



HOW DO ARAB STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ISRAEL PERCEIVE THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN PROVIDING SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE DURING THE TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION, CAREER AND FUTURE PLANNING?

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Abstract:

This study examined how Arab students in higher education in Israel understand the school counselors' role in supporting their academic, personal and professional development, specifically when transitioning from high school to higher education. It was important to research this to understand the effectiveness and relevance of high school counseling services provided in Arab communities, particularly with an eye to the expectations involved in advancing to subsequent academic stages amid academic pressures and uncertainty of future planning when entering higher education. The importance of this study will be its contribution to researchers in better understanding the social, cultural, and institutional contributions to how students conceptualize the efforts of a counselor when preparing and planning for postsecondary education. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with 40 Arab bachelor students from various academic disciplines. Thematic analysis as applied to the data revealed mixed perceptions of school counselors. For some students, there were positive reports of the school counselor's role in motivating students and providing personal guidance. Some students identified issues of cultural disconnection, disclosures of confidentiality and administrative overload in schools as setbacks. Social and cultural norms appeared to be the main reason for poor student-counselor relationships horizon. Recommendations for counselors include improvements in cultural competency, family involvement in the counseling process and better clarity around the role of the counseling in the school. The findings from this study not only have theoretical value for students and future discussions but also for the implementation of culturally responsive counseling models. The findings might also be of greater practical significance to advance educational equity when school systems improve school guidance practices that are culturally responsive to educational equity.

Keywords: Arab students, school counselors, higher education, Israel, guidance and counseling, cultural barriers, academic transition, career planning, educational equity, social norms, culturally responsive counseling, psychosocial support

1. Introduction

The study aims to investigate how Arab students in higher education institutions in Israel perceive the role of school counselors during their transition from high school to higher education, with an emphasis on academic, personal, and professional development. More generally, it seeks to understand which school counselors working with these students in their hometown high schools supported students as they prepared for higher education and later careers. The study is guided by a central research question, along with six sub-questions that focus on aspects related to school counselors' academic support, emotional support, career planning, cultural responsiveness, and service gaps. This study employs a qualitative design and relies on interviews with 40 Arab bachelor's students across differing disciplines and academic institutions in Israel. The thematic analysis indicated mixed views of the effectiveness of school counseling, as findings showed that some students experienced success and benefited from their counselor's help while others met barriers due to preconceived social expectations, cultural distance, or a too-familiar relationship with the school counselor.

The notion of guidance and counseling, core to this research, is defined by the literature as both developmental and supportive (Canu & Sitinjak, 2023; Dhal, 2020). There is a place for the definition of counseling in the literature as an opportunity to discover a better understanding of self, and to grow (Yulianti *et al.*, 2024), which requires empathy, cultural knowledge, and identifying student needs holistically (Bakar, 2019; Ramdani *et al.*, 2020). The parameters outlined in this study only accommodate the counseling of Arab students while in high school in Arab communities before their enrollment in higher education settings located in Hebrew-speaking, Jewish-majority cities. The timing is important because the study looks at counseling services prior to post-secondary education. This is vital because the aim was to look at the way prior counseling was related to the ability of students to recognize and assess the supports available to them whilst facing this complex transition. The research illustrated how counselors did or did not refer to students' cultural, familial and professional concerns, which ultimately shaped how supportive students perceived themselves to be at this time.

The results of the study demonstrated variability in the quality and accessibility of school counselling for Arab students. While some students felt that their understanding of counselling helped them to identify their strengths and promote academic self-efficacy and agency (Heled & Davidovich, 2019), others found wholly unsatisfactory experiences that related to approaches that seemed episodic, culture unspecific, or bounded by bureaucratic policies and procedures (Maizel, 2021). Many

students reported that cultural norms were their impediment to open lines of communication with their counsellors, rather than other factors, particularly when counselors were either too distant from or too close to the students' communities (Zinn *et al.*, 2024; Salinas *et al.*, 2025). This study goes further in suggesting improving cultural training at current levels, family engagement in the process, and reiterating definitional clarity of the role of the school counselling in schools as an important start to enhancing school counseling in Arab towns with a goal to increase the capacity of school counseling to prepare Arab youth for enhanced academic performances, psychosocial resilience, and informed career planning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Guidance and Counseling

Guidance and counseling are often defined very differently. In general, guidance involves ways of assisting a learner's whole person development, and counseling involves the focus of being helpful to the learner with some difficulty; the guidance approach is typically a preventive one, while counseling is a typically supporting approach (Canu & Sitinjak, C., 2023). Apparently, the global trend indicates that guidance and counseling practice is moving from a casework and remedial approach to one that is preventative, developmental. While people may be using these two terms interchangeably, the meaning of guidance and counseling is different, and overlapping, terminologies (Dhal, 2020).

