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Predicting Academic Aspiration through Dispositional Hope, Instructional Leadership and School Type: Evidence from Multilevel Analysis

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Abstract
Academic aspirations among adolescents are a crucial factor in ensuring both their educational success and the sustainability of their professional development after schooling. However, no study could be found that examines the holistic effects of school-level variables such as instructional leadership and school type on high school students' academic aspiration, considering individual-level variables such as dispositional hope and demographic characteristics. This study examined how individual and school-level variables shape the academic aspirations of high school students. The research was conducted with 1398 students nested within 24 high schools across 5 different school types, in Uşak city center Aegean Region/Turkey and the data were analyzed using HLM. Multilevel analysis showed that the model explained 37% of the variance at the student level and 76% of the variance at the school level. Dispositional hope, gender, parental education, instructional leadership, and school type are the key variables predicting academic aspiration. It is possible that findings suggesting some types of schools have a negative impact on students' academic aspirations are related to educational inequality. On the other hand, school diversity also has the potential to enhance these goals by offering students alternative career opportunities. Recommendations were made for policymakers, school principals, and teachers based on the findings.

Keywords: Academic aspiration, Instructional leadership, Dispositional hope, School types, Social reproduction, Multilevel modelling.

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Introduction

Secondary education is essential for equipping young people with the knowledge and competencies required for further education and employment, as well as for supporting their personal development, well-being, and capacity to pursue meaningful life opportunities (Antonio & Cunha, 2025; Waite & Sims, 2024). However, the extent to which students can transform these educational opportunities into long-term success depends substantially on their academic aspiration; that is, their willingness to set ambitious educational goals and persist in working towards achieving them. High school students' capacity to access these benefits appears to be linked to the effort they demonstrate in achieving their academic goals (Gupta & Mili, 2016; Xie et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding what promotes academic aspiration is essential for educational research and practice.

Existing research has provided important insights into the individual-level predictors of students' academic functioning (Diseth et al., 2012; Hu et al., 2025; Kienngam et al., 2022) yet the determinants of academic aspiration itself remain less fully integrated across levels of influence. Research has shown that dispositional hope is an individual-level resource that predicts school success and academic motivation (Dixson et al., 2025; Ge et al., 2025). Other studies also found that students' academic aspiration is influenced by socioeconomic status and parental qualities, such as educational levels of the mother and father (Seema & Rani, 2024). Furthermore, the literature provides evidence of relationships between gender and academic performance (Bergold et al., 2020; Cabras et al., 2023; Vera-Gil, 2024). Although these findings highlight the importance of student-level conditions, they also raise an important question: to what extent can schools cultivate or sustain academic aspiration beyond students' pre-existing characteristics? In this regard, dispositional hope is particularly promising because it captures students' future-oriented agency and perceived pathways for goal attainment, which may be directly tied to how educational aspirations are formed and maintained.

Instructional leadership that fosters student participation in educational activities and motivates students through various sources of motivation (Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) is a school-level variable that can support academic aspiration. Studies on the role of instructional leadership in student achievement, motivation, and school performance (Day et al. 2016; Heystek & Emekako, 2020; Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017; Olsen, 2023) supports this idea. However, although instructional leadership has been associated with higher student motivation and stronger school outcomes, its relevance for students' academic aspiration remains less clearly established, particularly in this research that considers psychological resources such as dispositional hope. Moreover, students' academic aspirations are likely to be shaped by the institutional contexts in which they learn. School type may therefore matter, as schools vary in their social reputation, selectivity, organizational climates, and curricular emphases. Therefore, examining instructional leadership alongside school type offers a stronger basis for understanding how both leadership practices and structural conditions shape the formation and strengthening of academic aspiration.

The importance of comprehensively addressing school-level variables that affect academic aspiration, alongside student-level variables, serves as the starting point of this research. To advance research in this area, the present study aimed to provide a multi-level explanatory framework for predicting the academic aspiration of high school students. This framework integrates individual dispositional hope and key demographic characteristics) at the student level, and school type and instructional leadership at the school level. In doing so, the study adds nuance to the literature by demonstrating how academic aspiration is shaped by the joint influence of students' internal psychological resources and the instructional environment created by school leadership. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question:

To what extent do basic demographic characteristics, dispositional hope, school type, and instructional leadership practices predict students' academic aspiration?

