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Explaining the educational aspirations-expectations mismatch among middle school students: The role of parental expectations, attitudinal and demographic factors

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Abstract

Aspirations and expectations are conceptually and empirically different, and given their differential impact on various educational outcomes, it is expected that they, and consequently their convergence, would be affected by different factors. This study examines the factors leading to high aspirations, high expectations and to the alignment between them by using cross-sectional data on 7th and 8th grade students in Qatar. Results from our study demonstrate that aspirations are affected by attitudinal factors and student grades alone, while expectations are significantly influenced by demographic factors (ethnicity, gender, school type, parent occupation). Parental expectations are influential in shaping student expectations but not student aspirations. The alignment of high aspirations with high expectations were determined by parental expectations, student grades and attitudinal factors. It appears that parental expectations play a critical role in bringing together high aspirations and high expectations. These results, the implications of the research and suggestions for future research are discussed further.

Keywords: Educational aspirations, Educational expectations, Aspiration-expectation gap, Parental expectations, School attitudes, Qatar.

Introduction

Studies on educational outcomes treat educational aspirations and educational expectations separately, with the former being an indicator of students' academic hopes for the future (Goodman, Gregg, & Washbrook, 2011), and the latter an indicator of students' realistic expectations, given their social and economic background (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Gorard, See, & Davies, 2012; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). Educational aspirations, are hence, more like idealistic educational goals which a student wishes to attain, without a full consideration of socioeconomic circumstances. Educational expectations, on the other hand, are rooted in students' perception of their material reality (Koo, 2012). Both these constructs, educational aspirations and educational expectations, are viewed as critical to understanding students' future orientation and their educational goals (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, & Mercado, 2011; Koo, 2012). Where gaps exist, educational aspirations are generally found to be higher than educational expectations (Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006; Koo, 2012; Lloyd, Leicht, & Sullivan, 2008; Nygård, 2017). Some argue that the lower levels of expectations held by students may be key in understanding the aspiration and educational attainment gap (Bohon et al., 2006; Kirk et al., 2012). This theoretical difference between the two constructs is also reflected in how aspirations and expectations are measured. Questions on educational aspirations ask students what they would like or want to achieve, while questions on educational expectations ask students to rate the likelihood of being able to attain that goal (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Bohon et al., 2006).

Research has also highlighted the differential impact of educational aspirations and educational expectations on school achievement (Bozick, Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, & Kerr, 2010; Gorard et al., 2012; Sharp, Seaman, Tucker, Van Gundy, & Rebellon, 2020) and participation in higher education (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Bohon et al., 2006; Kirk et al., 2012), with some debating their competing influences on various educational outcomes (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012; Harrison & Waller, 2018). Such observations suggest that there may be differences in the ways through which students' educational aspirations and expectations form (Beal & Crockett, 2010), and in the conditions that influence their alignment or mismatch with one another (Kirk et al., 2012). An appreciation of these conditions may further our understanding of various educational outcomes. Yet, few studies have compared the formation of educational aspirations versus educational

expectations, and we still have a limited understanding of the conditions under which high aspirations come to align with high expectations.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to expand our understanding of the factors leading to high aspirations, high expectations and to the alignment between them. We draw on data from 7th and 8th grade students in Qatar, aged between 12- to 14- years old. With its diverse student population, a demography where migrants outnumber locals, and a booming economy which emphasizes the importance of higher education, and yet struggles to increase interest of local students in study-intensive fields of education (Al-Misnad, 2012; Lee, 2016), the Qatari educational landscape serves as an interesting case study. In the next section, we discuss the main findings and patterns which research thus far has identified on the formation of aspirations and expectations.

The formation of educational aspirations and expectations

Educational aspirations

Researchers typically differentiate between students' idealistic and realistic educational goals (Kirk et al., 2012; Nygård, 2017; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001; Sharp et al., 2020). Students' educational aspirations are generally perceived as the more idealistic or hopeful goals about future educational attainment. Consequently, many studies examining student aspirations have sought to measure the hopes and wishes a student has about their educational journey. For example, some studies measure educational aspirations by asking students what they would want to do after finishing secondary school while offering options such as 'go to university', 'start full-time work', 'learn a trade', and so on (Gorard et al., 2012; Khattab, Madeeha, Samara, Modood, & Barham, 2021; LSYPE). Others have asked students about the level of education they would like to have or reach, such as high school certificate (upper secondary education) or university-level education (Dollmann, 2017; Nygård, 2017; Zimmermann, 2020). These studies have used single-question measures to determine students' educational aspirations.

