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Educational aspirations, expectations, and school achievement

## **Do educational aspirations and expectations matter in improving school achievement?**

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**Do educational aspirations and expectations matter in improving school achievement?**

**Abstract**

The main objective of this paper is to examine the role of students' aspirations and expectations in affecting school achievement among 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in Qatar's schools. The study draws on data collected in Qatari schools from a randomly selected sample of 841 students and their parents. The findings indicate that students' educational aspirations have a stronger effect on students' school performance when compared to students' educational expectations, even when controlling for demographic factors, school attitude, and parental expectations. This finding directly contributes to the debate in the literature about the relative importance of aspirations and expectations, while also confirming what other studies have suggested- that the meaning and the way in which both aspirations and expectations operate is contextually relative. Context plays a significant role here, and consequently, leaves the debate over what matters more, aspirations or expectations, widely open.

Keywords: Educational aspirations, Educational expectations, School Achievement, Qatar, Migrants, Ethnicity

### 1. Introduction

Recent studies on the effect of student's educational aspirations and expectations on school achievement have highlighted the superiority of expectations over aspirations as predictors of school achievement (Beal and Crockett, 2010, Bozick et al., 2010, Author, 2015, Author and Author1, 2018). It is argued that, whereas aspirations are those goals which a student hopes or wishes to achieve, and often unrelated to his or her actual circumstances, expectations reflect what a student can realistically achieve given his or her actual socioeconomic background (Gorard et al., 2012, Reynolds and Pemberton, 2001). These theoretical linkages between aspirations, expectations, and achievement have been developed based on studies conducted primarily in Western countries. Whether expectations and aspirations will function in a similar way within different national contexts, needs to be explored further.

For example, the current economic conditions in Qatar as an emerging economy in the Global South, and specific social and economic policies have resulted in a very different situation for many citizens and expatriates in this country. Qatar's abundant resource wealth has meant that the government is able to provide generous public sector employment to its citizens and offer competitive salary packages to attract regional and global talent to its rapidly growing economy (Ewers & Shockley, 2018; Stasz, Eide, Martorell, Goldman, & Constant, 2007). But due to current labour policies, only migrants earning above a certain threshold are able to bring their dependent children with them (Zahra, 2018). Hence, the majority (and certainly not all) of the student population in Qatar, both citizens and migrant children, are likely to come from economically stable families that can better support their educational aspirations and expectations. However, very little is known about the way through which students' educational aspirations and expectations affect school achievement in affluent, resource-abundant economies, such as the state of Qatar. Our literature review has not yielded even a single study on students' educational aspirations and expectations as predictors of school achievement among students in Qatar. **In such a context of socioeconomic prosperity, what role will students' aspirations play in predicting school achievement?** Will expectations operate in the

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same way as in Western countries? And what role do student demographics and parent characteristics play in determining the school achievement of their children? It is these questions which the present paper addresses by drawing on data collected in Qatari schools from a randomly selected sample of 841, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students between October 2018 to April 2020. Answering these questions will expand our understanding about immigration and educational outcomes in emerging economies and contribute to the growing literature on the Global South, while highlighting the importance of context in studying the relationship between educational aspirations, expectations and achievement among immigrant and native students.

In the next section we first review the literature and key observations surrounding the relationship between student aspirations, expectations and achievement. This is followed by a discussion on the importance of parental economic status, social and cultural capital and the impact of ethnicity and migration status in relation to student's school achievement. In the third section, the study context is presented followed by a discussion of the methodology and data. The results are presented in the fifth section, which is followed by a discussion and some concluding remarks.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Aspirations, Expectations, and Achievement

The literature treats student aspirations and expectations as conceptually different and hence they are measured in separate ways (Gorard et al., 2012, Author, 2015). Aspirations are a measure of what a student wishes to achieve, while expectations are the possibility or likelihood of actually fulfilling these wishes, given one's socioeconomic background (Reynolds and Pemberton, 2001). Hence, aspirations are closer to students' idealistic goals, while expectations reflect more realistic assessments of future possibilities that take into account socioeconomic constraints (Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). As a result, numerous studies, including the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, measure aspirations and expectations by differentiating between what a student wants to do after finishing school and what they expect will likely happen (Bohon et al., 2006;

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Gorard et al., 2012; LSYPE). This study follows suit and measures aspirations and expectations as described below:

### Aspirations

When you're 16 and have finished grade 10 (year 11), what do you want to do next...?

When you're 18 and have finished school, what you would rather do...?

### Expectations

How likely do you think that you will ever apply to go to university to do a degree?

How likely do you think that if you do apply to go to university you will get in?