Guidance and counseling refer to a process where enlightened individuals contribute to the growth and positive adaptation of other individuals through deeper self-understanding (Yulianti *et al.*, 2024). Anyi (2017) believes that counseling is a learning process where the counselor helps the client learn about themselves and their environment and be in a position to choose the appropriate behavior in order that they may grow, progress, ascend, develop, and step up, educationally, socially, and vocally, similarly Nkechi and Egenti (2016) define guidance and counseling as helping the person get a fuller awareness of who they are and how to behave as affected by the environment; Baugh (2018) defines counseling as an educational process by which a trained individual assists other individuals in their attempts to solve many of their problems by having an interactive and face-to-face conversation with the person. Baugh (2018) notes that guidance and counseling are very important aspects of the process that must be available for all educational institutions.

2.2 Rationale for Guidance and Counseling

Guidance and counseling programs primarily facilitate to identify, assess and enhance the development of students' life skills and educational experiences. The transition to adulthood can be difficult, even for the well-adjusted adolescent (Dudi *et al.*, 2022). In addition to family, students are influenced by school, and school experiences need to

mitigate the challenges of transitioning through puberty and help regularize decision making and sense of responsibility (Mastorci *et al.*, 2024). In essence, the family and school both need to facilitate the development of young people into mature, responsible, and well-adjusted adults (Gniewosz & Gniewosz, 2020).

Students face significant social, economic, and academic challenges. Therefore, they need psychological help to cope with their challenges so that they can move on with their lives as smoothly as possible (Wei, 2022). So, it is necessary to establish guidance and counseling in high schools. Researchers have reported that students in their teenage years and early adolescence start to undergo emotional and psychological alterations, experience trauma, and engage in behavioral modes that may harm their health (Dudi *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, they are always at odds with the expectations and impacts of schools. High school teenagers experience a period of time when all they want is to be free. As they struggle for freedom, they sometimes rebel against school authorities. Historically, society has always been able to provide what is needed at this stage (Uzun, 2021).

However, times have changed, and parents are working diligently to develop the best lifestyle for their children, so they may take very little notice of them. The children may find it hard to be able to deal with the happenings going on in their day-to-day life (Holmes *et al.*, 2024). Some children may react hostilely towards the community, which they feel has not, in turn, helped them. Schools find it very difficult to accommodate students with this level of need. They have the responsibility to develop and shape these individuals to be appreciative and constructive individuals in their society (Bakesia & Abwalâba, 2023). Appreciation can only be formed by the careful and devoted attention of a trained and understanding school counselor. Overall, young people seem to need counsel and guidance services now than ever as they are living in a more complex world (Rahmawati *et al.*, 2019).

2.3 Counseling

2.3.1 Types of Counseling

There are three main counseling methods: directive, non-directive, and eclectic. Directive counseling is when the counselor cares more about the challenge than the counselee. The counselor is concerned with identifying the challenge, analyzing the challenge, and choosing appropriate solutions (Arumugam *et al.*, 2021; Dudi *et al.*, 2022).

A **directive counselor** uses test data, school file records, and collects impressions and suggestions through offers through data. Arumugam, *et al.* (2021) state that directive counseling is more successful when the counselee is relatively well adjusted and the challenge is in relation to normal intellectual area challenges and/or that his/her challenge was initially influenced by a lack of information (Bakesia & Abwalâba, 2023).

Conversely, **non-directive counseling** helps address many different emotional problems. One of the main aims of non-directive counseling is to help the student become a more organized human being with health objectives (Cooper *et al.*, 2025). In non-

directive counseling, the student does not necessarily get back a well-laid-out plan for their problem; however, they will be able to work through these problems in a more effective manner (Dudi et.al, 2022). Non-directive counseling provides an opportunity where students have the freedom to express themselves and be fully open with the counselor.