Context of the Study

High school types in Turkey are categorized as Science High Schools (ScHS), Anatolian High Schools (AHS), Sports and Fine Arts High Schools (SFAHS), Vocational and Technical High Schools (VTHS), and Imam-Hatip High Schools (IHHS). These differ in academic entrance scores, program content, and objectives. Among these, the type of school that accepts a small number of students with the highest achievement scores, has a very high social status, and possesses rich resources in its learning environment is the ScHS. This type of school is followed by AHS, which are more numerous than other types of high schools in Turkey in terms of scores and status. Both ScHS and AHS aim to prepare students for higher education. SFAHS and VTHS, which admit students from the

lowest social classes and those with the lowest scores on central entrance exams, aim to provide vocational training rather than preparing students for higher education. Similarly, IHHS provide religious education and prepare students for professions in a more limited field. Therefore, this research is designed on the premise that the different student ecosystems resulting from stratification in different school types in Turkey may exhibit different characteristics in terms of the academic motivation variable.

Different school types seem like creating a kind of stratification by clustering either successful student groups who can advance themselves or student groups with low academic achievement, motivation, and educational opportunities (Bölükbaş & Gür, 2020). Different countries around the world also have categorized high schools into different types according to their own education policies; however, these schools, which differ in terms of admission requirements, curriculum and social prestige, provide specialization and focusing on a specific field on the one hand, but on the other hand have negative effects in terms of creating stratification and segregation in education (Blossfeld et al., 2016). Therefore, this research aims to provide a framework to the international literature that integrates individual and school-level variables explaining academic aspiration, while also including the school type variable within this framework to evaluate this issue mentioned in the international literature.

Literature Review and Hypothesis

Academic Aspiration and its Determinants

In this study, as a phenomenon that is influenced not only by student characteristics but also by school environment and school practices, academic aspiration is defined by the concepts of "academic ambition, school inspiration, achievement motivation, enjoyment in school and life, and the importance of schooling for the future" (Plucker, 1996; 1998). In a sense, academic aspiration is the ability to plan and pursue educational goals in a way that suits oneself and one's circumstances (Goswami & Singh, 2020) and the desire of students to continue their formal education with intrinsic motivation, in line with long-term outcomes and goals (Smith et al., 2016). These definitions indicate that individual characteristics are effective in academic aspiration, but that it is also a phenomenon that can be supported by external factors.

School Level Determinants of Academic Aspiration: Instructional Leadership and School Type

In this research we prefer to use the definition of instructional leadership as school principals (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) who define and share the school's mission, manage the entire process from the creation of the instructional process to monitoring and evaluation, create a school environment that encourages the development of students and teachers, ensure the effective use of instructional time, make classroom practices effective by improving teachers' professional standards, and continuously improve academic standards. In other words, school principals who focus school policies on instructional processes, monitor teaching methods and student-teacher performance, and take necessary measures for improvement are considered instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2003). Research shows that this type of instructional leadership plays a vital role in teachers' teaching practices and collaboration and improves the classroom teaching environment through the development of school policies and beliefs (Bellibaş et al., 2021; Bellibaş et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2025; Short & Spencer, 1989).

These aforementioned roles of instructional leadership can contribute to the development of students' academic aspiration. Studies demonstrating the effects of instructional leadership on student achievement and motivation serve as evidence for this (Day et al, 2016; Olsen, 2023). Indeed, in a study by Plucker (1996), while identifying the determinants of academic aspiration at the school level, attention is drawn to practices such as being inspired by school, finding school enjoyable, necessary, and important, and receiving support for academic motivation in the school environment. Boström and Bostedt (2020) emphasize that improved learning environments within schools are vital for student motivation. Furthermore, research shows that a positive and supportive school climate (Plucker, 1998) is important for developing the academic aspiration of high school students. However, it is necessary to consider not only instructional leadership as a school-level factor influencing academic aspiration, but also various types of schools that differ in terms of entry requirements, curriculum, and objectives, learning environments, social and cultural capital, social perception, and status. Since believe that the context in which students are situated also plays a role in their academic motivation. Indeed, studies show that the type, structure, and resources of the school (Antonio & Cunha, 2025; Basu & Khursheed, 2023) and cultural capital-supported school practices (Arastaman & Özdemir, 2019) influence the academic aspirations of high school students. In this context, the school-level hypotheses of the research are as follows:

Hypothesis 1A: Perceived instructional leadership influences students' academic aspiration positively.
Hypothesis 1B: Students' academic aspirations vary across school types.