While aspirations and expectations are both relevant in determining various academic outcomes (Friberg, 2019), it is perhaps the relative impact of these two measures on student achievement that is most debated. Harrison and Waller (2018) have discussed how since the 1990s, education policy in the United Kingdom centered on the importance of raising educational aspirations among various groups in order to reduce inequalities in higher education. However, research at a later stage has come to question the importance of aspirations in increasing educational attainment (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012, Gorard et al., 2012). As students belonging to diverse socioeconomic groups start to hold relatively similar high aspirations for attaining a university-level education (Baker et al., 2014), clear empirical evidence ascertaining the impact of aspirations on improving achievement is not to be found (e.g. Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012, Gorard et al., 2012), suggesting an attitude-achievement paradox (Mickelson, 1990). The study of Mickelson (1990) (See also Hanson, 1994) questions the role of aspirations in predicting achievement, as students belonging to different racial and socio-economic backgrounds tend to develop educational aspirations that are unrelated to their present or future school achievement. More recent research has shown that expectations rather than aspirations are a better predictor of achievement (Beal and Crockett, 2010, Bozick et al., 2010, Author, 2015). For example, studies on high-school students in the United States who are expecting to

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enrol in college show that higher expectations are positively associated with higher grades (Bozick et al., 2010, Froiland and Worrell, 2017).

In spite of such findings, as argued elsewhere (Author, 2015), we cannot disregard the impact of aspirations on achievement levels altogether. Aspirations are still closely related to participation in higher education, with students even from disadvantageous backgrounds showing a strong desire to attend university and investing in this hope with hard work and positive school engagement (Bondy et al., 2017, Friberg, 2019, Hadjar and Scharf, 2019). Hence, it may well be that the relationship between aspirations, expectations, and achievement is contextual. For instance, Author (2015) shows that in some cases, by holding high levels in at least one of the two, aspirations or expectations, students can save themselves from scoring low grades. Author (2015) found that it was the misalignment between aspirations and expectations that had a stronger negative impact on achievement levels; and having just high aspirations or only high expectations (of going to university) could still improve student performance. Another study in the UK showed that expectations functioned in different ways for students depending on their larger school context and the social class to which they belonged (LA and Author, 2018). **Based on the above discussion, the following hypotheses were formulated:**

- 1. A higher level of educational aspirations and educational expectations will positively affect students' school achievement.**
- 2. The effect of educational aspirations on school achievement is weaker than that of educational expectations.**

### *2.2. Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital*

Parents' socioeconomic status, which includes their education level, occupation, and income, referred to by some as economic capital (Strømme, 2020), is another strong predictor of children's achievement levels (Archer et al., 2014, Darko and Vasilakos, 2020, Strand, 2014, Strømme, 2020). Low levels of economic capital often result in lower achievement levels. Research on white working-class students in the UK finds that financial difficulties and the lack of tertiary education among family members,



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discourages working-class students from pursuing tertiary education themselves (Baars et al., 2016). Alternatively, parents with higher socioeconomic status are able to enhance their children's academic journey by offering their children practical advice, constructive activities, and by serving as role models for them (Archer et al., 2014, Darko and Vasilakos, 2020).

The impact of parents' characteristics on children's achievement levels extends beyond the financial, to encompass the social and cultural aspects as well. Family social capital, which captures the crucial relationship between parent and child, serves as an important medium to transfer expectations, family values, and mutual goals from parent to child (Watts and Bridges, 2006). Research shows that parental involvement and parental expectations are both strongly associated with enhanced school performance (Darko and Vasilakos, 2020, Froiland and Worrell, 2017). Students' own expectations are also increased by parental expectations and parental involvement in their education (Almroth et al., 2020, Berrington et al., 2016, Nygård, 2017). Studies argue that children perform better in school when their parents read to them, have effective communication with their children, and support their children's learning at home (e.g. Boonk et al., 2018).

Parents may also serve as the source for cultural capital for children. Cultural capital refers to resources within the family through which upper classes socialize their children and enhance their social and cultural awareness (Bourdieu, 1984). This can include activities such as reading for pleasure, learning a musical instrument, going to the theatre or engaging in community work (Sullivan, 2008). However, the impact of cultural capital may vary for different groups. In a study comparing the grades of Christian and Muslim secondary school students, cultural capital had a significant positive impact on Christian students but was negative and insignificant for Muslim students (Author and Author1, 2018). Cultural capital also includes home reinforcement of positive attitudes towards school (Sullivan, 2008). Research shows that attachment to school can improve student achievement (Bryan et al., 2012, Kpolovie et al., 2014). Based on the above discussion, it is reasonable to hypothesise that higher levels of economic capital, parental support and expectations and more positive attitudes towards school will positively affect students' school achievement.

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### *2.3. Ethnicity, Migrant status, and Education*

In addition to the factors discussed above, ethnic differences and migration status also impact educational outcomes. Research in Western contexts shows that in spite of their disadvantageous socioeconomic backgrounds, immigrant children hold high educational aspirations and expectations of obtaining university-level education and beyond (Friberg, 2019, Gil-Hernández and Gracia, 2018, Tjaden and Hunkler, 2017). However, high aspirations do not always result in better grades at school. Immigrant-origin children in some European countries tend to score lower grades than native peers and have higher drop-out rates (Birkelund, 2020, Dollmann, 2017). Likewise, Latino students in the US also tend to achieve lower grades than white-American students (Bahena, 2020). An exception to the case however are students of Asian heritage (Indians and Chinese) in the United States who perform better in school than their white American peers (Feliciano and Lanuza, 2017, Lee and Zhou, 2015, Pong and Zeiser, 2012).

In spite of such setbacks in academic achievement, immigrant students' ambitious academic goals are noteworthy. Theorists propose that this positive commitment towards education is linked to 'immigrant optimism', that is, a strong desire, hope, and determination among immigrant groups for social mobility via the educational pathway (Kao and Tienda, 1995). It is likely that, migrant students in Qatar have also inherited their parents' commitment to education and desire for career mobility which may be shaping their educational goals and outcomes.