Even though educational aspirations are viewed as the more idealistic hopes about future educational goals, nevertheless, research suggests that parental socioeconomic background is able to boost, or even limit, the development of children' educational aspirations (Baars, Mulcahy, & Bernardes, 2016; Strømme, 2021). For instance, Baars et al. (2016) find that among working-class

families in the UK, children with neither parent holding a university degree are unlikely to aspire to a university education themselves. Conversely, children whose parents are in managerial or professional occupations are highly likely to aspire and enroll in higher education (Strømme, 2021). Still, it is widely acknowledged that immigrant students in Western countries, especially those coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, tend to view higher education as a necessity for upward social mobility and hence aspire to enroll in college regardless of parents' educational and vocational background (Friberg, 2019; Hadjar & Scharf, 2019). Parental expectations also play an important role in shaping student aspirations. Zimmermann (2020) argues that parental social class effects on student aspirations are mediated in part by parental expectations. Other studies have also found evidence supporting the positive impact of parental expectations and parental involvement in children's educational aspirations (Berrington, Roberts, & Tammes, 2016; Chen, Chiu, Zhu, & So, 2022; Nygård, 2017).

Educational expectations

As noted earlier, many studies have found that students' educational aspirations tend to be higher than their educational expectations (Khattab et al., 2021; Koo, 2012; Nygård, 2017). One explanation is that educational expectations are more realistic assessments of future educational possibilities, shaped in large part by students' socioeconomic constraints (Gorard et al., 2012; Koo, 2012; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). Quantitative studies on students' educational expectations ask students about the likelihood of achieving their educational goals. For example, they ask students what is the likelihood that they will apply to go to university and how likely is it that they will get admitted (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Gorard et al., 2012; Khattab et al., 2021; LSYPE; Nygård, 2017).

Educational expectations are also shaped by high parental expectations, parental involvement in child's education and students' attitudes towards education (Almroth, László, Kosidou, & Galanti, 2020; Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017; Lazarides, Viljaranta, Aunola, Pesu, & Nurmi, 2016; Van den Broeck, Blöndal, Elias, & Markussen, 2022). Students who believe that education is important for their future, and those who hold positive attitudes towards learning are more likely to hold high educational expectations (Almroth et al., 2020; Van den Broeck et al., 2022), and are more likely to choose academic tracks over vocational ones (Lazarides et al., 2016).

Comparing the formation of aspirations and expectations

Theorists have long debated the various processes through which students either internalize socially desirable aspirations and expectations of status attainment, or rationally calculate what is ideal, and what is achievable. The Wisconsin model of status attainment, building on socialization theory and modelling behaviour (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1970), emphasized the social influences of parents, peer groups, teachers, and other role models in shaping student goals. Students adopt their aspirations or expectations of status-attainment from significant others and aim to achieve them. On the other hand, rational choice theory (Morgan, 1998), argued that students calculate the costs and benefits of a range of educational goals available to them, bearing in mind the “probability of success” (Zimmermann, 2020, p. 68). The emphasis here is on a rational calculated choice, which focuses on the cognitive processes of the students themselves (Morgan, 1998; Zimmermann, 2020). Research suggests that both educational aspirations and expectations may be shaped by social influences and students’ cost-benefit-success analysis (Koo, 2012; Zimmermann, 2020).