Student Level Determinants of Academic Aspiration: Dispositional Hope and Demographics

In this research, dispositional hope is operationally defined by the characteristics of "goal-directed determination" and "planning of ways to meet goals" in overcoming life's difficulties (Snyder et al., 1991). It also encompasses goal-oriented thinking and the determination to take consistent steps toward these goals across many areas of life. Therefore, it is a positive psychological structure that is not only related to psychological health in the moment but also increases overall quality of life aimed at the future (Ritschel & Sheppard, 2018). Thus, individual goals are considered a cognitive indicator of dispositional hope (Snyder et al., 2002). Research also shows that dispositional hope is a protective factor for young people, enabling them to cope with stress, anxiety, academic burnout, and other problems (Genç & Arslan, 2021). It is also a driving force in problem solving, planning, positive thinking, and subjective well-being (Roesch & Duangado, 2010; Yan et al., 2024). These conceptual explanations suggest that dispositional hope can be considered an individual force supporting academic aspiration.

Studies have provided evidence that demographic variables also have an impact on academic aspiration such as family's educational status, socioeconomic background, and other individual characteristics (Antonio & Cunha, 2025; Gong & Toutkoushian, 2024; Hadjar et al., 2021; Yong, et al., 2025). In this context, demographic variables were also added to the research design, and an individual-level hypothesis was formulated:

Hypothesis 2A: Dispositional hope and parental education level influence students' academic aspiration positively.
Hypothesis 2B: Students' academic aspirations vary by gender and grade level.

Theoretical Framework

Our endeavor for an epistemological foundation that brings together the conceptual frameworks examined, explains the relationships between them, and serves as a kind of theoretical framework for structural integration led us to two main theories: Achievement Goal Theory and Bourdieu's Sociology. Both theoretical frameworks are guiding factors in explaining the theoretical relationship between the student and school-level variables and the dependent variable in this research. The two-level research design, based on the established hypotheses, arose from our emphasis on evaluating individual and school-level variables together, rather than examining the relationships between different variables one by one with academic enthusiasm. Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical basis of the research framework.

