

Educational enigma for future talent: roles of teachers as catalysts in inspiring high school students to pursue higher education

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have been conducted from the perspective of high school students, examining the factors that contribute to their refusal to pursue higher education institutions (HEIs). Presently, there is limited study investigating teachers' viewpoints regarding their roles as change agents in encouraging students towards HEIs. Therefore, this study seeks to provide new insights from educators that can strengthen teacher training and development, as well as inform the creation of customised intervention strategies designed to promote a culture of academic aspiration and achievement among students. Grounded in the philosophical premise of social constructivism, the study employed a qualitative methodology, analysing a sample of ten teachers selected by purposive sampling. In-depth interviews were conducted, and the data were analysed using thematic analysis. Our findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the strategies teachers used and the challenges they faced when motivating students to pursue HEIs. We proposed a conceptual study framework built from these findings, illustrating the interaction between teachers' duties, educational problems, and students' aspirations for further education. Our research is significant as it advances theory development in educational psychology and motivation theory by revealing new themes and relationships that can enhance existing theoretical frameworks.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education is an essential foundation for individual development and advancement in society, and the transition from secondary to higher institutions significantly influences students' futures. The endeavour is not merely a personal accomplishment, but is intrinsically linked to the broader societal framework, wherein the abilities and competencies of the nation's youth significantly contribute to national advancement. The 12th Malaysia plan (2021-2025) underscores the critical importance of human capital development for Malaysia's aspiration to become a high-income nation. The 12th Malaysia plan prioritises the cultivation of future-ready talent through the enhancement of educational access and the improvement of teaching and learning practices. The government has made significant efforts to strengthen and solve the needs of the education system in order to produce high-quality human capital that is skilled and qualified to satisfy the

demands of the industry [1]. Nevertheless, there is growing concern over recent trends indicating that high school graduates are refusing to go after to pursue higher education institutions (HEIs).

The disclosure by Malaysia's Ministry of Education, which recorded the absent of 29,663 out of a total of 407,637 registered candidates, raises concerns not only about individual educational trajectories, but also about the nation's future talent pool. Furthermore, data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) in 2019 revealed a discouraging statistic: 72.1% of Malaysian *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* holders declined to continue their studies in HEIs [2]. The government's efforts to provide a high-quality education system will be for nothing if high school graduates refuse to pursue HEIs. This has negative impact because Malaysia potentially losing investors due to a lack of skilled and knowledgeable labour because human capital is the primary driver of socioeconomic development. According to Indrayani *et al.* [3], education has a significant influence on human development, and having a better education promote human development in the country. Additionally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [4] provides insights into the evolving nature of education and its impact on future talent development. Through this report, the OECD in 2018 emphasized the importance of equipping individuals with the necessary skills and competencies to thrive in a rapidly changing world characterised by technological advancements and globalisation.

Numerous studies have investigated the factors contributing to the decline in school graduates' inclination to pursue higher education [5]–[7]. Nevertheless, the representation of teachers in current literature remains limited and insufficient. Thus, how teachers may play their roles in influencing students for their future endeavor remain unexplored. Teachers assume a pivotal role in moulding the ambitions and academic engagement of students, exerting influence over their choices to continue higher education by providing mentorship, support, and the establishment of positive educational settings [8]. Sandberg and Alvesson [9] emphasized the importance of investigating a research gap from the perspective of an understudied area. Since most existing studies have predominantly centred on investigating the perspectives of students to understand the underlying reasons behind their disinclination towards pursuing higher education. Therefore, this research aims to explore the teachers' roles in encouraging students to pursue higher education. As far as this study is concerned, it may pioneer the exploration of the teachers' roles in motivating students to pursue HEIs in Sabah, Malaysia. By shifting the focus from students to teachers' perspectives, the study is essential as it can provide a more holistic understanding of how teachers can act as agents of change to motivate school graduates to pursue higher education [10], [11].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers are important for the future of education because of the potential they foster in their students and the way they influence the field through their knowledge, experience, and passion for their students' personal and academic development. The educational realm increasingly acknowledges teachers as pivotal change agents [12]–[14]. Teachers are change agents because they are proactive in working with their colleagues and have strong collaborative abilities. Teachers, acting as change agents, recognize the importance of others in advancing their own education, teaching methods, and school-level instruction [15]. Building a professional network and utilizing collaborative skills are crucial for transforming educational and professional development [16]. Transforming teachers from only consumers of knowledge to change agents who promote educational improvement is essential in the process of change in a school setting. At an international level, school systems recognise that the quality of teaching is an essential component that influences student outcomes [17].