This should come as no surprise. Student aspirations and expectations, regardless of their conceptual differences, may be sensitive to similar influences. In fact, scholars have used similar determinants, such as race/ethnicity, gender, parents’ socioeconomic status, parental expectations, and various measures of student effort, achievement, and students’ educational attitudes to predict aspirations and expectations, with significant results (see Almroth et al., 2020; Baars et al., 2016; Berrington et al., 2016; Lazarides et al., 2016; Nygård, 2017). Still, most studies that have sought to compare and contrast the formation of aspirations versus expectations, and examine the gaps between them, have found evidence for some variation, albeit modest, in the ways in which these two constructs form (Bohon et al., 2006; Kirk et al., 2012; Lloyd et al., 2008; Nygård, 2017). For example, Bohon et al. (2006), in their study comparing the college expectations and aspirations of Latino students in the US, found that among the various predictors used, only immigrant status stood out as differentially impacting aspirations and expectations. Immigrant status was significant in predicting expectations, but not aspirations. Nygård (2017) in his study on students in Sweden and Netherlands found that, while student grades, parental education and expectations were all significant in predicting ideal and realistic educational goals, gender was only significant for predicting expectations. Interestingly, Lloyd et al. (2008), found no difference in the factors shaping aspirations and expectations of students in Texas.

The above findings also highlight the lack of consistent evidence on the impact of some key variables. For example, parental education levels were significant in predicting the aspiration-expectation gap in some cases (Boxer et al., 2011; Sharp et al., 2020), but were insignificant in others (Bohon et al., 2006; Nygård, 2017). Also, some studies found that student grades and student attitudes towards learning can explain the differences between aspirations and expectations (Boxer et al., 2011; Kirk et al., 2012; Sharp et al., 2020), but in others, student engagement in school did not lead to any substantial difference (Bohon et al., 2006; Nygård, 2017). In another study, students' self-esteem led to the biggest difference between aspirations and expectations (Sharp et al., 2020). Some studies further argue that the determinants may vary in the power of their impact, that is, they may be weaker or stronger in their impact for aspirations and expectations (Bohon et al., 2006; Sharp et al., 2020).

The inconsistency in the above literature about the effect of some key factors lends support to the argument that it is reasonable to expect that aspirations and expectations are formed differently, and that, the alignment between them may also be affected by a different set of factors. The Qatari context with its many contrasts, provides us with an excellent opportunity to further examine these processes.

The Qatari Educational Context

The Qatari educational landscape provides some interesting contrasts with respect to gender, migrant status, and socioeconomic class. While young Qatari women are flocking to universities, there is a low representation of Qatari males in higher education (Al-Misnad, 2012). Research shows that Qatari females have more positive attitudes towards school (Lee, 2016), and often hold higher educational expectations (A. L. Sellami, 2019). However, another study on all-Qatari secondary school students found that male students reported higher levels of commitment towards learning than female students (Nasser & McInerney, 2016).

It is also often argued that wealthy locals lack motivation to study, and research shows the propensity of native Qatari students to choose public sector employment over careers in science, technology, and business (Said, Summers, Abd-El-Khalick, & Wang, 2016; A. Sellami et al., 2017). In contrast, migrant students in Qatar value school more (Lee, 2016), are more motivated

towards STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) (Said et al., 2016), and continue to outperform native peers in international assessments (PISA, 2018).

Regardless of the impact of gender and ethnicity though, research in Qatar contends that positive attitudes towards school and interest in STEM careers (over public sector employment) are strong predictors of the expectation to enroll in university (Nasser & McInerney, 2016; A. Sellami et al., 2017). In general, students in Qatar value school and expect to obtain tertiary education. A study on 730 native-Qatari students found that about 70 percent of their sample held expectations of going to university (A. L. Sellami, 2019), and in another study, from a sample of 1091 students (7th and 8th graders), about 78 percent were found to have positive attitudes towards school (Lee, 2016). Information on how the aspirations and expectations of students in Qatar compare is not available.

The school system

There are two main types of schools in Qatar: public and private. In the academic year 2019-2020, there were around 124,600 students (of Qatari and non-Qatari backgrounds) attending over 200 public schools, all of which are funded by the state. The private sector consists of two sub-types: international schools and community-based schools. There were more than 330 private schools in the academic year 2019-2020 catering for nearly 211,000 studentsⁱ. The majority of private schools, especially the international ones, enjoy a good reputation and have been invited by the Qatari government to operate in Qatar (Sawalhi & Tamimi, 2021). In order to maintain their prestige, private schools tend to charge high tuition fees and apply rigorous admission standards. Most students in private international schools come from middle class families and professional expatriates. Community schools are operated by foreign embassies using the language of their country as a medium of instruction.