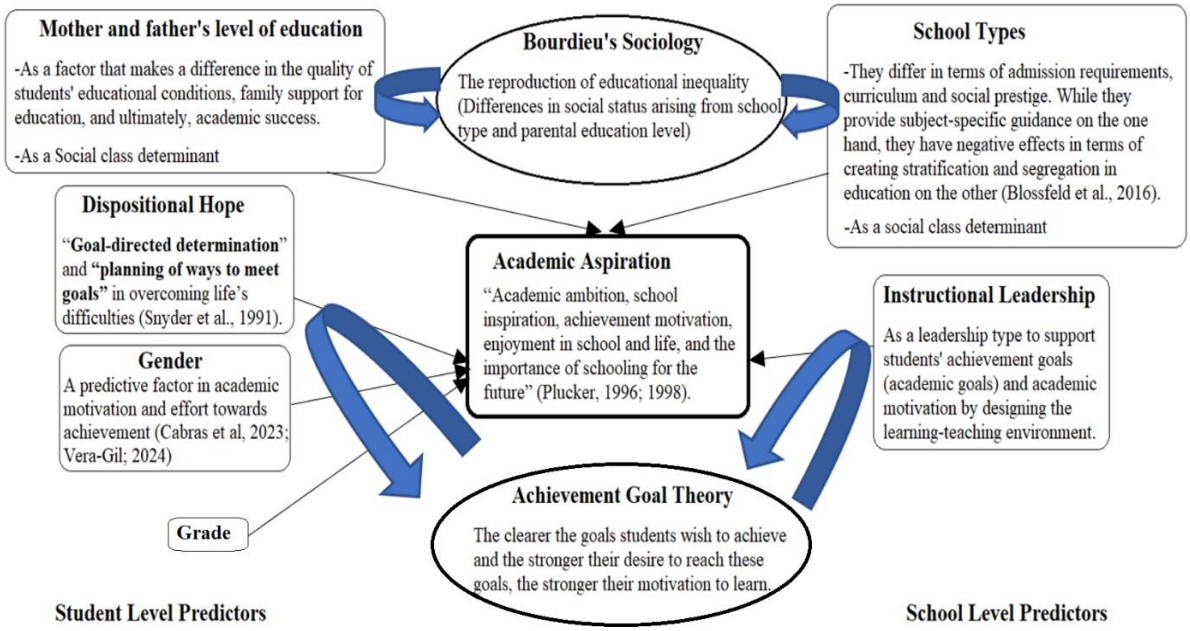


Figure 1. The theoretical basis of the research framework

Achievement goal theory, when explaining students' effort toward learning activities, focuses on the underlying reason and purpose for their participation in that activity (Elliot, 1999). This theory explains students' motivation for academic effort as a process that develops based on their own specific reasons and goals. In other words, the goals students wish to achieve and the clearly defined objectives in their minds are the driving force behind their learning or performance orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Student motivation is influenced by individual characteristics, but once students' achievement goals are clear, their academic motivation is shaped by the academic environments provided to them (classroom, school, etc.) and educational interventions (Ames, 1992). In this context, the study examines the effects of dispositional hope defined by Snyder et al., (1991) as "goal-directed determination" and "planning of ways to meet goals," along with students' demographic characteristics and instructional leadership variables, on academic aspiration, using Achievement Goal Theory as a basis.

Bourdieu's sociology, rather than being a standalone theory, has distinguished itself through its ability to contextualize concepts and make research findings debatable in data-driven studies conducted across many different disciplines (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007). In particular, the fundamental concepts of Bourdieu's sociology, social reproduction and habitus, have been quite helpful in placing the variables we examined in our research within a theoretical framework. From the perspective of social reproduction and habitus, schools can be understood as institutional arrangements that classify and reward students' background qualifications in different ways, thus contributing to the reproduction of academic orientations and inequalities (Bourdieu, 2018; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997). Schools are the key to a better future for almost everyone except a small, fortunate minority. However, schools, which we see as a beacon of hope, on the one hand classify students according to their social class or completely ignore differences, and on the other hand, impose different target behaviors and values on students from different social classes, affecting their future educational paths. (Golann, 2015). From this perspective, it is quite rational to consider different types of high schools as factors that can influence students' future academic orientations and aspirations, due to differences in both admission requirements and school climates and curricula. However, factors that students bring to school from their out-of-school habits, such as parental education level, similarly affect their academic aspiration.

This research model, developed to identify the predictors of academic motivation, aims to examine not only the independent associations of each of these two theories with academic aspiration but also their combined associations. Beyond simply viewing each theory as one that forms the basis of academic aspiration, we believe that it is also important to evaluate these two theories within the same model, in relation to one another. In this context, the habitus within which students live will influence what kind of future they envision, what kind of career they will choose, or what choices they will make -whether academically oriented or in other directions- and, consequently, whether they will be success-oriented or not. To clarify, the habitus described in Bourdieu's Sociology serves as a determinant of the "motivation to act toward a goal," which forms the basis of Achievement Goal Theory. For example, in their study, Çiftçi and Cin (2018) observed that students' career goals tend to resemble those of their families; children from families engaged in agriculture and livestock farming generally set goals related to agriculture and livestock rather than academic goals. In their research based on Bourdieu's sociology, Archer et al. (2012) found that the combined effect of inequalities in the distribution of capital and families' lifestyles creates unequal patterns in students' ability to achieve their academic goals. In this context, the literature discusses how habitus and cultural capital shape students' expectations and goals along class boundaries and the facilitating and limiting effects of these factors on the attainment of academic goals (Dumais, 2002; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Tan & Liu, 2022). Therefore, in our study, we combined Bourdieu's Sociology with Achievement Goal Theory to construct a theoretical foundation for students' academic aspirations.

Method

Participants and Data Collection

The study's data was collected from all high schools (24 schools, 5 types) in a city center located in the Aegean region including all school types. To enhance the participant group's ability to represent the population, we aimed to collect data from all schools in a province, ensuring that the distribution of high school students, schools, school types, and student numbers paralleled the distribution across Turkey. In this way, we collected data on a voluntary basis and established a correlation with the distribution of students in different school types across Turkey. According to official statistics from MoNE (2025), the distribution of students in different types of state high schools in Turkey and those in this study are presented comparatively in Figure 2.