In the 21st-century, there is a need to empower teachers for educational reform. Darling-Hammond [18] stresses the need for training teachers to effectively nurture students' talents and skills. Training equips teachers with the knowledge necessary to understand the various learning styles and preferences of students. A nuanced understanding allows teachers to tailor their motivational approaches to better resonate with individual students. Before teachers can influence student learning and achievement, teachers must first advance their teaching abilities to a high level [15]. The assertion by Heijden *et al.* [15] aligns with the understanding that advanced teaching abilities, cultivated through professional development, form the foundation for effective motivation. Teachers, armed with these elevated abilities, can authentically inspire and guide high school students towards the pursuit of higher education, shaping not just academic success but also a future of continued learning and achievement [19], [20]. This study utilises Bandura's self-efficacy theory to understand and explain the motivational dynamics involved in guiding high school students towards HEIs. Self-efficacy pertains to an individual's confidence in their ability to effectively plan and carry out the necessary steps to accomplish specific goals [21].

Usher and Pajares [22] asserts that several factors, including acquiring mastery experiences, observing others, social influences, and experiencing physiological or emotional emotions, influence self-efficacy beliefs. These sources shape students' impressions of their skills and influence their choices

about academic endeavours. In the context of high school students, their self-efficacy beliefs may significantly influence their attitudes towards further education. Previous studies have demonstrated that self-efficacy beliefs exert a significant impact on students' inclination towards certain topics, their academic achievements, and their expectations for their future careers [23], [24]. Educators and counsellors have the ability to motivate high school students to pursue further education with confidence and drive by fostering self-efficacy via positive experiences, role models, and supportive settings [25].

3. METHOD

This study is grounded in social constructivism, which emphasize the importance of social interactions in the learning process [26]. A social constructivist perspective motivates this study to examine teachers' understanding of their responsibilities in preparing high school students for future talent. Based on this philosophical foundation, this study was conducted using qualitative research which comes in the form of written or spoken words, actions, sounds, symbols, physical objects, or visual images such as maps, photographs, or videos [27]. Semi-structured interviews were conducted where the interviewer assumed an "active and reflexive" role in the data collection process [28] and establishes the question and can alter its order and wording based on the interviewee's responses. Questions asked can be a miss or hit during the interview process [29]. Therefore, the interview question lists in this study was flexible, and some views and suggestions posed by the participants who were not previously considered were included and used to enhance the topic list for the existing interviews [30].

The recruitment of participants was carried out using the purposeful sampling technique, which entailed the identification and selection of individuals or groups that possessed a high level of expertise or experience in the specific phenomena under investigation [31]. This study particularly recruited a total of ten teachers from high schools who primarily teach form five students and possess over five years of teaching experience. Each interview was conducted for about 20-45 minutes and the data for this research was analysed using the thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke [32]. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within the qualitative data [32]. Braun and Clarke [32] distinguished between a top-down or theoretical thematic analysis that is driven by the specific research question(s) and/or the analyst focused on it and a bottom-up or inductive one that is driven mainly by the data itself.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants in this study consist of ten teachers from Sabah who taught Form Four and Form Five students. Principle saturation was deemed that ten participants was adequate for this study as further interviews elicit no new concepts [33], [34]. Most of the participants in this study teach core SPM subjects, and one of them is a counsellor. The confidentiality of procedures and collected data was guaranteed for all respondents. Thus, participants' names and schools were made confidential and anonymous. The study's demographic profile shows that 60% of the teachers were male and 40% were female. Approximately 60% of the participants are between the ages of 41 and 50. The sample is very well distributed across several experience brackets, with the two most common being 5-10 years and 11-15 years, making up 20% and 30% of the sample, respectively.

4.1. Analysis findings

4.1.1. Understanding teachers' perspective of their roles in motivating students into HEIs

In this study, 30 unique codes have been identified in the first rank order of thematic analysis. Subsequently, these 30 codes were organised into ten themes, as shown by their second rank order in Table 1 (see Appendix). The second rank order themes were then consolidated into four primary aggregation themes: inspiring and empowering students, navigating HEIs, value driven career and educational challenges.