Method

Participants

Analysis for this study is based on cross-sectional data from the ‘School experience, educational aspirations and scholastic achievement’ (SEEASAP) project conducted in Qatarⁱⁱ. The sample

consists of 841 students from the 7th and 8th grades (approximately between 12 to 14 years old), but the final sample used in the analysis is 730 students because that is the total number of students who responded to the questions on aspirations and expectations. Around 56 percent of the sample are female students and 43 percent are male students. In terms of ethnicity, 32 percent are Qatari, almost 54 percent are ‘Other Arabs’ (non-Qatari Arab students), and the remaining 13 percent were classified as ‘Others’ (migrant students of non-Qatari and non-Arab origins). With regards to type of schools, 64 percent are from public schools, 28 percent from community-based schools, and 9 percent from private-international schools. Slightly more than half of the students, 55 percent, have a parent who has obtained university-level education. From the remaining students, about 20 percent have parents (father or mother) who have completed high school. In terms of parental occupation (highest occupation from father or mother), half of the students have a parent working at the managerial or professional level. Another 35 percent are in intermediate-level occupations while 7 percent are not economically active. More description of these categories will be presented later.

Procedure

Student and parent surveys for this project were administered between October 2018 to April 2020. As part of the sampling procedure, a stratified two-stage sampling design was used. At first, all schools in Qatar were categorized into 3 groups: public schools, community-based schools, and private-international schools. Community-based schools in Qatar are also private schools, but unlike the ‘international’, these offer the national curricula of various countries.. Then, a random representative sample of 24 schools were selected, of which 18 schools agreed to take part in the study. The adequate representation of schools by type (public schools, community-based schools; private schools offering the national curricula of specific countries, and private-international schools, was preserved. Parents and students were given sufficient information about the study and informed that participation is voluntary, and that all data will remain confidential. Once informed consent was obtained, students were given separate questionnaires for themselves and for their parents. Information about student grades was obtained directly from the schools.

Prior to data collection, a pilot study was conducted to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaires for students and parents. Note that the survey questionnaires were drafted based on the UK’s Longitudinal Study of Young People in Education (LSYPE) (Department of Education).

Parts of the questionnaires were modified to suit the Qatari educational and cultural context. Questionnaires were administered in English and Arabic.

Instruments and Measures

In line with the research aims, there are three dichotomous outcome variables. The first and second are to measure students' educational aspirations and expectations. A third binary variable was created to measure alignment of high aspirations with high expectations. All outcome variables are further described below:

Students' Aspirations: Students were asked, '*What is the highest level of qualification that you would like to achieve?*', with 6 response choices. Those who answered bachelor's degree, or master's degree and above were coded as 1 'high aspirations'. All lower level qualifications were coded as 0, that is, low aspirations. While dichotomizing responses does result in loss of some information, we chose this method as we are trying to measure aspiration for university-level education.

Students' Expectations: This is a dichotomous variable based on two questions: a) How likely do you think that you will ever apply to go to university to do a degree? b) How likely do you think that if you do apply to go to university you will get in? Students who said it is very likely that they will apply for university and get admission were coded as 1 'high expectations'. All other responses (fairly likely, not likely, not at all likely, and don't know) were coded as 0. We decided to choose only those who were very confident (who reported 'very likely') as high expectations, while excluding those who reported 'fairly likely' from this category because of the low number of cases in the lowest two response choices (not likely and not at all likely). By following this method, we obtained reasonable variation in the two new dichotomous categories created.

High Aspirations and High Expectations: This is a binary variable, coded 1 for all those who had high aspirations and high expectations from the above two dichotomous variables. The rest of the students who either had both low aspirations and low expectations, or whose aspirations and expectations did not align, were coded as 0.