Finally, **eclectic counseling** is the combination of both directive and non-directive counseling. In eclectic counseling, the counselor decides the approach that is felt best for their situation (Arellano, 2025). They help their clients accept and understand their ideas, goals, and attitudes (Arumugam, *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, they might also present their clients with alternative solutions to a problem while allowing the student (client) to choose the most appropriate one (Amit *et al.*, 2019).

2.3.2 The Counselor

For this study, a counselor is defined as a trained professional teacher and therapist operating in schools, with the school counselor's primary mission being to assist their clients in battling issues in their lives while developing their personality and valuing their culture (Avasthi *et al.*, 2022). Schools can adopt counseling in a variety of ways, including one-on-one counseling and group counseling. However, counseling' is usually effective in schools when it considers a broader view of counseling, values a whole school approach (Arumugam *et al.*, 2021), and is handled with consideration and might in the context of disposition, whether group or one-on-one counseling.

Counseling emphasizes empowering people. A teacher-counselor goes through training so they can obtain skills to perform that role as an empowering role (Parveen & Akhtar, 2023). Counselors working with children and young adolescents must know their clients' worlds (Ramdani *et al.*, 2020). They can only help them better when they understand them. At the same time, they must have an interest and desire to relieve distress and help people live more fulfilling lives (Dudi *et al.*, 2022). Generally, counselors need to go beyond being interested in counseling, and arm themselves with some knowledge (Corey, 2013). Similarly, teacher-counselors need to have knowledge of some cultural values and beliefs of most of the clients that they encounter so that they do not misinterpret their cultural background, causing harm, possibly long-term harm (Dianovi *et al.*, 2022).

Besides the components above, counselors must have a variety of additional characteristics and qualities that allow them to perform counseling as the role was intended. For example, as communicators, Arumugam *et al.* (2021) indicated that excellent communication is important. Counselors communicate verbally, by listening to the student's complaints or needs and responding to them, for the majority of their time. The ability to communicate their ideas and thoughts to the client is a quality that should not be undervalued. As mentioned before, counselors also need to value diversity. Counselors need to acknowledge that when they work with clients, the clients will often be from different cultural backgrounds (Abdul Lasi *et al.*, 2023). A counselor's success

and ability to help their clients involve helping their clients learn how to value and acknowledge their diversity in a school setting (Arumugam *et al.*, 2021). More simply, they need to factor in how a student's socio-economic status, race, religion or ethnicity will likely factor in to a given situation.

Counselors also need to be friendly. Counseling is about working with clients and providing solutions, so they need to be friendly and create a comfortable place for the clients. In other words, counselors need to be open, extroverted, and inviting (Bakar, 2019). A friendly atmosphere will create an environment for students to feel comfortable with their counselor and talk to them about their issues. In other words, if a counselor is friendly to students, they will earn most students' trust and thus have many more students comfortable in opening up and seeking help (Opondo, 2020).

School counselors should also possess empathy, or the ability to understand what other people are feeling. School counselors create a space that encourages students to deal with whatever challenges they may be facing (Ziomek-Daigle & Haskins, 2016). To help facilitate students to improve on this idea effectively, a counselor must empathize with students to understand what the student is experiencing and alter this feeling into a sympathetic response (Bakar, 2019).

2.4 Role of the School Counselor in Israel's Education System Today

The Israeli Ministry of Education claims that school counseling is a professional service implemented in a learning institution to advance functioning and mental well-being of learners and educational staff (Erhard, 2014). The school counselor attempts to advance the social, emotional, professional, and psychological development of students and staff. Thus, when counselors carry out their job of counseling their clients, they are doing so from the point of view of the whole educational system (Heled & Davidovitch, 2021). When addressing the rest of the educational staff, they still view the well-being of students as individuals within a system. Additionally, they should try to take steps to decrease violence in the area of the school and make it a safe and protected area (Zinn *et al.*, 2024).

Counselors in the schools of Israel are also called educational counselors in the school system. The counselor's main duty is to support the student, teacher and parents emotionally and psychologically. The counselor's role is to assist in the supportive climate within the schools to ultimately reshape the educational system and improve the emotional development of students (Heled & Davidovich, 2019). This is especially true for students with disabilities aged 3-18 (in special education). Counselors support teachers in managing issues related to students and guide them on how to improve the environment of the school (Maizel, 2021). The role of the school counselor is not the same as in previous decades. The school counseling role has never been regulation-based (mandated by law) and has not been created by law or defined in guidance documents. Each school may implement this role differently from other schools (Guni & Worgan, 2023).

