



PERCEPTIONS OF ARAB FEMALE STUDENTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION REGARDING THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN BUILDING A CULTURE OF PROJECT-BASED LEARNING AND STRENGTHENING PARENTAL PARTNERSHIP TO ENHANCE CHILDREN'S MOTIVATION FOR ACQUIRING SKILLS AND VALUES

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Abstract:

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the perceptions of twenty Arab female students specializing in early childhood education regarding the role of school principals as pedagogical leaders in building a culture of project-based learning (PBL), strengthening parental partnerships, and enhancing children's motivation for acquiring skills and values within the Israeli educational context. The study adopts the "Leadership-Practice-Mobilization Cube" (L-P-M) model, comprising three interconnected dimensions: Leadership (L) with its transformational, instructional, and contextual aspects; Practice (P) represented by project-based learning; and Mobilization (M) grounded in building community partnerships and resource mobilization. Semi-structured interviews revealed that effective educational leadership is perceived as a multidimensional construct, and that principals who demonstrate pedagogical presence, emotional intelligence, and the ability to mobilize community resources are most influential in building a culture of inquiry-based learning. The study highlights the pivotal role of project-based learning in translating leadership vision into classroom practice, while community mobilization emerged as a mechanism for strengthening partnerships and providing necessary resources. Within the complex context of Arab education in Israel, principals face dual accountability pressures yet exercise contextual leadership by navigating between centralized bureaucratic requirements and local community needs. Key challenges identified include resource constraints, class overcrowding, cultural resistance to pedagogical innovation, and limited autonomy. Nevertheless, participants emphasized that effective community mobilization and engineered success situations can transform constraints into opportunities for innovation. The proposed model offers a practical framework for achieving institutional

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excellence through the integration of effective leadership, innovative pedagogical practices, and sustainable community mobilization.

Keywords: educational leadership, early childhood education, project-based learning, parental partnership, community mobilization, children's motivation, Self-Determination Theory, Arab education in Israel, institutional excellence

1. Introduction

Early childhood represents a critical developmental period that fundamentally shapes cognitive, social, and emotional foundations for lifelong learning (Almalki *et al.*, 2024; Villa & Toquero, 2024). Within this context, the role of school principals as pedagogical leaders in building a culture of inquiry-based and participatory learning becomes paramount. This study aims to explore how Arab female students specializing in early childhood education perceive this role in promoting project-based learning and strengthening parental partnerships to enhance children's motivation for acquiring skills and values.

The Arab educational sector in Israel faces unique structural challenges including centralized administrative control, resource disparities, cultural complexities, and demographic pressures (Blass, 2024; Peled, 2020). These challenges place extraordinary demands on school principals who must navigate between bureaucratic requirements and local community needs while ensuring pedagogical quality (Arar, 2021; Thaher *et al.*, 2022). Within this framework, the principal's role as an educational leader responsible for building a school culture that promotes active learning and community partnership becomes increasingly significant.

Contemporary educational literature has witnessed a paradigm shift in conceptualizing leadership, moving from procedural management toward multifaceted professional practice that shapes institutional culture and instructional quality (Fullan, 2013; Katsikas, 2025). Educational leadership in early childhood settings is particularly consequential given the developmental sensitivity of this stage and the need for direct pedagogical guidance (Akomodi, 2025; Robinson, 2020). Transformational leadership, characterized by intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration, has demonstrated significant impact on organizational commitment and innovation (Atasoy, 2020; Engin, 2020).

Project-based learning (PBL) has emerged as a powerful pedagogical strategy aligned with early childhood developmental characteristics, promoting inquiry, critical thinking, and authentic engagement (Condliffe, 2017; Mula *et al.*, 2024). PBL transforms children from passive recipients to active knowledge constructors, fostering intrinsic motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the three psychological needs identified by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sigalingging *et al.*, 2023). However, PBL implementation faces significant barriers in Arab schools, including

overcrowding, curriculum pressures, resource limitations, and cultural resistance to non-traditional pedagogies (Sirwesvary & Jamaludin, 2025; Syahlan *et al.*, 2023).

Parental partnership and community mobilization represent critical variables in enhancing children's motivation and developing their skills and values. Epstein's framework of overlapping spheres of influence provides a comprehensive model for understanding the systematic integration of family and school collaboration (Epstein, 2022; Newman *et al.*, 2019). In the Arab context, the concept of "familism" (Abu-Asba, 2021) presents both opportunities and challenges for educational leadership. While strong family bonds can support academic achievement, they may also lead to intervention in pedagogical details, requiring culturally responsive leadership capable of mobilizing the community in support of the educational process (Siddiqua, 2025; Elmalak-Watad, 2025).