4.2. Discussion on thematic analysis

The study's results showed that teachers play a part in providing students with the support they need to further HEIs. By setting a good example, teachers inspire their students to have a bright future and serve as role models influencing students' career choices and aspirations [35]. Teachers play a vital role in motivating their students to pursue higher education by demonstrating passion for their work, dedication to their students' success, and acting as inspiring role models. Research additionally reveals that the academic performance of students is directly impacted by the motivation and attitudes of their teachers [36]. Recent studies have investigated the role of teachers as catalysts for the effective functioning of schools, the development of self-improving school systems, and the promotion of educational enhancement within a school environment [37]–[40]. For teachers to function as change agents, it is essential to comprehensively

grasp teachers' responsibilities in student motivation. Teachers in this study acknowledged the significance of active engagement. They believed that their own involvement would serve as a model for students, leading them to develop a more objective perspective, a clear vision for their future, and a proactive approach to prepare for their desired future. By engaging in this practice, students will develop a heightened understanding of their goals and aspirations, leading to a more focused and well-defined path for their future. As asserted by Toharudin *et al.* [41], students who possess self-assurance are more inclined to exhibit proactivity, competitiveness, and innovation, all of which might impact their academic performance. Scholars highlighted that students who experience an improvement in self-confidence and self-efficacy will find it more convenient to make decisions and determine their future path [42], [43].

The study also found that teachers help students learn about HEIs by navigating them. When the teachers use actual experiences, the students are in a better position to understand the benefits of higher learning together with the difficulties that are found along the way. By providing an insight to the students on campus life will help boost student's emotion and motivation to further their studies into HEIs. Social media is commonly associated with the negative perception of higher education with statements made regarding the irrelevance and inefficiency of degree programs or achievement of success without the necessity to pursue any form of education. According to Perna [44] study, those negative views can play a decisive role in shaping young people's education choices. By sharing this real-life event with the students, it will help students become more open and this will clear the bad perspective about education from the social media and their social circle. By giving a sense of awareness to students, it will help students to have self-efficacy and self-regulations about their future, and they might start planning their vision for the future. Students who feel confident in themselves are more likely to be proactive, competitive, and innovative, which can affect how well they study [41]. Students' who increased self-confidence and self-efficacy will make it easier for them to make decisions and choose what to do with their future [42], [43].

The study's findings revealed that teachers also strive to instill in students a deep appreciation for the transformative impact of education, emphasizing the power of education can have on their lives [45]–[47], to overcome adversity and pursue meaningful, fulfilling lives. According to the study by Majumder and Biswas [48], education can eradicate poverty or alleviate the poverty because they can enhance that achieving higher education can lead a household from being poor to non-poor. Because of their earnings potential increase it will help them to be out from poverty and improve their life mobility [49]. This demonstrates the significant influence of education in empowering economically disadvantaged students to improve their social status. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that these students have access to educational resources and opportunities that can strengthen their motivation. Furthermore, discussing the potential career opportunities that await students if they choose to pursue the mentioned course at university will not only enhance their preparedness but also ignite their enthusiasm to pursue higher education. This is because they will have a clearer and more objective vision of the path they have chosen.

Other findings highlight various challenges that might hinder student motivation to pursue HEIs. These include learning and motivational challenges such as limited motivational slot, lack of school facilities and environmental challenges as well as the need for attractive teaching and learning. In order to tackle the hurdles that impede student motivation to pursue HEIs, it is crucial to take into account these issues. Teachers have a vital role in addressing these difficulties by improving their skills, using innovative teaching methods, and seeking help from key stakeholders [50]. Inadequate financial resources, restricted possibilities for professional growth, and a dearth of explicit guidance or backing from educational leaders might hinder endeavours to successfully tackle these challenges [51]. Teachers also confront the challenge of an excessive emphasis on sciences and TVET subjects, which leads to the creation of a hierarchy of disciplines, where certain subjects are considered more prestigious or useful than others [52]–[54].

The study findings emphasize that focusing on certain subjects might result in negative consequences, such as the undermining of students' sense of importance and their perception of a limited future if they choose less popular courses in school. While science, technology, engineering, mathematics or STEM fields are often prioritized in education systems, this focus may inadvertently lead to disengagement among students pursuing social science disciplines [55]. Consequently, students who excel in courses that are not prioritised may experience feelings of exclusion or neglect, which can result in decreased desire and involvement in their academic pursuits. Another significant challenge encountered by teachers, as shown in this study is parent attributes to education, such as lack of education and awareness among parents, as well as their overreliance on schools. Multiple studies have repeatedly demonstrated that parental participation significantly influences children's educational achievements [56], [57]. Parental engagement in children's education is vital on children's academic performance and holistic growth.