The role of a school counselor in Israeli schools is highly complex and explicit. Therefore, the definition of the role of counselor and the scope of their position varies from school to school and adjusts to the realities of the institution (Heled & Davidovitch, 2020). Likewise, the terms and nature of work as it relates to counselor employment, is closely affiliated with the school principal and how they utilize counseling and can be negotiated or changed at the beginning of each school year (Heled & Davidovich, 2019). Recent research has confirmed there was some confusion concerning the counselor's role and scope of position within the framework of the Israeli educational system. This confusion resulted in counselors engaging in a variety of areas in and out of school (Amir, 2013).

Counselors must act on the systemic conception of the definition, attending to the mental-being within the educational organization while still considering the other elements in the system (Heled & Davidovitch, 2021). They must act on numerous functions from very different fields of activities, such as helping and including students with special needs, executing intervention plans, building classes, and all kinds of forms. At the same time, the counselor is asked to offer individual therapy for youth who are struggling and organized topic-focused groups (Heled & Davidovitch, 2021). In Israel, the counselors are teachers and required to teach classes in their school that can range from a few hours in the classroom, depending on the regulations of the school, and expect to include other roles and tasks engaged in this identity (Ben Moshe, 2011).

Various surveys reveal that counselor s in Israel's education system perform both roles concurrently. That works for about eight weekly hours on average in teaching. 46% teach subjects such as History, Bible, and Psychology, while about 44% teach counseling-related content, including life skills, career planning, and learning strategies (Heled & Davidovitch, 2021). About 10% are homeroom teachers or teach in special education classrooms. These surveys also found that most of them are extremely frustrated in their dual role, which they link to the lack of recognition of counseling as a distinct profession (Heled & Davidovitch, 2020).

3. Material and Methods

Using qualitative research methods, the present study has explored Arab students' perceptions in higher education institutions in Israel regarding the role of school counselors in supporting their academic transition, career planning, and personal development. The study used qualitative research methods to uncover students' lived experiences, lived emotions, and lived reflections as they relate to school counseling services. Sileyew (2019) refers to qualitative research methods as a form of data collection that is flexible and context-rich, as researchers explore complicated social issues through conversations of inquiry using open-ended questions. Timans *et al.* (2019) also point out that qualitative methods are particularly useful for unearthing under-studied or

culturally specific events, and are particularly well-suited to explore the experiences of a minority group, such as Arab students in Israel.

In this study, semi-structured interviews served as the main method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews are a common method of data collection because they offer a balance of consistency and flexibility (Maher & Bedwei-Majdou, 2025). While the semi-structured interview provided a series of guided questions based on the aim of the study, it allowed parents to provide as many details as they needed to communicate their own experiences and perceptions (Rocha, 2020). This allowed the researcher to explore the effectiveness, accessibility, and contextual relevance of how school counselors attempted to provide guidance (Hu *et al.*, 2024). The interview protocol was designed with the six research sub-questions of the study in mind, which included academic support, emotional and social guidance, cultural relevance and gaps in counseling services.

The study population included Arab bachelor's students at higher education institutions in Israel. The sample included 40 students from different disciplines, institutions, years of study, and ethnic and regional subgroupings in the Arab sector. In order to obtain depth and variety of experiences, the researchers employed purposive sampling in conjunction with snowball sampling (Memon *et al.*, 2025). The purposive sampling provided an appropriate method for identifying students who had contact with school counselors, while snowball sampling allowed the researcher access to a larger and more diverse pool of potential participants through referrals. Using both methods expanded the supported representativeness of the sample to account for differences in socio-cultural background, educational pathway and access to counseling services.

The data were collected in face-to-face interviews and over video platforms, such as Zoom and Google Meet, which participants could access via the most convenient means to them. All interviews were documented on video, transcribed and then analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an established approach in qualitative research analysis (Campbell *et al.*, 2021) used to identify, interpret, and report patterns across textual data. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to organize the data as the researcher identified recurring themes or sub-themes (Hole, 2024) that related to research questions about students' perspectives on counselor effectiveness, cultural relevance, and recommendations for improvement. Overall, thematic analysis provided the researcher with a structured, yet flexible approach to interpret the data, which ultimately allowed for a deeper understanding of the many roles that school counselors have for Arab students in relation to their educational and personal growth.