### **3. Qatar Background**

Over the last two decades, Qatar has experienced exceptional economic growth and development driven chiefly by the wealth of its hydrocarbon sector. As the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas (LNG), and counted among the richest economies by GDP per capita, the small but wealthy nation is able to offer to its citizens high-paying public sector employment, quality healthcare and free education (Stasz et al., 2007). An estimated 83 percent of Qataris are working in the public sector (Nolan, 2012). But it is not only citizens who are benefitting from Qatar's wealth and rapid growth. Qatar has attracted

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large inflows of skilled, educated workers from the region and beyond, such as from Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, South Asia and Europe (Ewers and Shockley, 2018). While exact figures are unavailable, many have come to the country with their families, including school-age children.

In fact, migrants heavily outnumber locals in Qatar, who make up only 10 percent of the total population, which is roughly 2.7 million (Snoj, 2019). As of 2018, approximately 31 percent of non-Qatari working population were categorized as skilled to high-skilled workers (this included skilled service workers, technicians, professionals and managers) (PSA, 2019). In Qatar, only those foreign workers who are earning a minimum monthly salary of QR4,000 (USD1,000) are able to bring their dependent children and other family members with them into the country (Zahra, 2018). Recent PISA data shows that around 57 percent of students in Qatar are from migrant families, and among them, 4 in 5 students are considered economically advantaged (PISA, 2018). With many relatively high-income Qatari families on one hand, and the more populous, economically stable migrant families on the other, the Qatari educational landscape is a very different scenario when compared to that of many Western countries. **How will expectations and aspirations influence school achievement in such a context is the central question which this paper asks.**

**Another difference between Qatar and the Western context lies in test scores.** In contrast to the lower achievement levels of some migrant students in the UK and other European countries when it comes to school grades (Dollmann, 2017, Author, 2015), migrant students in Qatar perform better than local students, even when adjusting for students' economic status and school profile (PISA, 2018). But similar to global trends, female students in Qatar are achieving better grades than male students (PISA 2018). This gender gap in favor of women is also visible in higher education in Qatar where women clearly outnumber men (Phan, 2010). This is often attributed to the low educational goals of Qatari boys, who are more likely to find and enter government jobs right after completing their high-school education (Stasz et al., 2007). The Qatari government has been pursuing reform efforts to overcome this dependence on government jobs, however, progress has been limited (Romanowski et al., 2013). With Qatar's modern education system still developing, school performance of students remains a

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significant challenge. Therefore, it is safe to hypothesis that female students will outperform male students, and migrant students in will outperform Qatari students.

#### **4. Methodology**

##### *4.1. Data and sample*

This study draws on cross-sectional data collected in Qatar for the ‘School experience, educational aspirations and scholastic achievement’ project (SEEASAP), to understand the impact of students’ expectations and aspirations on school performance while considering a variety of student and parent characteristics. The survey instruments for students and parents were developed by following closely the UK’s Longitudinal Study of Young People in Education (LSYPE) (Department of Education). However, the questionnaires had to be adjusted for contextual and cultural appropriateness. A pilot study took place in Spring 2017 to ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments. English and Arabic versions of the questionnaire were administered as some schools have Arabic as the medium of instruction. Data collection took place between October 2018 to April 2020.

As a first step, schools were sampled and divided into 3 categories, namely, public schools, community-based schools (private schools offering the national curricula of specific countries), and private-international schools. A list of 24 schools were randomly selected out of which 18 agreed to participate. In each school, all students in the 7th and 8th grades were invited to participate. Only the students and parents who agreed to participate in the study were given the questionnaires which they were asked to complete by themselves. Questionnaires were distributed to students at school, and to their parents at home via the students. The sample consists of 841 students (aged approximately between 12-14 years old) with 64 percent in public schools, 28 percent in community-based schools, and 9 percent in private-international schools. Information on school performance was collected directly from the student’s school.

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### *4.2. Ethical approval*

The initial approval for this study and the instruments was received by Qatar University Institutional Review Board on August 28th 2016 (Research Ethics Approval No. QU-IRB 630 EA/16). The IRB approval was renewed for one year on September 11th 2017. A new IRB approval was granted by Doha Institute for Graduate Studies Institutional Review Board on November 8th 2018 (DI-IRB-2018-F14). A final renewal was received on November 24th 2019.

### *4.3. Variables*

The dependent variable is the average grade point (AGP) for the student, converted into a percentage scale, for the same academic year as when data was collected for this study. The sample has an average AGP of 80.4 and a standard deviation of 14.14 (Table 1).

The independent variables include gender, ethnicity, school type, socioeconomic status, parental and schools' factors, and student's aspirations and expectations (see Table 1).

Gender: Females (56%) and Males (43%).

Ethnicity: Students were asked about their ethnicity and their responses were grouped into 3 categories, which are: Qatari, Other Arab (migrant students who consider themselves Arab but are not Qatari citizens), and Others (all other migrant students from non-Qatari and non-Arab backgrounds). There are 32 percent Qatari, almost 54 percent of Other Arabs, and 13 percent Others.