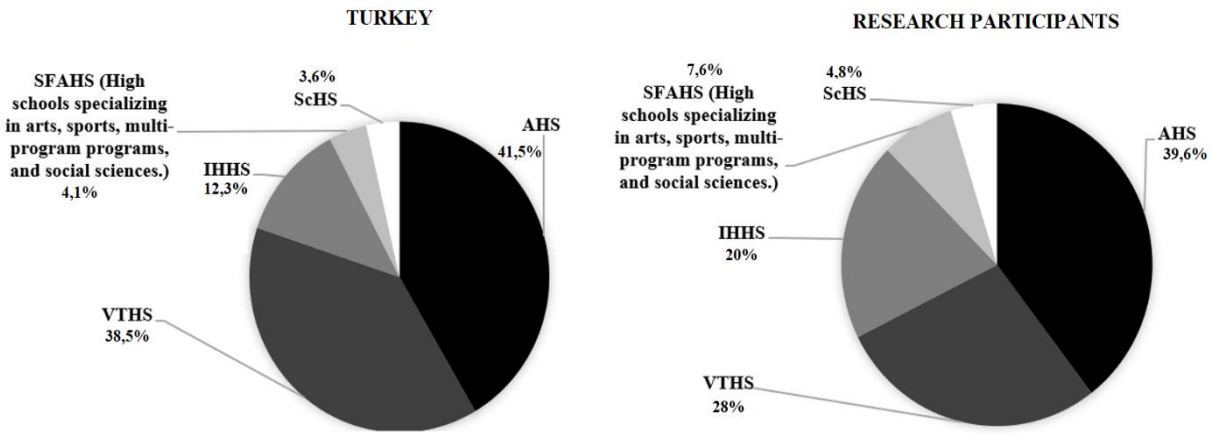


Figure 2. Distribution of students in different types of high schools

Data collection tool includes written informed consent and ethical approval was obtained from Uşak University (App.No/Date:2023-198/09.11.2023) to collect the research data. In this way, a total of 1398 participating students were included in the study. The demographics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The demographics of the participants

		f	***%***
Gender	Female	846	60,5
	Male	552	39,5
Total		*1398*	
Grade	9	472	33,8
	10	361	25,8
	11	341	24,4
	12	224	16,0
School Types	Science High Schools (1 School)	67	4,8
	Anatolian High Schools (11 Schools)	554	39,6
	Sports and Fine Arts High Schools (2 Schools)	106	7,6
	Vocational and Technical High Schools (5 Schools)	392	28,0
	Imam-Hatip High Schools (5 Schools)	279	20,0
Total	***24 Schools***	**1398**	
Mother's Educational Level	Primary school	394	28,2
	Secondary school	307	22,0
	High school	475	34,0
	Undergraduate degree	174	12,3
	Postgraduate degree (Master's/Doctorate)	48	3,5
Father's Educational Level	Primary school	265	19,0
	Secondary school	336	24,0
	High school	472	33,8
	Undergraduate degree	253	18,0
	Postgraduate degree (Master's/Doctorate)	72	5,2

Table 1 shows that 60.5% of participants were female students and 39.5% were male students. Data on mothers' education levels show that 49.8% of students have mothers with a high school education or higher. Data on fathers' education levels show that 57% of students have fathers with a high school education or higher.

Measures

School Principal's Instructional Leadership Behaviors Scale (ILBS)

The ILBS, developed by Bay-Dönertaş (2021), was used to assess high school students' perceptions of their principals' instructional leadership behaviors. The scale consists of 34 items and four dimensions. These dimensions are named, respectively, "Mission, Vision, and School-Specific Values," "Managing the Curriculum," "Developing the School's Learning Climate," and "Acting in Accordance with Ethical Standards". Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) conducted during scale development showed that the four-factor structure accounted for 61.52% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha *(α)* reliability coefficients for the dimensions were 0.89, 0.94, 0.89, and 0.88 respectively. Based on these data, the scale was concluded to be valid and reliable in measuring high school students' perceptions of their principals' instructional leadership behaviors (Bay-Dönertaş, 2021). In this study, Confirmatory Factor Analysis *(CFA)* was conducted to assess validity. The analysis results indicated a good fit (*$\chi 2/df=4.2$, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation [RMSEA]=0.04*, Comparative Fit Index *[CFI]=0.94*, Tucker–Lewis Index *[TLI]=0.94*, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual *[SRMR]= 0.03*). The total reliability of the scale was calculated as $\alpha_T = 0.97$. These values indicate that the scale is valid and reliable for this study.