4. Results

The study's findings reveal the complex perceptions Arab students in higher education have about the role of school counselors in their transition from high school to university.

The findings presented in six thematic domains displayed students' positive and negative experiences in the context of counseling.

- **Theme 1:** The Perceived Role of School Counselors in Academic, Personal, and Professional Development

Participants generally recognized the impact school counselors had on influencing their academic and personal development, but the level of engagement varied. One student explained, *"My counselor always pushed me to apply to university and encouraged me and let me believe that I could succeed outside my community."* Another stated, *"She spoke to us about values and confidence, not just grades."* These examples align with the findings of Heled and Davidovitch (2019), which highlight that counselors have a significant role in enabling a student's occupational identity through their academic and personal development. Moreover, they found that when counselors are involved in the whole outward-facing development of a student, their impact goes beyond the school and lasts into a student's future for educational aspirations (Heled & Davidovitch, 2020).

- **Theme 2:** Perceived Effectiveness of School Counselors in Addressing Social, Emotional, and Cultural Barriers

Arab students' experiences indicated some views about school counselors' effectiveness at supporting socio-emotional issues were positive, and others were negative. One participant suggested, *"The counselor did not understand my situation at home; she spoke as if all the students were the same,"* while another participant claimed, *"He helped me talk about my fear of being different, and I felt I was seen."* These comments highlight the need for cultural empathy when providing counseling support, which was also noted by Zinn *et al.* (2024), who argued that, in Israel, Jewish and Arab school counselors experienced complex identity tensions when working through issues surrounding culturally sensitive issues, suggesting the need for culturally nuanced approaches. If counselors are unaware of socially and culturally complex dimensions of students' experience, they may only provide generic support and fail to be aware of socio-emotional barriers that impact boys' and girls' educational transitions.

- **Theme 3:** School Counselors' Role in Career Guidance and Future Planning

In the present study, many of the Arab students indicated that school counselors were limited in their ability to assist in their career guidance because of the lack of job opportunities for Arabs in Israel and the influence of cultural norms. One participant stated, *"We were never encouraged to be anything other than doctors or lawyers, but no one explained other titles or what the job market even looked like for Arabs."* Another participant said, *"Girls were typically pushed to be teachers; no one mentioned that they could pursue technology or entrepreneurship."* This highlights not only the structural-based discrimination in the job market, but the expectations of their families also informed the career paths that the students identified in their development. Significantly, research by

Lipshits-Brazilier *et al.* (2025) identified that Arab students in Israel are frequently met with employability barriers, such as being emboldened into lower professions and not occupying any high-status sectors and limited access to professional networks. Similarly, the counselors do not often have updated market knowledge or cultural sensitivity considerations and therefore cannot disrupt the norms or suggest an alternative path. Hence, their contribution to career planning mostly appears to reinforce their students' professional aspirations, instead of enriching them. Accordingly, culturally relevant approaches and equity-informed practices in career counseling and advising in Arab schools must be improved.

- **Theme 4:** Responsiveness to the Unique Needs of Arab Students

Students reported a large disconnection between themselves and school counselors. This was due to two different but impactful circumstances. First, a couple of participants mentioned that their counselors were from different districts or could be construed to be of a materially different religious identity. Participants felt they could not relate to a counselor based on an affirmative religious background or lived experience. One participant mentioned, *"My counselor was not from our community. She didn't have an understanding of our traditions and how things work in our homes."* This creates a lack of cultural and contextual understanding. Second, in some cases where the counselor was from the same neighborhood or was even related to the student, the reverse was true. In these situations, students did not want to be publicly exposed or judged. As one other participant said, *"She was my cousin's neighbor. I couldn't talk to her about my problems—I knew it would get back to my parents."* The opposite realities complicated matters and created an emotional barrier. Combined, the experience creates a general lack of open and effective communication. Zinn *et al.* (2024) stated that there needed to be trust and cultural competency in school counseling when working with students from minority communities, where social norms and familial contexts influence student activity. Students may withhold vital pieces of information in cases where counselors are too distant from them (i.e., lived experience) or when they are too familiar, thus limiting the help they are receiving (Salinas *et al.*, 2025). This illuminates how a careful balance is needed when establishing counselor-student relationships within the framework of confidentiality and cultural competency (Dunn, 2025).