4.3. The proposed conceptual framework

Given the aforementioned findings, this section proposes an extensive conceptual framework. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates the interplay between teachers' roles, educational challenges,

and students' intentions to pursue higher education. It emphasizes how different aspects of teachers' contributions can significantly impact students' educational aspirations, moderated by specific challenges within the educational environment.

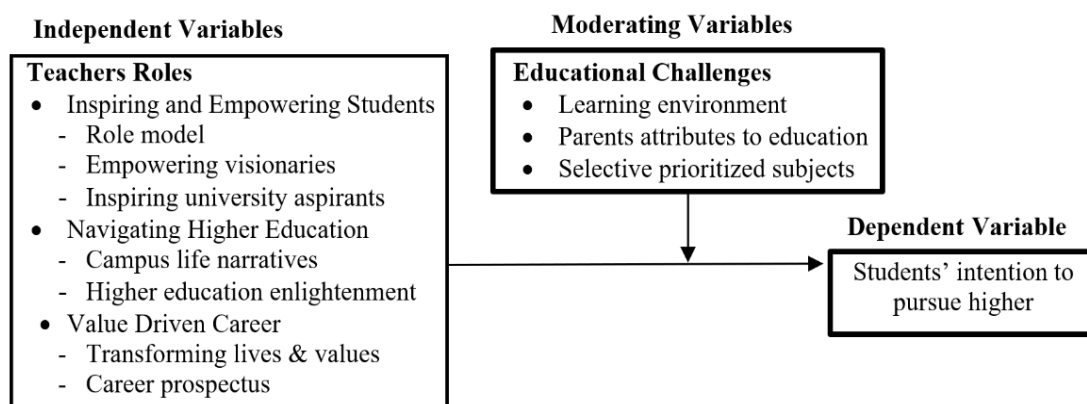


Figure 1. The proposed conceptual framework of study

As shown by Figure 1, the first three themes found from thematic analysis are conceptualized to become independent variables in this conceptual framework: inspiring and empowering students; navigating higher education; value driven. The independent variables represent the various roles that teachers play in influencing their students. Teachers inspire and empower students by serving as role models, empowering visionaries, and inspiring university aspirants that motivate students to aim for university education. Research has shown that teachers significantly motivate students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, to aspire to higher education [47]. Effective teachers not only impart knowledge but also actively communicate their hopes and dreams, inspiring students to pursue further education [58]. Teachers' influence extends to shaping students' interests and career choices, underscoring the importance of their role in guiding students towards higher education [59]. Thus, in this conceptual framework, it is expected that by inspiring and empowering students can influence their intention to further study into HEIs.

Teachers have a relevant role in preparing their students for HEIs by offering first-hand testimonial of campus life and knowledge of sundry benefits of further education in universities. According to Owens and Ramsay-Jordan [59], students' views and aspirations for higher education can be significantly influenced by teachers' personal narratives and experiences in secondary education. Clandinin [60] argues that teachers can help students develop a more nuanced knowledge by sharing stories from their own lives. Teachers may provide students with more possibilities to learn and grow by utilising narrative elements [61]. This will assist students to have improved comprehension of the matter and developments towards their objectives in a given profession. According to this theoretical framework, students' intentions to continue their study in higher education might be influenced by the following themes: navigating HEIs and a value-driven profession.