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of educational leadership in minority contexts and provides practical implications for leadership preparation programs and policy development in the Arab education sector. The research seeks to answer the central question:

- How do Arab female students specializing in early childhood education perceive the role of school principals as pedagogical leaders in building a culture of project-based learning and strengthening parental partnerships to enhance children's motivation for acquiring skills and values?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Educational Leadership

Educational leadership has evolved significantly from administrative compliance toward professional practice centered on institutional culture and instructional quality (Fullan, 2013; Katsikas, 2025). This paradigm shift reflects growing recognition that leadership effectiveness extends beyond procedural management to encompass vision-building, teacher development, and learning environment design (Bloom, 2023; Akomodi, 2025).

Transformational leadership, characterized by intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration, represents a dominant framework for understanding leadership impact on organizational commitment and innovation (Atasoy, 2020; Engin, 2020; Wabiser *et al.*, 2022). Research demonstrates that schools adopting transformational leadership patterns show elevated rates of academic engagement among children compared to institutions following traditional administrative models (Engin, 2020). Intellectual stimulation particularly emerges as crucial for building self-efficacy and metacognitive awareness through engineered success situations (Abzhanova *et al.*, 2025).

Instructional leadership provides the operational framework translating vision into classroom practice through direct pedagogical intervention (Akomodi, 2025; Richardson, 2024). Researchers identify three organizational dimensions: pedagogical

alignment ensuring structural coherence between educational goals and classroom practices; guided supervision providing formative feedback; and professional development management establishing professional learning communities (Sinnema *et al.*, 2021; Jannah, 2024). Instructional leadership proves especially vital in early childhood settings given developmental sensitivity requiring direct pedagogical guidance (Robinson, 2020).

Authentic leadership based on transparency, consistency, and normative commitment contributes directly to reducing burnout and raising job engagement (Tsemach & Barth, 2023; Houlihan, 2020). Authentic leaders create psychologically safe environments where educators practice pedagogical innovation without fear of failure (Goffin & Washington, 2022). This dimension assumes particular significance in contexts characterized by structural constraints and limited autonomy (Elmalak-Watad, 2025).

2.2 Leadership Characteristics and Competencies

Effective educational leaders possess a constellation of interrelated competencies encompassing shared vision-building, pedagogical knowledge, data-driven decision-making, emotional intelligence, and ethical commitment (Priamphimai, 2024; Grogan, 2013; Elmalak-Watad, 2025). Shared vision-building represents the methodological foundation of effective leadership, requiring formulation of clear goals and staff engagement in adoption (Priamphimai, 2024). Emotional intelligence, including awareness of staff needs and professional relationship management, constitutes a critical success factor (Grogan, 2013). In the Arab context, building trust-based relationships and managing tension between central system requirements and local community needs demand exceptional diplomatic skills (Arar, 2021; Thaher *et al.*, 2022).

Pedagogical competence and data-driven decision-making represent essential requirements for leadership in early childhood settings (Akomodi, 2025). Evidence-based leadership utilizes feedback from staff, parents, and student outcomes for continuous institutional improvement (Abel *et al.*, 2024). Reflective thinking and professional decision-making relate to continuous evaluation of classroom practices and measurement of developmental impact (Sinnema *et al.*, 2021; Amalia, 2019). Moral commitment gains particular importance given the structural gaps in Arab education, requiring integrity and commitment to social justice principles (Elmalak-Watad, 2025; Siddiqua, 2025).

2.3 Project-Based Learning: Theoretical Foundations and Applications

Project-based learning emerges as a pedagogical methodology bridging theoretical knowledge and practical application (Condliffe, 2017). Defined as a comprehensive educational strategy organizing learning around essential questions and complex projects requiring sustained inquiry, PBL represents not a supplementary activity but a fundamental framework for developing educational competencies (Condliffe, 2017; Lazić *et al.*, 2021). This approach finds theoretical support in pragmatism (Dewey) and

constructivism (Piaget, Vygotsky), emphasizing learning through experience and social interaction (Lazić *et al.*, 2021; Markula & Aksela, 2022).