- **Theme 5:** Identified Gaps in Counseling Services

Students described their experience with school counselors as inconsistent or irrelevant support. One participant stated, *"We only saw her when there was a problem,"* while another participant indicated, *"He never had time to talk to us individually because he was stuck doing paperwork."* These perceptions reveal systemic and institutional barriers to access and delivery of counseling services. As noted by Maizel (2021), many counselors in Israel are overloaded with administrative tasks that do not leave opportunity for any meaningful engagement with students. This under-delivery of service may have an outsized impact

on Arab students, who typically use school counseling as a means of transitioning through the stressful experiences of embarking on higher education and into working life.

- **Theme 6: Recommendations for Improving Counseling Practices**

Students made meaningful recommendations for improving counseling in school, most of which focused on cultural relevance and better engagement. One student suggested to *"Hire more Arab counselors who understand our language and challenges,"* and another said, *"Counselors should be trained to work with families too, and not just students."* This sentiment echoes an increasing need for culturally embedded, inclusive guidance practices. Zinn *et al.* (2024) noted the importance of professional identity development for school counselors to provide better support systems, particularly in diverse and ethno-socio-political contexts. Including family dynamics and language capacity could help create more accessible and relevant counseling services for Arab students in Israel.

5. Discussion

This study researched Arab students in higher education institutions in Israel, their understanding of school counselors and their roles transitioning from school to university, with a focus on academic, personal and professional development. Utilizing qualitative data analysis, it was found that school counselors are able to positively impact students' trajectories, however, the impact of the school counselor can depend on a range of factors, including cultural awareness, institutional practices, and the interaction between the students and counselors. The authors also highlight deeper structural issues related to social and cultural implications of help-seeking behaviors among Arab students and suggest structural changes that make school counseling and school counselor support more relevant and effective.

The first finding relates to the supportive role of counselors in students' academic and personal development, but the support role differed among students. Some students expressed that counselors encouraged their plans and provided encouragement to build their confidence, confirming what was found regarding the role of counselors in the formation of students' occupational identity (Heled & Davidovich, 2019) and that the impact of the counselor role is more long-term as compared to the more short-term impact of academic advising. Furthermore, the impact of these relationships can engage or disengage students from the path toward higher education (Heled and Davidovich, 2020). However, the results indicate that not all students experienced this level of involvement and that variability regarding the level of involvement occurred and that there were possible differences in counselor engagement, as well as a lack of clearer counselling frameworks across schools in the same context.

The second key finding brought to light varied perceptions of the effectiveness of counselors in intervening with social and emotional challenges for students. Some

students articulated feelings of emotional support, while others conveyed that counselors usually regarded all of the students the same and did not acknowledge the specific cultural and family-related challenges Arab students faced. Importantly, this barrier to a counselor's support was not language-based but instead related to how social and cultural norms shaped student behavior and identity. This again reflects a finding in Zinn *et al.*'s (2024) study around the tensions between Arab and Jewish counselors working with diverse student populations, often arising from misunderstandings of the cultural background of the students and counselors based on contrasting identities. When counselors relied on a one-size-fits-all methodology, they often neglected important elements of the students' lived realities, rather than providing relevant emotional and cultural support as the students confronted critical transitions in their lives.

One key finding focused on the dynamics of the counselor-student relationship and its complexity in Arab society. Students stressed two primary factors imposing limits: one, a counselor is not from their community and has no cultural context, and two, when the counselor is too familiar (a neighbor or relative), to encourage openness. These different dynamics, created not by language but by social and cultural contexts, uneasily shared a sense of mistrust or discomfort. Zinn *et al.* (2024) suggest that trust and cultural empathy are the starting point for effective school counseling, especially in marginalized communities; Salinas *et al.* (2025) add that counselors should demonstrate cultural competence and maintain appropriate professional boundaries in developing trust with students. Navigating the combined tension of not being either disconnected or inappropriately familiar requires a careful balance and tailored strategies that honor confidentiality while developing cultural understanding.