School Type: This included 3 categories— public schools, community-based schools, and international-private schools.

Highest Parental Occupation: Parental occupation was classified using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) from the International Labour Organization's (ILO). The thirteen categories from ISCO, including economically inactive, were recoded into three categories only, due to

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low count or empty cells in many of the original 13 categories. This variable was computed using responses from the participating parent about their occupational category and that of their spouse. The higher occupational category was selected. Note that only 34% of the participating parents were mothers. 19 cases belonged to those who were in the armed **forces**. Due to the low count, these were treated as missing cases. The 11 cases in the skilled/unskilled manual worker categories were grouped with the intermediate class. Our 3 main categories and sub-groups are as follows:

Economically Inactive- economically inactive, student

Managers and Professionals – managers, professionals, unclassified (only 1 case)

Intermediate class - technicians and associate professionals, clerical support workers, service and sales workers, skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers, craft and related trades workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers, elementary occupations.

Parental Expectations: Parents who said that it is very likely that their child will go to university to do a degree were coded as 1. Not likely and fairly likely as 0. Majority of the parents (75%), hold high expectations.

Parental Support: This is a continuous variable measuring the parent-child relationship, used here as a possible indicator of social capital. Students were asked a list of questions in relation to their fathers and mothers to understand how often (always, sometimes, never) their parents engaged in supportive behavior, and the sum of their support was calculated. There were a total of 15 items such as, “Makes me feel better after talking over my worries with her/him”, “Gives me a lot of care and attention”, “He/she likes me to make my own decisions”, and “My parents encourage me to do well at school”. The variable has a mean of 74.8, a standard deviation of 15.6, and a range of 1 to 90, with higher scores indicating more support from parents. Cronbach’s alpha is 0.929.

Homework Days: In order to capture student effort, students were asked on average how many days in a week do they spend doing homework. Range is from 1 to 6 days, with a mean of about 4 days and a standard deviation of 1.5 days.

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Attitudes towards School: An index was used to measure students' attitudes towards school and learning which included items such as "I am happy when I am at school", "School is a waste of time for me", "I am bored in lessons". Students were asked to report their level of agreement/disagreement. Higher scores mean a more positive attitude towards school. Mean is 34.7, standard deviation is 8.5 and range is from 3 to 52. Cronbach's alpha is 0.549.

Leisure activities: Another index was developed to measure how often students engaged in a variety of social and leisure activities such as playing a sport, reading for pleasure, doing community work, participating in a cultural event, playing a musical instrument, etc. This index is used as an indicator of cultural capital. It ranges from 4 to 60, with a mean value of 32.3, and a standard deviation of 11.8. Higher scores mean higher levels of cultural capital available to the child. Cronbach's alpha is 0.858.

Students Aspirations: A binary variable coded as 1 for students who said that they will stay in full time education when they are 16, and go to university when they finish school at the age of 18. All other responses such as leave full-time education, start working, or something else were coded as 0. Most students (around 80 percent) held high aspirations of enrolling in university.

Student Expectations: This is a binary variable coded 1 for those who said it is very likely that they will apply and get into university to do a degree (high expectations). 0 is for those who reported otherwise (fairly likely, not likely, not at all likely, and don't know). About 47 percent of students had high expectations, while 53 percent were classified as having low expectations. The reason we classified only those who were very sure (very likely) that they will apply and get into university as high expectations, was because of very high concentration on the highest two levels (very likely and fairly likely), which meant that there were very few cases in the lowest two levels (not likely and not at all likely). In order to create a measure that allows sufficient number of cases in each category, it seemed to us completely reasonable to differentiate between the highest category (very likely) on the one hand, and the rest of categories on the other hand.

[Insert Table 1 here]

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Descriptive Analysis

The charts below illustrate the relationship between student aspirations, expectations, and school performance (average grade point), which were created using the ANOVA technique. As expected, student performance improves as both aspirations and expectations move from low to high. AGP was 77 percent for students with low aspirations and 82 percent for students with high aspirations (Figure 1). Similarly, for expectations, AGP increased from roughly 76 percent to almost 83 percent for students with high expectations (Figure 2). Figure 3 considers the impact of both student aspirations and expectations on school performance. The parallel lines demonstrate that the difference in grades between low and high aspirations is the same as student expectations move from low to high. That is, having high student aspirations is beneficial regardless of the level of expectation. However, note that students with both high aspirations and high expectations, on average, had the highest score of about 85 percent. Likewise, students with both low aspirations and low expectations, on average, had the lowest score of about 74 percent.

[Insert Figure 1 here] [Insert Figure 2 here]

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Thus far the descriptive analysis is showing that aspirations and expectations have a strong and positive effect on school performance. To examine these relationships further, and in order to understand how and to what extent the main independent variables correlate with each other and with the dependent variable, we show the Spearman's correlations in Table 2.