Drawing from existing research and available data, in addition to gender, ethnicity, and type of school as described earlier, the following predictor variables were also added to the analyses:

Parent education status: The participating parent was asked to report their highest level of education. Data on the education level of the spouse is not available. However, about two-thirds of the responding parents were fathers, and it is common for fathers in the family to have higher qualifications. Note also that when the participating parent and their partner's occupational status was compared, both had relatively similar profiles. Therefore, we believe this variable is a good measure for parental education.

Highest Parental Occupation: The International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) from the International Labour Organization's (ILO) was used to categorize parental occupation. The ISCO has 13 categories. These were recoded into three to account for low cases in many cells. Responses from the participating parent about their occupational category and that of their spouse were compared and the higher category was selected. Those in the armed forces were treated as missing due to very few cases (19 only). Another 11 cases in the skilled/unskilled manual worker categories were classified as intermediate class. Below are the final classes and sub-groups:

Economically Inactive- this category included all economically inactive participants (those who are not formally employed) and students.

Managers and Professionals – this category included managers, professionals, and one unclassified case.

Intermediate class – this category included 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, and 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. Those who said not likely and fairly likely were coded as 0.

Average grade point (AGP): Data for student grades was obtained for the same academic year as the survey. Grades were standardized by conversion into a percentage scale. Mean is 80.4, with standard deviation of 14.14.

Attitudes towards school: Students' attitudes towards school were measured through an index which contained 11 items. Students were asked questions such as '*I am happy when I am at school*', '*School is a waste of time for me*', '*I am bored in lessons*'. Response options were

‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘strongly disagree’, ‘disagree’. Negative items were recoded. This is a continuous variable with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes towards school. Mean=34.7, SD=8.5, Range=3 to 52. The Cronbach’s alpha is 0.549. As this is a somewhat low value for internal consistency, we understand that this is a potential limitation in the study.

Importance of university education to get a job: Students were asked, ‘*How much do you agree or disagree with the following? - Without a university education it is difficult to get a good job*’. Those who reported ‘strongly agree’ were coded as 1, and the rest (agree a little, strongly disagree, disagree a little) were coded as 0.

Public sector job matters to me: Students who reported that finding a job in the public sector mattered a lot were coded as 1. Those who reported that a public sector job mattered a little or did not matter were coded 0.

Interaction term: An interaction term was created for sex and ethnicity, which then was used in the logistic regression.

Results

We start by discussing results from Table 1 which compares the percentage of students who reported high aspirations, with those who reported high expectations, and those who reported high for both of them. In order to assess the distribution of these cases along the various predictor categories, the percentages are broken down by demographic and attitudinal factors.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Table 1 shows that more students reported high aspirations (78.5%) than high expectations (47%), and an even lower percentage reported having both (40%). Also, as predicted, female students outnumber male students in all the three measures. In terms of ethnicity, a higher proportion of ‘Other Arab’ students reported high aspirations, high expectations, and alignment between them, followed by Qataris, and then students of other non-Arab ethnicities (Others). Students from public schools are more likely to report high levels as well, when compared to students from community-based schools and private-international schools. Note that however, half of the public-school students in our sample are of non-Qatari origin, and perhaps that is one reason why public-school

students report higher levels of aspirations and expectations. As expected, students with either parent who has a university degree, or is in a managerial/professional occupation were more likely to report high aspirations, high expectations, and higher instances of alignment between the two, than those students whose parents do not have a university degree or are in the intermediate occupational class or are economically inactive.

Parental expectations lead to the biggest difference between students. For example, in terms of students with high aspirations, 64.4% were those whose parents hold high expectations, and only 15.2% were those whose parents hold low expectations. A similar pattern is seen for high expectations and for the alignment variable. Students who deem it important to obtain a university education for obtaining a job outnumber those who do not believe so in all three outcomes. Finally, the aspirations, expectations, and instances of alignment for students who reported that public sector jobs matter to them and those who said otherwise are quite similar.

In Table 2, regression analysis was performed to understand to what extent the predictor variables determine the formation of our main outcome variables. Table 2 hence presents three binary logistic regression models. Prior to the regression analysis, the Spearman Rho test was run to confirm that there was no problem of multicollinearity between the key factors. We have not presented these results to save space, but the results of these tests can be provided upon request.