Dispositional Hope Scale (DHS)

The DHS was developed by Snyder et al. (1991) to determine students' levels of hope and was adapted into Turkish by Tarhan and Bacanlı (2015). The scale consists of 12 items (4 of which are control items) and two dimensions. These are named "Alternative Paths" and "Action-Oriented Thinking,". The CFA values obtained during the adaptation process of the scale are as follows: *(GFI=0.96, AGFI=0.92, RMR=0.08, NNFI=0.94, RFI=0.90, CFI=0.96, and RMSEA=0.07).* The test-retest reliability coefficients for the scale were calculated as α_1=0.78 and α_2=0.81 for each dimension, respectively, and α_T=0.86 for the scale as a whole (Tarhan and Bacanlı, 2015). In this study, CFA was conducted to assess the scale's validity, which indicated good fit: *($\chi 2/df=4.85$, RMSEA=0.05, CFI=0.98, TLI=0.96, SRMR=0.02).* The α value for the scale as a whole was calculated as $\alpha_T = 0.80$. These results indicated that the scale is a valid and reliable tool for this study.

Academic Aspiration Scale (AAS)

The AAS was developed by Plucker (1996) to determine students' academic aspirations and was adapted into Turkish by Arastaman and Özdemir (2019). The scale consists of 21 items and five dimensions. The dimensions of the scale are "Ambitions, School Inspiration, Achievement Motivation, Enjoyment in School and Life, and Importance of Schooling to the Future." The CFA values obtained during the adaptation process are as follows: *($\chi 2/df=3.56$, RMSEA=0.05, GFI=0.97, IFI=0.93, CFI=0.93, AGFI=0. 96).* The Cronbach's alpha coefficients (α) for the scale were calculated as follows for each dimension: $\alpha_1=0.61$, $\alpha_2=0.72$, $\alpha_3=0.59$, $\alpha_4=0.74$, $\alpha_5=0.85$, and α_T=0.83 for the scale as a whole (Arastaman & Özdemir, 2019). In this study, CFA was also conducted to assess the scale's validity. The results indicated good fit *($\chi 2/df=2.23$, RMSEA=0.06, CFI=0.94, TLI=0.92, SRMR=0.06).* The α value for the scale as a whole was found to be $\alpha_T = 0.86$. These results showed that the scale is a valid and reliable tool for measuring high school students' academic aspiration.

Analytical Strategy

Within the scope of the study's main problem, a Two-Level Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) analysis was conducted to examine student- and school-level variables that predict high school students' academic aspiration levels. The analyses were performed using Mplus. In the HLM analysis, the Null Model, which includes no predictor variables, was tested first. The ICC coefficient obtained in the Null Model indicated that the data were suitable for multilevel analysis *(ICC.= 0.051, p=.002)*. Subsequently, the Final Model, which included research variables at the student (Level 1) and school (Level 2) levels, was tested. The variables "dispositional hope, gender, class, mother's educational level, and father's educational level," which were measured to determine whether they affected high school students' academic aspiration, were added to the model as student-level (Level 1) variables; "instructional leadership and school type" were added as school-level (Level 2) variables (Figure 3). To determine the predictive power of the school type variable at the school level on academic aspirations, Science High Schools, which have students achieving the highest academic success among these high school types, were designated as the reference group in the dummy coding.

According to the theoretical model shown in Figure 1, the formulas for Level 1 and Level 2 predictor variables are presented in Figure 3.