PBL in early childhood settings integrates guided play with simplified scientific principles, transitioning children from passive reception to active knowledge construction (Aisyah & Novita, 2025; Bulkis *et al.*, 2025). This integration provides holistic learning environments simultaneously developing academic, social, and emotional skills (Ordoñez *et al.*, 2025). Key characteristics of effective PBL include: authentic connection to real-world goals; learner autonomy granting decision-making opportunities; reflective thinking developing higher-order skills; constructive assessment; and public product presentation to the community (Zhang & Ma, 2023). PBL demonstrates significant impact on academic achievement and cognitive development (Gao, 2024), and substantially improves cooperation and negotiation skills (Bulkis *et al.*, 2025).

2.4 Parental Partnership and Community Mobilization

The concept of parental involvement has evolved from procedural attendance to shared responsibility and institutional accountability for children's developmental progress (Salac, 2022; Newman *et al.*, 2019). Joyce Epstein's framework of overlapping spheres of influence provides a comprehensive organizational structure for understanding family-school-community interaction (Epstein, 2022). Epstein's six dimensions include: Parenting, Communicating, Volunteering, Learning at Home, Decision Making, and Collaboration with Community (Epstein, 2022; Alias *et al.*, 2024; Newman *et al.*, 2019).

Family-school partnership in Arab society represents structural and social relationships requiring culturally responsive leadership capable of community mobilization (Abu-Hussain, 2023; Elmalak-Watad, 2025). The concept of "familism" described by Abu-Asba (2021) positions family as a central sociological structure affecting school organizational dynamics. In the Arab context, community mobilization extends beyond traditional participation to include building extensive support networks, mobilizing local resources, and transforming educational institutions into active community centers (Auerbach, 2021; Addi-Raccach, 2022).

2.5 Children's Motivation: Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2000) provides the most comprehensive framework for understanding children's motivation (Ackermans *et al.*, 2025; Sigalingging *et al.*, 2023). Three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—constitute the core of SDT. PBL satisfies autonomy needs through genuine choices in learning paths (Ackermans *et al.*, 2025). Competence is satisfied through engineered success situations and balanced tasks within the zone of proximal development (Abzhanova *et al.*, 2025; Hariri *et al.*, 2020). Relatedness concerns children's feeling of psychological safety and social connection with teachers, peers, and parents (Wabiser *et al.*, 2022). Educational leadership plays a decisive role in creating the psychological climate shaping children's motivation (Engin, 2020; Wabiser *et al.*, 2022).

2.6 The Arab Educational Context in Israel

Arab education in Israel operates within a dual accountability system combining central bureaucratic requirements and local community expectations (Nets, 2017; Gal-Arieli *et al.*, 2023). Demographic pressures, socioeconomic challenges, and the digital divide impose structural constraints affecting institutional excellence (Alkasem *et al.*, 2025; Ghanayem & Da'as, 2024). The Israeli educational system's structural multiplicity reflects social and political divisions leading to sector-based structure (Peled, 2020). Administrative centralization characterizes decision-making, with notable structural variation in resource distribution (Blass, 2023, 2024). The Arab educational sector functions within a hierarchy characterized by administrative dependency and central supervision limiting pedagogical autonomy (Abu-Hussain, 2023). Early childhood education in Israel has undergone significant legislative and funding transformation, yet quantitative enrollment increases haven't been matched by equitable resource distribution or quality assurance (Peled, 2020; Blass, 2024).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design and Philosophy

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Arab female students regarding educational leadership in early childhood settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology was selected as particularly appropriate for understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences within specific social and cultural contexts. The research philosophy aligned with interpretivism, recognizing that reality is socially constructed through participants' subjective interpretations.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Twenty Arab female students specializing in early childhood education in Israeli higher education institutions participated through purposive and snowball sampling. Participants represented various academic years: first year (n=2), second year (n=5), third year (n=6), fourth year (n=4), and certified teachers completing advanced qualifications (n=3). Geographic distribution included Kafr Kanna, Kokab Abu al-Hijaa, Tur'an, Sakhnin, and other Arab communities.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually, lasting 45-90 minutes. The interview protocol addressed six thematic areas: (1) entry into early childhood education; (2) perceptions of principals' impact; (3) leadership styles and teacher autonomy; (4) PBL implementation; (5) parental partnership and community engagement; and (6) motivation and vision for future leadership. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework guided data analysis. Trustworthiness criteria were addressed through credibility (prolonged engagement, member checking, triangulation), transferability (thick description), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (reflexive journaling). Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent.

