions will be effective in Arab schools and localities in Israel.

6. Conclusion

Overall, the study showed that the school-leaving experiences of former Arab high-school students in Israel were shaped by interconnected institutional, relational, psychological, and socioeconomic processes. Institutional responses were often perceived as fragmented, disciplinary, or delayed rather than as coordinated support. At the same time, students' sense of belonging weakened before their official withdrawal, while boredom, frustration, exhaustion, and declining expectations contributed to psychological disengagement. These school-based experiences interacted with academic failure, absenteeism, peer influence, behavioral conflict, employment, family circumstances, and financial pressure. The central conclusion is therefore that dropout was not one isolated act but the endpoint of a cumulative process in which school-based pressures and external demands progressively reduced the perceived feasibility and value of continued attendance.

The synthesis of the findings highlights that preventing school withdrawal requires more than monitoring attendance, imposing sanctions, or attempting to persuade students to return after relationships with school have already deteriorated. Effective prevention must make students feel recognized, respected, academically capable, and able to obtain practical assistance before their difficulties become crises. Nevertheless, several questions remain unresolved. It is not yet clear which forms of support are most effective at different stages of disengagement, when a declining trajectory remains most responsive to intervention, or how experiences vary according to gender, religion, locality, socioeconomic position, family responsibilities, learning difficulties, and prior disciplinary histories. The study also cannot determine how many students experienced each pattern, whether the identified processes occurred in the same sequence for all participants, or whether different pathways led to withdrawal and later re-engagement. These questions are especially important because Arab communities in Israel are heterogeneous and should not be approached through a single uniform model of risk or support.

Future research should prospectively follow students from the early emergence of attendance, academic, relational, or emotional difficulties through completion, withdrawal, or re-engagement. Longitudinal mixed-method studies could clarify temporal relationships among support, belonging, well-being, attendance, achievement, work, and family pressures, while comparisons among continuously enrolled students, intermittently absent students, former dropouts, and successfully re-engaged youth could identify both risks and protective processes. Participatory research involving young people, families, teachers, counselors, and community organizations should also design and evaluate interventions based on early coordinated support, trusted-adult continuity, restorative discipline, culturally and linguistically accessible services, academic recovery, and flexible vocational and academic routes. Such interventions should be assessed not only through enrollment or attendance figures but also through changes in belonging, psychological well-being, educational progress, and young

people's confidence in their futures. Preventing dropout ultimately requires schools not merely to keep young people formally enrolled, but to ensure that every student is noticed, supported, and able to imagine a credible future within education.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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