We used the Spearman's rho correlation because some of the variables were measured using an ordinal scale. The main observation that can be made here is that none of the variables are substantially correlated with one another showing that multicollinearity is not an issue. For example, although the



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Spearman's coefficient for students' aspirations and expectations is significant (as expected), it is only 0.25, hence demonstrating a moderate correlation. Both students' aspirations and expectations are significantly and positively correlated with AGP, yet expectations have a higher Spearman's coefficient with AGP (0.26) than the coefficient of aspirations (0.19), which means that the effect of expectations on AGP is greater than the effect of aspirations. While it appears that parental expectations are significantly and moderately correlated with AGP (0.23), and with students' aspirations (0.18) and students' expectations (0.17), they have a weak correlation with parental support (0.09).

Attitudes towards school is significantly and positively correlated with all the other variables, and has the highest correlation with parental support (0.28), followed by the correlation with students' aspirations (0.26) and students' expectations (0.23). It is likely that the support of parents helps create positive attitudes towards school among students. The only variable that is barely correlated with anything is the number of days that a student spends doing homework in a school week. There is however a significant, yet weak, correlation with AGP (0.08), attitudes to school (0.10) and parental support (0.11). However, these are weak correlations rendering this variable insignificant. This is a surprising result, as effort was previously found as an important predictor (Author and Author1, 2017). Because of the theoretical importance of this variable, we will include it in the multivariate analysis, which will be presented in the next section.

[Insert Table 2]

### *5.2. Multivariate Analysis: The unique relationship of aspiration and expectation on school achievement:*

Multivariate and multilevel regression analyses were performed to investigate the predictive model for school achievement. Table 3 presents results from the multi-level regression models which, in line with our sampling strategy, account for school effects at the second level. This method allows for neutralizing any bias that may arise because of the school which the student attends (Hox, 2002). The table displays 4 models. Model 1 looks only at the effect of student aspirations and student expectations on AGP. This

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model shows that low expectations and low aspirations have a significant negative impact on AGP, where the coefficient for aspirations ( $B=-6.71$ ), is stronger than that of expectations ( $B= -4.64$ ). These results remain the same in model 2 (adjusting for student characteristics: gender, ethnicity and school type) and model 3 (adjusting for parent characteristics such as parental occupation, parental expectations, and parental support). That is, the coefficients for student aspirations and expectations do decrease but remain significant, with aspirations consistently displaying a stronger effect on AGP. In model 4, additional explanatory variables including student effort (homework days), students' attitudes towards school, and students' engagement in social and leisure activities are added. In this model, low student aspirations continue to significantly and negatively predict AGP, while low student expectations lose their initial significance.

[Insert Table 3]

Turning to other student and school characteristics, we see that in model 1, being a Qatari male student decreases AGP, while coming from public and international-private schools increases AGP compared to community based schools. In terms of the impact of parental characteristics, model 3 shows that, students whose parents are economically inactive score approximately 8 points lower than students with a parent who is in a managerial or professional occupation. Also, students with parents in the intermediate class score slightly lower than the managerial or professional class. Parental expectations and parental support show a strong and highly significant coefficient. Students whose parents hold low expectations of their children enrolling in university are likely to score 6 points lower than students whose parents believe it is very likely that their children will attend university. Parental support, which is indicative of the social capital available to the child through a supportive parent-child relationship, is also highly significant with a positive impact. That is, higher levels of family social capital lead to higher grades in school. In model 3, compared to model 1 and 2, half of the effect of student aspirations, is explained by these student and parental characteristics.

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In the final model, Qatari males from community schools, whose parents are economically inactive, expect lesser from their children, and are less supportive, predict lower AGP. In addition, social and/or leisure activities predict negative coefficients, while homework days yield a weak but positive coefficient, and the impact of student attitudes towards school on AGP is positive and highly significant.

### **6. Discussion**

The main objective of this paper was to examine the role of students' aspirations and expectations in affecting school performance among students aged 12-14 years in Qatar. In line with previous studies, mainly in the West, and given the theoretical and empirical differences between aspirations and expectations (Beal and Crockett, 2010, Bozick et al., 2010, Author, 2015, Author and Author1, 2018), we expected both aspirations and expectations to be positively associated with students' achievement. However, because aspirations are usually formed independently of the student's social and economic reality, it is expected that their influence on actual school performance is weaker than that of expectations. The latter is closely related to the student's social and economic circumstances, and therefore play a more significant role in determining school achievement.

The main, and most surprising and interesting finding in this study is that students' educational aspirations are more important than students' educational expectations in affecting students' school performance. Having controlled for all the explanatory variables in the analysis, students' aspirations remained highly significant, whereas students' expectations became largely insignificant in affecting school performance among students. This finding is out of line with previous and most recent studies that showed the importance of expectations as a determinant of school performance (Hadjar and Scharf, 2019, Author and Author1, 2018, Kirui and Kao, 2018, Villarreal et al., 2015, Stephan and Sebastian, 2020). This further demonstrates that the effect of aspirations and expectations is highly contingent upon the socio-economic and specific demographic and political contexts within which they operate. For example, a recent study in the UK pointed out that expectations operate in different ways for students depending on their larger school context and the social class to which they belong (LA and Author, 2018). In another recent study focusing on migrant youths in Shanghai (Kaland, 2020), it was

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argued that aspirations are a life-long process and contextually relative, which implies that they are likely to have different meanings for different students within varied contexts.