4. Results

Thematic analysis revealed five major themes reflecting participants' perceptions regarding principals' roles as educational leaders, analyzed through the lens of the "Leadership-Practice-Mobilization Cube" (L-P-M) model:

4.1 Theme 1: The Principal as Leader of Inquiry-Based Learning Culture (Dimension L)

Participants consistently emphasized the principal's pivotal role in building a school culture grounded in inquiry and active learning. A third-year student related: *"The principal creates the general atmosphere in the kindergarten... when they believe in inquiry-based learning, this reflects on everything, from how teachers plan to children's interaction and enthusiasm."* (Participant 4, Year 2). Another student emphasized: *"The principal was supportive and welcoming of this project and had a role in guiding teachers... this gives value to projects and encourages everyone to participate."* (Participant 1, Year 3).

Participants noted the importance of the principal's field presence. A fourth-year student explained: *"When the principal participated in projects and closely followed work progress, this gave great impetus to teachers and children... we felt that what we were doing was important."* (Participant 6, Year 4). A second-year student added: *"The principal would walk between classrooms, ask children about their projects, and encourage them... this presence made children feel their projects had real value."* (Participant 7, Year 2).

4.2 Theme 2: Building PBL Culture Through Supportive Leadership (Dimension P)

Participants identified specific mechanisms principals use to build PBL culture. A program graduate stated: *"The principal was a key supporter... she provided the project with all necessary materials, tools, and ideas to make it excel."* (Participant 3). A third-year student clarified: *"The intelligent principal doesn't think in terms of 'yes or no,' but rather: 'How can we make PBL possible here, in this specific reality?'"* (Participant 5, Year 4).

Participants emphasized the principal's role in developing teacher competencies. A second-year student observed: *"The principal provided workshops and new ideas... she believed teachers needed continuous support to develop their skills."* (Participant 7, Year 2). A third-year student added: *"When teachers feel the principal trusts them and gives them space for creativity, they become bolder in trying new things."* (Participant 4, Year 2).

4.3 Theme 3: Community Mobilization and Parental Partnership (Dimension M)

Community mobilization and parental partnership emerged as critical variables in enhancing children's motivation. A second-year student related: *"When parents participate in projects, whether by providing materials or participating in activities, children feel what they do matters to their families too... this greatly enhances their motivation."* (Participant 7, Year 2). A third-year student added: *"In the recycling project, parents participated by bringing materials... children were very proud of their parents' participation, which increased their enthusiasm."* (Participant 3).

Participants emphasized earning parents' trust. A second-year student explained: *"The communication code with parents is based on reassurance and building trust before persuasion."* (Participant 7, Year 2). A fourth-year student noted: *"The principal facing resource shortages seeks partnerships with the local community... building a support network."* (Participant 10, Year 4). Another observed: *"Children who feel their families and community care about what they do in kindergarten are more enthusiastic and participatory."* (Participant 10, Year 4).

4.4 Theme 4: Structural and Cultural Challenges

Participants identified challenges facing principals. A third-year student explained: *"Class overcrowding and curriculum pressure pose major challenges... principals need great creativity to overcome these obstacles."* (Participant 4, Year 2). A third-year student observed: *"Arab principals work between the Ministry's hammer and society's anvil... they need high diplomacy to protect their educational vision."* (Participant 1, Year 3). A second-year student added: *"Some parents still believe good education means only rote learning and writing... changing this perception requires great effort."* (Participant 7, Year 2).

4.5 Theme 5: Strategies for Enhancing Children's Motivation

Participants identified strategies for enhancing motivation. A third-year student explained: *"When principals see previously shy students or those with learning difficulties standing confidently to explain their ideas... this transformation becomes the greatest fuel for continuation."* (Participant 12, Year 3). A second-year student observed: *"When projects connect to children's lives, they become more passionate."* (Participant 2, Year 3). A third-year student noted: *"When children's projects are displayed and celebrated, they feel their efforts are recognized."* (Participant 4, Year 2). A second-year student added: *"Through projects, children learn cooperation, negotiation, and problem-solving... these skills and values stay with them for life."* (Participant 7, Year 2).