However, the impact of teacher roles on the students' intent is not always direct and sometimes depends on certain moderating variables which are referred to as educational challenges as per the context. Thus, the effectiveness and inefficiency of the work performed can depend on the quality of the learning environment [62], [63], parental attitudes towards education [55], [56], and the importance given to certain subjects [55]. While a learning environment that supports and facilitates may enhance the effectiveness of teachers' positive impact, in a pressurized environment it may be limited. In the same way, parents who value and support education can enhance the efforts of the teachers while uninterested or negative parental attitudes can harm them. It is also worth admitting that the strengthening of some disciplines as compared to others may affect students' perceptions of relevance and value of the college or university. Mainly, the dependent variable in this paradigm is the students' intention to take higher education. This is due to the increased package of duties assumed by teachers in the course of their activities and the moderating factors within the sphere of education. Understanding these linkages helps develop strategies to help educators and address challenges that hinder education hence supporting the learners' achievements [11], [64], [65]. The important practical implication of this study is that strategic teacher training modules can be designed, allowing for continuous improvement and scalability as well as to inform educational future policy refinement.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the significant role that high school teachers play in shaping students’ decisions to pursue higher education. First, the study analysed teachers’ roles in influencing high school’s students to step into higher education. The thematic analysis created 30 codes in the first rank order of thematic analysis. The second order rank categories all these 30 themes into ten themes, then consolidated into four primary aggregation themes: inspiring and empowering students, navigating HEIs, value driven career and educational challenges. Secondly, this study proposed a conceptual framework indicating the interplay between teachers’ roles, educational challenges, and students’ intentions to pursue higher education. This study highlights the understandings and perceived responsibilities of high school teachers in motivating students to pursue HEIs by understanding teachers’ awareness of their roles.

There are a few limitations in this research, primarily the sample choice only focused on the teachers that teach form four and Form Five students. In order to inspire and motivate students to further their studies, it must be promoted from the early age of education. Besides that, a small scope of study is also one of the limitations of this study that the researcher needed to face. Because of the limitations the researcher faced, this research could not focus on taking the perspective of the management side in school, such as the principal of the school, the director of Jabatan Pendaftaran Negara Sabah, and any parties that are involved in evaluating the teacher’s performance. Also, the scope of study should be enhanced and not focus on the Kota Kinabalu area. Instead, it should focus on urban and rural areas of schools to observe and assess the level of awareness between these two scopes and to investigate what the training needs are for these two different backgrounds of schools with different areas and students. For future research, it is recommended to investigate the perspectives from both students and teachers on higher education aspirations to identify perception gaps or alignment, which can inform more holistic interventions.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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Rasid Mail	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
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C : Conceptualization
 M : Methodology
 So : Software
 Va : Validation
 Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation
 R : Resources
 D : Data Curation
 O : Writing - Original Draft
 E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization
 Su : Supervision
 P : Project administration
 Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [SMA]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Thematic analysis findings




First rank order (coding)	Second rank order (theme)	Aggregation
Set your self as an example of success Sharing personal achievement Showcasing personal possession Encourage students' clear vision Give direction to higher level Setting clear goals Help them to be ambitious Motivate them during breaktime of teaching Encouraging them to go to university Give student inspiration Sharing university's life Sharing campus life experience Sharing personal experience Giving information about HEIs Provide information about benefits to further study Sharing information about scholarship Highlight knowledge is important to change life Highlight the value of life Reminding students to change their poverty life Career talk Career exploration Career guidance Limited motivational slot Environment challenges Facilities The needs for attractive teaching and learning Perspective on selective subject	Role model: teachers become role models for the students to inspire students to have the same success Empowering visionaries: guiding students towards setting clear and high vision for their future Inspiring university aspirants: teachers serve as catalysts for students' academic and deliberate efforts to instill aspirations for higher education Campus life narratives: teachers share their campus life experience and being part of the university community and its environment Higher education enlightenment: teachers disseminate essential information about higher education and equipping them to make informed decisions when furthering studies to higher education Transforming lives and values: teachers strive to instill in students a deep appreciation for the transformative impact of education, emphasizing its capacity to empower individuals to overcome adversity and pursue meaningful, fulfilling lives Career prospectus: teachers provide valuable insight about career prospects through career talk, exploration and guideline Learning and motivational challenges: this theme encompasses the challenges posed by limited motivational resources, environmental obstacles, and facility constraints within educational settings Selective prioritize subject: prioritize technical and vocational education and training (TVET) or sciences subjects over other creates a hierarchy of disciplines. This leads to a loss of motivation for students who excel in areas outside of these favored subjects. Parents attributes to education: parents' level of education, and attitudes towards education significantly impact their children's motivation and performance	Inspiring and empowering students Teachers led by example and act as a catalyst for aspiration and envision bright future for students Navigating HEIs Teachers share appealing campus life experience and provide essential HEIs information to help them to make informed decisions about pursuing HEIs Value driven career Teachers instill an understanding of the transformative power of education they can have on their lives Educational challenges Teachers highlight the various obstacles and challenges within the educational system that might hinder student's motivation to pursue higher education institutions
Less educated parents Unawareness of parents Parents depending on school		

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