It seems most plausible to us that for poor and working-class students, aspirations are likely to be low or in many cases unrelated to their actual performance (Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012, Gorard et al., 2012). For these students, aspirations are likely to reflect unrealistic hopes and dreams. For students coming from middle class and affluent families, high aspirations are the norm and are achievable due to the material resources and support available to them (Author, 2014). This suggests that the specific context within which aspirations are developed should be taken into account in order to fully understand their impact on students' school performance. This implies that the explanation for the finding about the centrality of aspirations versus expectations, lies within the unique socio-demographic and economic context of Qatar. Given their resourceful socioeconomic background, children of skilled migrants in Qatar, and children of Qatari citizens, are able to hold high aspirations, and in the very same time are able to turn these aspirations into reality. These students are less likely to face the same challenges and obstacles that migrant and working-class students face in many countries in the West. For most of them, the high income and the already high socioeconomic status of their parents means that the formation of high aspirations is inevitable, and these aspirations in turn reinforce academic success.

Within this context it makes sense that aspirations are important in affecting school achievement. However, the lack of a significant influence of expectations on school achievement (AGP), especially given the plethora of evidence showing otherwise, requires an explanation. The effect of expectations was significant in the first three models in Table 3, but it lost its statistical significance when the following three explanatory variables were added to the analysis: effort (homework days), attitudes to school and social/leisure activities. When these variables were added to the analysis, the coefficient of expectations dropped by 50% and lost its statistical significance suggesting that its explanatory power was now almost completely mediated by the additional variables. This suggests that within the Qatari context, unlike aspirations, students' expectations do not have an independent influence on school performance, and most of its influence is mediated by the other explanatory variables in the model.

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Another possible explanation might be related to the nature of expectations, in that they are rooted in the material, cultural, and socioeconomic reality of students, and once these are fully controlled for in the analysis, students' educational expectations lose their independent importance.

Student demographics however retain their explanatory power in all the three models. Female students continue to perform better than male students even after all the controls are added in Model 4. Interestingly though, in our models, students from public schools do better than students from private schools. However, this may be connected to the general impression in Qatar that private schools have more rigorous assessment criteria, and tougher international curricula. In fact, the recent educational reforms in public schools which Qatar pursued were issued to enhance the traditional public school system in order to make it more at par with global standards (Romanowski et al., 2013). It is also important to point out that a large number of migrant students (who generally perform better) also study in public schools, and this may also raise the average scores for public schools. In our sample, half of the students in public schools were migrant students.

In terms of ethnicity, we see that 'Others' is not a significant category. That is, regardless of ethnic origin (Arab or otherwise), non-Qatari students score higher grades than Qatari students. Hence, it is being a migrant student in Qatar which improves school performance. This is in contrast to the performance outcomes of migrant students in some Western countries (Bahena, 2020, Birkelund, 2020, Dollmann, 2017).

There might be two explanations for the performance gap between native students and migrant students in Qatar. The first explanation refers to the low educational goals of Qatari students, especially boys, who are more likely to enter government jobs right after completing their high-school education (Stasz et al., 2007). Previous studies have shown that Qatari boys are less motivated and less school oriented than non-Qatari students (Lee, 2016), which is likely to be an outcome of a culture fostering a sense of entitlement rather than school achievement and merits (Baker et al., 2008). The second explanation is probably the greater confidence (optimism) of migrant students which is likely a result of several forces operating simultaneously, such as: an established family tradition of university education, observing the accomplishments of their parents who successfully migrated and obtained upper-level occupations in

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the oil-rich Gulf, and the possible awareness that unlike their Qatari counterparts, their future success can only be achieved through the educational pathway. It is also possible that migrant students in Qatar face greater parental pressure to do well at school in order to preserve their socioeconomic status and prevent future downward socioeconomic mobility. For most skilled and highly skilled parents, these goals can only be achieved through the academic success of their children.

It seems, the impact of parents on student school achievement cannot be overrated. As pointed out in other previous research in Qatar and elsewhere (Baker et al., 2008, Author and Author1, 2018, Lee, 2016), the findings of this study also confirm that parental support and parents' expectations are positively and strongly associated with student school performance. Parents who support their children and encourage them, and those who have high expectations for their children, can indeed boost the school performance of their children, while also elevating their children's aspirations. This implies that any policy which aims to raise the school achievement of students to yield positive outcomes, should also aim to enhance and promote stronger parental support and expectations.

Additional findings of this study are those related to school engagement and social/leisure activities. As expected, positive school engagement is associated with higher grades. However, participating in social and leisure activities, used here as a measure of cultural capital, did not improve AGP. It may be that in the context of Qatar, leisure or social activities are distracting students from their studies. This is just one probable explanation, and it is important to further assess the impact of cultural capital on student performance, as other research (Author and Author1, 2018) has also found that the impact of cultural capital can vary across diverse student groups.

### *6.1. Limitations of the study*

The above findings need to be understood within the constraints of some limitations. Our sample size is 841, of which majority of the students (68 percent) are from a migrant background. This limits the extent to which we can generalize the results from the finding. More research with larger and more diverse sample sizes is needed. The dependent variable, AGP, although standardized for statistical

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purposes, was developed based on school scores where different curricula, as well as different assessment methods are implemented. This is, however, common practice in research on school achievement as scores from standardized testing are not always available.