5. Discussion

5.1 Integration of Findings with Theoretical Framework and the L-P-M Model

The findings support the theoretical framework and confirm the validity of the "Leadership-Practice-Mobilization Cube" (L-P-M) model. Participants perceive the

principal as a pivotal element in building an inquiry-based learning culture through three main roles: building vision and a supportive organizational climate, providing resources and flexibility for PBL implementation, and empowering teachers' professional development. This aligns with Fullan's (2013) vision of the leader as change agent, Katsikas's (2025) conceptualization of leadership as an integrated system, and Bloom's (2023) whole leadership framework.

The principal's field presence indicates the importance of instructional leadership requiring active involvement in the educational process (Akomodi, 2025; Richardson, 2024). Findings also emphasize the importance of transformational leadership in inspiring staff and building organizational commitment (Atasoy, 2020; Engin, 2020). Teacher empowerment reflects the concept of "*distributed leadership*" (Heikka *et al.*, 2021; Sirwesvary & Jamaludin, 2025). Findings confirm that PBL contributes to developing children's skills and values holistically, consistent with previous studies (Bulkis *et al.*, 2025; Ordoñez *et al.*, 2025).

Participants recognize community mobilization and parental partnership as critical variables in enhancing children's motivation, aligning with Epstein's framework (2022) and "*community leadership*" concepts (Auerbach, 2021; Addi-Raccah, 2022). Engaging parents in educational projects enhances children's motivation by making them feel their work matters to their families, aligning with Self-Determination Theory regarding the importance of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Wabiser *et al.*, 2022). Earning parent trust through transparency and continuous communication aligns with the dual capacity-building framework (Mapp & Bergman, 2021). Effective principals mobilize community resources through building extensive support networks, reflecting leaders' ability to transform challenges into opportunities through creative and flexible leadership (Arar & Abu Nasra, 2020; Gal-Arieli *et al.*, 2023).

5.2 The Leadership-Practice-Mobilization Cube (L-P-M Model)

Based on the findings, this research presents the "Leadership-Practice-Mobilization Cube" (L-P-M) model comprising three interconnected dimensions:

- **Leadership (L):** The transformational, instructional, and contextual leadership dimension,
- **Practice (P):** Project-based learning as an applied pedagogical tool,
- **Mobilization (M):** Building partnerships and mobilizing community resources.

Within this cube, institutional excellence represents the final outcome of integrating the three dimensions, achieved when leadership, practice, and mobilization work integrally and harmoniously. The model addresses key challenges: resource limitations through mobilization, class overcrowding through practice, administrative centralization through contextual leadership, weak parental partnership through mobilization, and resistance to change through transformational leadership.

5.3 Implications for Practice and Policy

Findings indicate the need for leadership preparation programs focusing on developing transformational, instructional, and contextual leadership skills; building partnership and community mobilization competencies; enhancing capacity to manage structural challenges flexibly; and providing practical training in educational leadership. Policies should support granting principals' broader educational autonomy, reducing administrative burdens, allocating budgets to support PBL, and developing assessment mechanisms focusing on learning quality. Principals require awareness of the importance of community mobilization, tools for partnership building, and strategies for sustainable communication bridges between school and community.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how Arab female students specializing in early childhood education perceive the role of school principals as pedagogical leaders in building a culture of project-based learning and strengthening parental partnerships to enhance children's motivation for acquiring skills and values. The study adopted the "Leadership-Practice-Mobilization Cube" (L-P-M) model comprising three interconnected dimensions: Leadership (L), Practice (P) represented by project-based learning, and Community Mobilization (M).

Findings show that participants perceive the principal as a pivotal element in building an inquiry-based learning culture through three main roles: building vision and organizational climate, providing resources and flexibility, and empowering teachers (Dimension L). Participants recognize the importance of project-based learning as an applied pedagogical tool developing children's skills and values (Dimension P). Participants confirm that community mobilization and parental partnership are critical variables in enhancing children's motivation (Dimension M).

Findings confirm the integrative relationships between the three model dimensions, where leadership, practice, and mobilization work synergistically to achieve institutional excellence. The proposed L-P-M model provides a practical framework for understanding the integrative relationship between leadership, practice, and mobilization, and can be used as a tool for developing leadership practices in Arab early childhood institutions.

In conclusion, this study confirms that educational excellence in early childhood in the Arab context requires conscious educational leadership combining strategic vision and field presence, innovative pedagogical practices, community mobilization and partnership building, and flexibility in facing challenges with commitment to quality and educational equity.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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