Level 1 Formula (Student-Level)	$(AAL)_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1(DH)_{ij} + \beta 2(Gender)_{ij} + \beta_3(Grade)_{ij} + \beta_4(MEL)_{ij} + \beta_5(FEL)_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij}$ (AAL= Academic Aspiration Level, DH= Dispositional Hope MEL= mother's education level, FEL= father's education level, ϵ_{ij} = Student level error)
Level 2 Formula (School-Level)	$AAL_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(IL)_j + \gamma_{02}(D_IHHS)_j + \gamma_{03}(D_AHS)_j + \gamma_{04}(D_VTHS)_j + \gamma_{05}(D_SFAHS)_j + \upsilon_{0j}$ (AAL_{0j} = School-level Academic Aspiration mean scores, γ_{00}= Grand Intercept, IL=Instructional Leadership Level of Principal, D_IHHS= Imam Hatip High School, D_AHS= Anatolian High School, D_VTHS=Vocational and Technical High School, D_SFAHS = Sports and Fine Arts High Schools, υ_{0j}= random intercept)
Integrated Model Formula	$AAL_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}\cdot IL_j + \gamma_{02}\cdot D_IHS_j + \gamma_{03}\cdot D_SFAHS_j + \gamma_{04}\cdot D_AHS_j + \gamma_{05}\cdot D_VTHS_j + \beta_1\cdot DH_{ij} + \beta_2\cdot Gender_{ij} + \beta_3\cdot Grade_{ij} + \beta_4\cdot MEL_{ij} + \beta_5\cdot FEL_{ij} + u_{0j} + r_{ij}$ (r_{ij}= student-level error (residual) term)

Figure 3. Regression formulas of HLM models.

Findings

Variance Components and Model Rationale

When examining the results of the Null Model constructed in the first stage of the analysis, the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) for the academic aspiration variable was .051. This finding indicates that 5.1% of the total variance in students' academic aspiration scores is attributable to differences in school characteristics, while the remaining 94.9% is attributable to students' individual characteristics. The statistical significance of the inter-school variance ($p < .01$) indicates that the data are suitable for multilevel analysis and that school-level variables can be included in the model. The coefficients and variance components from the HLM analysis are presented in Table 2. Prior to interpreting the Level-2 fixed effects, potential multicollinearity among school-level predictors was evaluated using the estimated Level-2 correlation matrix. Bivariate correlations between instructional leadership and school-type dummy variables remained low to moderate (ranging from $r = -.373$ to $r = .361$), well below the critical threshold of .70, indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern at Level 2.

Table 2. HLM Analysis Results for Factors Predicting Academic Aspiration

	Model 1 *(Null Model)*		**Model 2** *(Final Model)*	
Predictor Variables	*Coefficient*	*s.e.*	*Coefficient*	*s.e.*
Fixed Effects				
Intercept (γ_{00})	3.221***	0.033	1.132***	0.212
Student Level Predictors (Level 1)				
Dispositional Hope	—		0.523***	0.026
Gender *(Ref. Female)*	—		-0.088**	0.031
Grade *(Ref. 12) (9,10,11,12)*	—		-0.030	0.018
Mother's Level of Education *(Ref. Primary) (Primary, Secondary, High School, Bachelor, Graduate)*	—		-0.028*	0.013
Father's Level of Education *(Ref. Primary) (Primary, Secondary, High School, Bachelor, Graduate)*	—		0.032**	0.012
School Level Predictors (Level 2)				
School Principal's Instructional Leadership	—		0.180***	0.050
School Type *(Ref. Science High School)*				
Imam-Hatip High School	—		-0.233***	0.030

Sports and Fine Arts High School	—	-0.196***	0.041
Anatolian High School	—	-0.147***	0.033
Vocational and Technical High School	—	-0.141***	0.031
Random Effects	*Variance*	*Variance(se)*	
Level-2 *(Between School)* (τ_{00})	0.020	0.002(0.002)	
Level-1 *(Within School)* (σ^2)	0.376	0.240(0.012)	
Model Fit Statistics			
Deviance (-2LogL)	2634.876	1979.68	
ICC (*Intraclass Correlation*)	0.051 *(p=.002)*	—	
Explained Variance (pseudo-R^2)		Level 1 (Student Level)= 0.373***	
		Level 2 (School Level) = 0.760***	

Note: Science High School is the reference group for school type. Female is the reference group for gender. Grade 12 is the reference group for grade level. Primary school degree is the reference group for parental education levels. Student-level Dispositional Hope was group-mean centered. The pseudo-R^2 value was automatically calculated by Mplus using the Snijders and Bosker (1994) method for explaining within-model variance.
Sig.: ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