[Insert Table 2]

The first model predicts educational aspirations and it shows that only attitudinal factors and student grades are significant. By attitudinal factors we mean those determinants which reflect students' attitudes towards school, tertiary education, and public sector employment. Demographic factors such as sex, ethnicity, school type, and parental characteristics, including parental expectations are not significant in predicting high aspirations. Students with higher grades and more positive attitudes towards school are more likely to have high aspirations. The belief that university education is important to find a job is the strongest predictor for high aspirations. Interestingly, preference for public sector employment also significantly increases likelihood of high aspirations. This is contrary to widely held notions that interest in public sector employment decreases students' aspirations for tertiary education (Al-Misnad, 2012; A. Sellami et al., 2017), however, these studies were only focusing on Qatari students, while our sample consists of natives and migrants. Perhaps this assumption about the negative impact of public sector interest applies

only to Qatari students and not to migrant students in Qatar who may have an interest in public sector employment because of its benefits such as flexible working hours and job security, but are still aware that obtaining a university degree is non-negotiable for future job and economic security.

The second model in Table 2 predicts educational expectations, and this model is clearly different from the first model. Here, in addition to attitudinal factors and student grades, demographic factors and parental characteristics are also significant. Other Arab male students are less likely to hold high expectations than Qatari counterparts. However, the aspiration model indicates that the aspirations of 'Other Arab' students are higher than that of Qatari students. Even though this is not a significant result, it shows that aspirations and expectations are working differently based on ethnic groups. While 'Other Arab' students may be having higher aspirations, the precarity of their situation as migrants in Qatar, in comparison to the affluent Qatari students with citizenship rights, might lower their expectations.

Model 2 also shows that attending a private-international school lowers educational expectations than going to a public school. This result may not appear surprising when we consider that, unlike public schools in Qatar, private-international schools in Qatar are considered to be more competitive (Cheema, 2015), and studies have found that competitive school environments can lower student goals (Mann, Legewie, & DiPrete, 2015). Having parents in the intermediate class had a significant negative impact on expectations, compared to having parents who are inactive. This result warrants further examination. A number of crosstabulations showed that, most of the Inactive cases are Qatari parents and those with no university degree. Note that migrant fathers need a job visa to stay in Qatar. This means that the inactive cases are mostly Qatari parents with little education who do not need to earn for themselves because of family wealth or other sources of income. Their children, the new generation, because of family wealth have higher expectations. Furthermore, 179 out of 258 of the parents belonging to Intermediate-class occupations are without a university degree. Their lack of tertiary education, and lack of wealth (indicated by their migrant occupational class), explains why their children have lower expectations than Qatari students whose parents might be inactive, but have family wealth to their advantage.

The interaction term 'Other Female' (female, non-Qatari and non-Arab students) is also significant but negative when compared to Qatari males. This is consistent with results from Table 1 which

show that students from Other (non-Arab) origins have lower aspirations and expectations than Qatari students. The interaction term Other Arab female is not significant, but it is in the positive direction, and consistent with other research which suggests that non-Qatari females have more commitment to education than Qatari male students (Lee, 2016). Previous research on migrant students in Qatar have not paid much attention to ethnic differences among non-Qatari students. In our study, we differentiate Arab-origin and non-Arab migrant students, and find that there are differences between them.

High parental expectations have the strongest positive impact on student expectations. And similar to the results in the aspiration model, educational expectations are also affected by some attitudinal factors. Student grades, positive attitudes towards school, and valuing the importance of university education for employment all are significant and positive in predicting high expectations. The importance of university education was the strongest predictor for aspirations, but its strength decreases for expectations, and instead, parental expectations take over to become the strongest predictor. Note also that there is variation in the direction of the impact for some factors. Ethnicity (being 'Other Arab'), studying in private schools, and being female (result not significant) are positive for aspirations but negative and significant for expectations.