The fifth finding was more about structural limitations on counseling service delivery. Many students implied that counselors generally were not available, they were bogged down with paperwork, or they were act-and-react rather than serve-and-support. These connections are supported by Maizel's (2021) research, indicating that counselors in Israel were inundated with other administrative tasks that cut into their capacity for direct interaction with students. This structural obstacle places specifically Arab students at a disadvantage - they may not have other available support options and rely more heavily than a Jewish student for guidance during the transition to higher education (Wilkins & Powe, 2016). The role of school counselors and how that differs from school to school is not established in Israel (Heled & Davidovich, 2020), reducing the potential of counselors to equally and consistently support students.

Finally, participants provided concrete ways to improve counseling practices by hiring more culturally competent Arab counselors, and involving families in the process. These recommendations supported findings in Zinn *et al.* (2024) that professional identity development and cultural training are necessary for the developmental needs of counselors working in diverse communities. Incorporating social context, the family unit, and community norms into counseling services may serve to make counseling more relevant and approachable. Additionally, developing clarity around the counselor role,

and alleviating administrative demands may enhance the reach and impact of counseling to Arab schools across Israel. Ultimately, these conclusions call for reframing school counseling practice, locally and globally, as a culturally responsive and equity-driven practice within broader educational practice.

Regarding the area of career planning and guidance for the future, again, the counselors worked within culturally preferred roles as careers, like medicine, law, or education careers for women, but failed to offer a range of career pathways. This represents a broader structural issue. As demonstrated by Lipshits-Braziler *et al.* (2025), Arab students in Israel experience industrial relations disadvantage in employment and often entered into limited high-status professions. The limitations were particularly evident in the lack of guidance provided by the counselors, reflecting their own failure to have up-to-date labor market information, as well as adopting the expectations that exist in the current cultural contexts. Instead of broadening the aspirations of students, the school counselors often replicate the social patterns that already exist. This reinforces career counselling from an equity perspective that provokes change, rather than merely identifies an existing norm in respect to the way students and families regarded career-related roles and opportunities.

6. Conclusion

This research has given important insights into how Arab students in higher educational institutions in Israel understand the role of school counselors as they transition from school into higher education and career decision-making while also developing as individuals. The research findings indicate that although some students experienced support and encouragement from school counselors, awareness of the school counselor's role was a limited experience for most students, and in the case of school counseling, was hampered by school counselors' lack of cultural awareness of their students and various other institutional constraints. School counselors are important for the identification of students' academic and professional identity, or "*how students threw off their boundaries*" aligned with Heled and Davidovich (2019, 2020), but the participants in the study experienced change in depth and effectiveness of school counselors' role depending on different contextual factors. The significant barrier that Arab students faced during the transition phase was not one of language; instead, it was embedded within a myriad of deep social and cultural norms, including communal expectations and expectations around confidentiality.

A synthesis of the central themes shows that the process of counseling faces layers of gaps due to either students' being culturally misaligned with their school counselor, or potentially too familiar with their peers, whereby they shrank back from pursuing a more personal discussion, thereby any communications about concerns breached a trust gap which may have arisen from contrary encultured values. Furthermore, the results highlight that counselors are often not only reproducing traditional gendered and social

expectations of engaging with students' conventional career paths of different institutions of medicine, law, and teaching, but also do not afford students a broader, equitable notion of the entire labor market. For instance, Lipshits-Braziler *et al.* (2025) documented the structural challenges faced by Arab students in accessing diverse employment opportunities and the limitations of career guidance in promoting upward mobility. The absence of up-to-date market knowledge and proactive counseling strategies reinforces inequity, rather than challenging it.

While the study provides significant contributions, it also highlights issues and a gap that remain to be addressed - the need for the structure of culturally responsive counseling to be institutionalized and for equity-based career educational practices to be incorporated into counselors' initial and ongoing training. It is also important for the mental health burdens of the school counseling position to be alleviated to ensure that the initial intent of the position can be fulfilled. Future research could examine how school counselors prioritize their role and combat dilemmas at Arab majority schools, as well as explore if they present similar or different systemic requirements, and provide evidence for building practice-related research to support their workers, in line with the stated needs of students. Future research could also employ a longitudinal approach to determine what shifts occur in school counselors' interactions with students, and if there are subsequently any changes to academic aspirations and career pathways over time. If school counseling is to realize and actualize its fullest potential for developing and transforming learners, it cannot simply provide counseling advice, and planning for future educational and employment opportunities. Ultimately, if school counseling is to fulfill its developmental and transformative potential, it must move beyond routine advising and embrace culturally grounded, student-centered approaches that actively empower marginalized populations.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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