### 7. Conclusions

The current study provides some important insights into the ways through which students' educational aspirations and expectations function in relation to school achievement in emerging economies characterised with economic prosperity and abundant natural resources such as the state of Qatar. The evidence provided here suggests that aspirations, but not expectations, do matter in relation to educational outcomes (e.g. school achievement). Higher aspirations are associated with higher levels of school achievement. This is an important finding with implications for future research, as it underscores the need to further explore the role of context in determining the meanings and ways in which aspirations and expectations operate. The findings of the study might also have some important policy implications, in that various policy makers and educational authorities in countries like our case can improve school achievement further by rising students' aspirations. However, because context plays a significant role in determining how aspirations and achievement are connected, further research in other emerging economies and within different socio-economic contexts is needed.

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Table 1: Descriptive table for all variables

|                              | Percentage | Mean  | Std<br>Deviation | Min   | Max | N   |
|------------------------------|------------|-------|------------------|-------|-----|-----|
| <b>Dependent Variable</b>    |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Average Grade Point (AGP)    |            | 80.53 | 14.00            | 36.80 | 100 | 836 |
| <b>Independent Variables</b> |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Sex                          |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Female                       | 56.8       |       |                  |       |     | 436 |
| Male                         | 43.2       |       |                  |       |     | 332 |
| Ethnicity                    |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Qatari                       | 32.6       |       |                  |       |     | 272 |
| Other Arab                   | 53.8       |       |                  |       |     | 449 |
| Other                        | 13.7       |       |                  |       |     | 114 |
| Type of School               |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Public                       | 65.4       |       |                  |       |     | 548 |
| International-private        | 8.7        |       |                  |       |     | 73  |
| Community-based              | 25.9       |       |                  |       |     | 217 |
| Highest Parental Occupation  |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Managers & professionals     | 57.2       |       |                  |       |     | 424 |
| Intermediate class           | 35.5       |       |                  |       |     | 263 |
| Economically inactive        | 7.3        |       |                  |       |     | 54  |
| Parental expectations        |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Low                          | 24.8       |       |                  |       |     | 191 |
| High                         | 75.2       |       |                  |       |     | 579 |
| Parental Support             |            | 74.85 | 15.62            | 1     | 90  | 746 |
| Homework days                |            | 4.39  | 1.56             | 1     | 6   | 620 |
| Attitudes towards school     |            | 34.75 | 8.52             | 3     | 52  | 739 |
| Social/leisure activities    |            | 32.30 | 11.86            | 4     | 60  | 707 |
| Student aspirations          |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Low                          | 20.1       |       |                  |       |     | 141 |
| High                         | 79.9       |       |                  |       |     | 560 |
| Student expectations         |            |       |                  |       |     |     |
| Low                          | 53.1       |       |                  |       |     | 393 |
| High                         | 46.9       |       |                  |       |     | 347 |

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Figure 1: Graph of Student Aspirations and AGP

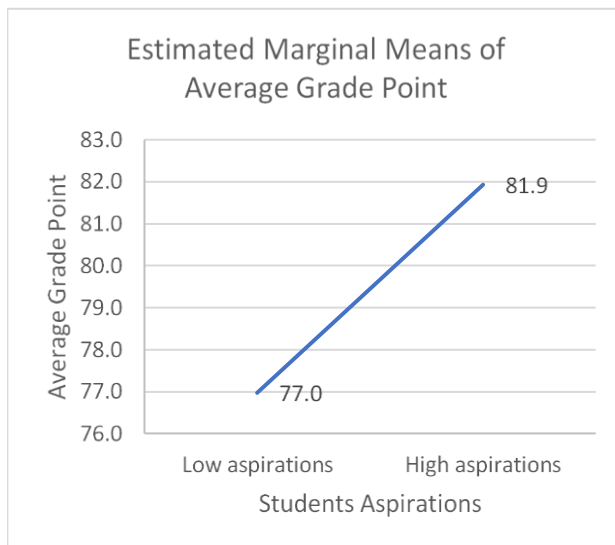
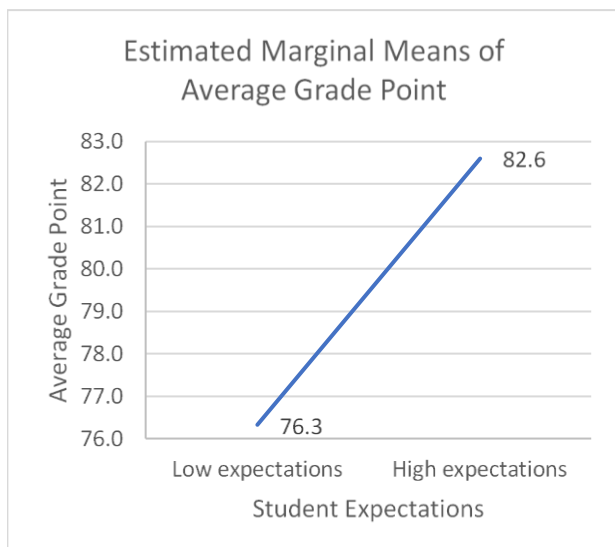


Figure 2: Graph of Student Expectations and AGP



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Figure 3: Graph of Student Aspirations, Expectations and AGP