We now turn to the third model in Table 2 to understand which factors are critical in predicting the alignment of high aspirations with high expectations. Results show that high parental expectations, student grades, attitudes towards school, valuing university education for employment, and interest in public sector employment are significant predictors of alignment. Sex, ethnicity, school type, and determinants of parental socioeconomic status are insignificant. Once again, parental expectations have the strongest impact.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare the formation of educational aspirations, expectations, and the alignment of high aspirations with high expectations. We argued that, because of the conceptual and empirical differences between aspirations and expectations (Author, 2015) , and given their differential impact on various educational outcomes, aspirations, expectations, and consequently their alignment, would be formed by different processes or factors. Previous studies

comparing the formation and misalignment of aspirations and expectations have documented some differences, however, the factors which led to these differences have been inconsistent across the studies, with no obvious pattern emerging on the impact of demographic factors and/or students' engagement with school and learning (Bohon et al., 2006; Boxer et al., 2011; Kirk et al., 2012; Nygård, 2017).

Results from our study demonstrate that, in the Qatari context, there are clear differences in the formative processes shaping these three constructs. And these dissimilarities highlight the differential impact of individual demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, and attitudinal factors. Our results lend evidence to the notion that, as expectations are rooted in a students' material circumstances, (while no doubt also being shaped by student attitudes and grades), they will, nevertheless, be more sensitive towards a students' socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity. And as aspirations are more equated with ideal hopes for the future, these will be less affected, in this case unaffected, by material conditions. Instead, aspirations are a function of how a student relates to their school, their achievement, and their future career goals, such as obtaining a university degree for better employment. Moreover, where certain individual characteristics such as ethnicity and school type may potentially boost aspirations, they can also deflate expectations. Finally, we see in the third model that, in Qatar, parental expectations play a vital role in transforming high aspirations to achievable expectations. These results are in line with many previous studies confirming the powerful impact of parental expectations (Almroth et al., 2020; Lazarides et al., 2016; Nygård, 2017; Zimmermann, 2020).

Another interesting result of this study was the positive and significant impact of school achievement (AGP). This factor was found to be positively and significantly associated with all three dependent variables. Some previous studies have pointed out that aspirations are often unrelated to actual, current or past achievement (Goodman et al., 2011), at least not to the same extent as to expectations (Author, 2015) . Our results here are out of line with these studies suggesting that the relationship between aspirations and school achievement, or between expectations and school achievement, is not universal and is likely to be highly contingent upon the specific context within which the study is conducted. Most of the students in our sample are coming from resourceful families where children's aspirations are not necessarily unrelated to

actual achievement. That is, in these cases, high aspirations are the norm and are achievable due to the material resources and support available to these students.

Conclusion

This study finds that aspirations, expectations, and their alignment are formed through different processes. It is most likely that these processes, that is, the exact set of factors, the strength and the direction in which these factors will determine aspirations and expectations, are dependent on the context of the study. For instance, in our study, migrant and local students are from well-to-do families where aspirations are achievable for wealthy local students, and migrant children are enthusiastic about their educational goals. In this situation, students' relative socioeconomic status and individual demographics have a stronger impact on their expectations than aspirations. This finding may not fully apply to other contexts where aspirations and expectations are embedded in a different set of social and economic conditions. It is likely that these conditions will not only influence the formation of aspirations and expectations, but will also impact the ways in which these constructs influence other educational outcomes. For example, given the different impact of the demographic factors (gender and ethnicity) on aspirations and expectations (and their alignment), and the different socio-cultural and economic realities and constraints facing Qatari and non-Qatari students of both sexes, will aspirations and expectations be equally important in determining their future educational and career choices and opportunities? The current study cannot answer this question as it uses cross-sectional data. Future studies can expand our understanding in relation to this question by drawing on longitudinal data and by employing life-story research.

The inability to use longitudinal data is not the only limitation of this study. Future research should aspire to reach a larger sample size, which can provide more analytical possibilities and can increase the generalizability of the study findings. It would be greatly useful to also include international schools with a sizeable body of western students (Americans, Australians, and Europeans), which are extremely underrepresented in our sample, which is another limitation.

The findings from this study have important implications for teachers, school administrators, parents, and policy makers alike. Through their emphasis on the importance of parental

expectations and positive attitudes towards school and university education, the findings suggest three ways through which interventions can help elevate and converge student aspirations and expectations. These are: supportive programs that enhance the parent-child learning relationship, activities that foster greater interest and involvement of students in their school and classroom, and finally programs that increase student awareness about the benefits of various university-level degrees and career pathways.

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Table 1: Percentage of students reporting high for aspirations, expectations, and for both.

	High Aspirations (Percentage)	High Expectations (Percentage)	High Aspirations and High Expectations (Percentage)	N* (TOTAL)
Total	78.6	46.9	40	730
Female	47.7	28.5	25.1	422
Male	30.9	18.4	14.9	308
Ethnicity	78.6	46.9	40.1	728
Qatari	21.9	14.9	12.4	227
Other Arab	47.1	27.3	24.2	401
Other	9.6	4.7	3.6	100
School Type	78.5	46.9	40.0	730
Public schools	48.1	32.0	27.1	460
Private-International schools	7.5	2.7	2.5	67
Community-based schools	23.0	12.2	10.4	203
Parent education status	79.5	46.8	40.3	673
Has university degree	46.2	28.2	24.7	373
No university degree	33.3	18.6	15.5	300
Parent occupation	79.8	47.7	40.6	645
Inactive	5.2	3.7	2.9	44
Intermediate class	26.6	15.3	12.7	226
Managerial/Professional	48.1	28.7	25.0	375
Parental expectations	79.5	47.4	40.6	667
High	64.4	40.3	35.7	518
Low	15.2	7.1	4.9	149
University education is important for job	78.7	47.1	40.2	706
Strongly agree	56.0	34.8	30.7	452
Other responses	22.7	12.3	9.5	254
Public sector job	79.4	47.6	40.9	650
Matters a lot to me	39.8	25.0	22.3	304
Matters a little/does not matter	39.5	22.7	18.6	346

**Note: The number of students who reported their aspirations and expectations were similar but not exactly the same. The N here represents total number of students who gave answers for both. As 'AGP' and 'attitudes towards school' are continuous variables, they are not shown here.*

Table 2: Binary logistic regression for high aspirations, high expectations, and their alignment

	High Aspirations	High Expectations	High Aspirations and High Expectations
	Exp(B)	Exp(B)	Exp(B)
Female (ref: male Qatari)	1.411	.953	1.061
Student ethnicity (ref: male Qatari)			
Other Arab	1.595	.469*	.508
Other	.931	.771	.629
Type of school (ref: Public)			
Private-International	1.837	.400*	.476
Community-based	1.550	.841	.911
Parent education status (ref: no university degree)			
Parent has university degree	1.055	1.247	1.241
Parent occupation (ref: Inactive)			
Intermediate class	.428	.419*	.445
Managerial/Professional	.585	.499	.562
Parental expectation (ref: low)			
High parental expectations	1.239	2.468*	2.848**
Average Grade Point	1.033*	1.024*	1.034**
Attitudes towards school	1.035*	1.055**	1.058**
University education is important for job (ref: Other responses)			
University education is important for job: Strongly agree	3.621**	1.907*	2.254**
Public sector job (ref: matters a little/does not matter)			
Public sector job matters a lot to me	1.867*	1.401	1.559*
Student ethnicity * Sex (ref: Qatari male)			
Other Arab Female	.624	1.295	1.121
Other Female	.768	.212*	.228
Constant	.043	.019	.003
N	537	534	530
Chi-square	p<0.001, df=15	p<0.001, df=15	p<0.001, df=15
Cox and Snell R square	0.145	0.180	0.212

Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.001$

ⁱ Ministry of Education and Higher Education:

<https://www.edu.gov.qa/en/Pages/AboutMinistry/AboutMinistry.aspx?ItemID=72> (accessed 16 December 2021).

ⁱⁱ Ethical approval was obtained from Qatar University's Institutional Review Board on 28 August 2016 (Research Ethics Approval No. QU-IRB 630 EA/16). On 11 September 2017, a one-year renewal was granted, and then on 8th November 2018, a new IRB approval was obtained from the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies' Institutional Review Board (DI-IRB-2018-F14). A final extension was granted on 24 November 2019.