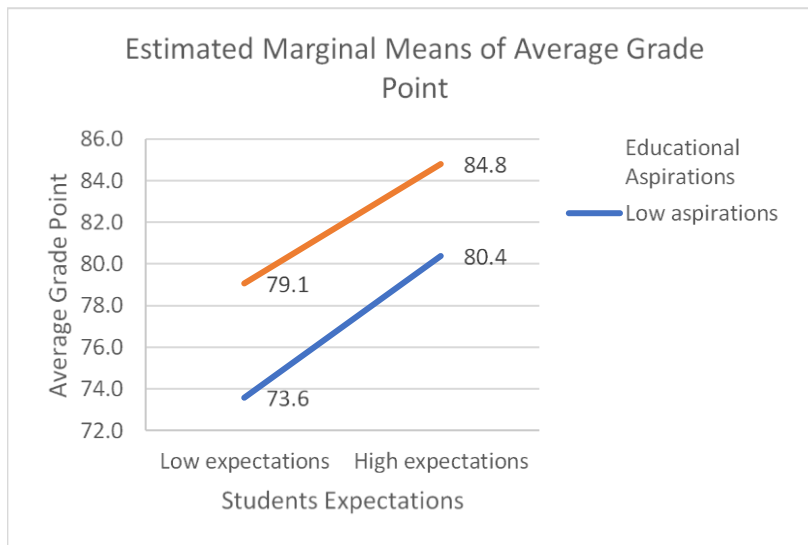


Table 2: Spearman Correlation for Key Variables

| Variables                       | HD    | SLA     | ATS    | PS     | SA     | SE     | PE     |
|---------------------------------|-------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Average Grade Point (AGP)       | 0.08* | -0.11** | 0.16** | 0.20** | 0.19** | 0.26** | 0.23** |
| Homework Days (HD)              |       | 0.03    | 0.10** | 0.11** | 0.06   | 0.05   | 0.04   |
| Social/leisure activities (SLA) |       |         | 0.16** | 0.14** | 0.005  | 0.05   | -0.07  |
| Attitudes towards school (ATS)  |       |         |        | 0.28** | 0.26** | 0.23** | 0.17** |
| Parental Support (PS)           |       |         |        |        | 0.14** | 0.14** | 0.09*  |
| Student aspirations (SA)        |       |         |        |        |        | 0.25** | 0.18** |
| Student expectations (SE)       |       |         |        |        |        |        | 0.17** |
| Parental Expectations (PE)      |       |         |        |        |        |        |        |

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

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Table 3: Multi-level Linear Regression for Average Grade Point

|   | Model 1  |      | Model 2  |      | Model 3   |      | Model 4  |      |
|---|----------|------|----------|------|-----------|------|----------|------|
|   | B        | S.E. | B        | S.E. | B         | S.E. | B        | S.E. |
| Intercept   | 86.20    | 1.49 | 80.78    | 3.92 | 73.92     | 4.48 | 67.89    | 5.38 |
| Male (base=female)  |          |      | -6.47*** | 1.29 | -6.57***  | 1.26 | -5.44*** | 1.29 |
| Ethnicity (base=Other)  |          |      |          |      |           |      |          |      |
| Qatari  |          |      | -6.17*** | 1.44 | -5.79***  | 1.47 | -6.65*** | 1.66 |
| Other Arab  |          |      | 2.29+    | 1.32 | 0.63      | 1.35 | -0.70    | 1.46 |
| Type of School (base=Community Schools)                         |          |      |          |      |           |      |          |      |
| Public  |          |      | 11.03*   | 4.04 | 12.16**   | 3.90 | 12.69**  | 4.07 |
| International Private   |          |      | 10.61*   | 4.68 | 8.45**    | 4.50 | 7.89     | 4.71 |
| Highest Parental Occupation (base = Managers and professionals) |          |      |          |      |           |      |          |      |
| Economically inactive   |          |      |          |      | -8.00***  | 1.89 | -7.32**  | 2.12 |
| Intermediate class  |          |      |          |      | -2.61**   | 0.97 | -1.89+   | 1.04 |
| Parental expectations (base=high)                               |          |      |          |      | -6.12***  | 1.13 | -5.65*** | 1.26 |
| Parental Support  |          |      |          |      | 0.12***   | 0.03 | 0.13***  | 0.03 |
| Homework days   |          |      |          |      |           |      | 0.53+    | 0.31 |
| Attitudes towards school  |          |      |          |      |           |      | 0.24***  | 0.06 |
| Social/leisure activities                                       |          |      |          |      |           |      | -0.20*** | 0.04 |
| Student aspirations (base=high)                                 | -6.71*** | 1.18 | -5.45*** | 1.13 | -3.87**   | 1.17 | -4.16**  | 1.35 |
| Student expectations (base=high)                                | -4.64*** | 0.94 | -4.53*** | 0.88 | -3.12**   | 0.91 | -1.53    | 0.98 |
| Schwarz's Bayesian Criterion (BIC)                              | 5409.48  |      | 5331.98  |      | 4461.11   |      | 3448.46  |      |
| Residuals   | 136.39*  |      | 120.09*  |      | 102.39*** |      | 87.45*** |      |
| Level-2 Variance (School)                                       | 28.16**  |      | 25.60*   |      | 23.69*    |      | 25.86*   |      |