Student Level (Level-1) Findings

As shown in Table 2 Final Model, student-level variables have significant effects on students' academic aspirations. Among individual-level variables, dispositional hope levels are the strongest predictor of academic aspiration *($\beta = 0.523$, $p < .001$).* In other words, as hope levels increase, students' academic aspirations also tend to increase. The gender variable also has significant predictive power for academic aspiration *($\beta = -0.088$, $p < .01$).* When the effect of the gender variable, used as a dummy variable *(Female = 0, Male = 1)* in the analysis, is interpreted, it is found that female students' academic aspiration levels are higher than those of male students. Looking at another student-level variable, dummy coded parental education level *(Primary=0, Secondary=1, High School=2, Bachelor=3, Graduate=4),* it was seen that the father's education level significantly and positively predicted students' academic aspiration *($\beta = 0.032$, $p < .01$).* In contrast, the mother's education level had a negative explanatory effect on academic aspiration *($\beta = -0.028$, $p < .05$).* The results regarding the predictive power of the final student-level variable, grade level, showed that grade level was not a statistically significant predictor of academic aspiration *($p > .05$).*

School Level (Level-2) Findings

The effects of school-level variables, the focus of the study, were examined using the findings in Table 2. In this context, it was found that school principals' instructional leadership significantly predicted students' academic aspirations positively and at a high level ($\gamma = 0.180$, $p < .001$). In other words, the instructional leadership of the school principal has significant explanatory power for the increase in students' average academic aspiration in that school. Another school-level variable, school type, also has predictive power for academic aspiration. To clarify the difference between school types, Science High Schools, considered the top group in terms of academic achievement, were used as the reference group in the dummy coding. According to the analysis results, Imam Hatip High Schools ($\gamma = -0.233$), Sports and Fine Arts High Schools ($\gamma = -0.196$), Anatolian High Schools ($\gamma = -0.147$), and Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools ($\gamma = -0.141$) have statistically significantly lower levels of academic aspiration ($p < .001$) than Science High School students. When examining the γ coefficients, it is seen that the gap between Science High Schools and Imam Hatip High Schools is the widest. Compared to Science High Schools, the school type with the lowest academic aspiration variance is Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools.

When the overall explanatory power of the model is evaluated, with variables for dispositional hope, gender, grade level, and parental education included at the student level, the intra-school variance, calculated as 0.376 in the Empty Model, decreases to 0.240 in the Final Model. This finding indicates that the individual variables considered explain 37.3% of the difference in academic aspiration among students (R2=0.373). At the school level, adding the principal's instructional leadership and school type variables to the model reduces the between-school variance from 0.020 in the Empty Model to 0.002. Accordingly, the established model explains 76% of the difference in academic aspiration between schools (R2=0.760).

Discussion

In the study, the effects of school-level and individual-level variables on high school students' academic aspirations were examined. The two-level analysis showed that these variables influenced academic aspirations at both levels. Seema and Rani (2024) also found that setting educational goals and taking action to achieve them are influenced by individual factors, such as socioeconomic status and level of school participation, as well as school-level factors, such as peer influence and school environment. These results indicate that academic aspirations should be viewed through a multidimensional perspective. These diverse predictors of academic motivation led us to ground this research in two theories: Achievement Goal Theory and Bourdieu's Sociology, and consequently, the interpretation of the results was based on these two theories.

This study's finding that instructional leadership is the school-level variable with the highest explanatory power for students' academic aspirations underscores the great importance accorded to instructional leadership in the educational management literature. Studies show that instructional leadership practices, such as preparing enriched learning environments for students and facilitating teaching, are more effective than other types of leadership in improving students' well-being, academic aspiration, and school achievement (Robinson et al., 2008; Shatzer et al., 2014). Furthermore, various studies provide evidence that instructional leadership plays a direct or indirect role, through teachers, in student achievement, motivation, and school performance (Bellibas & Liu, 2017; Day et al. 2016; Heystek & Emekako, 2020; Leaf & Odhiambo, 2017; Olsen, 2023). Boström and Bostedt (2020) emphasize that social relationships and rich learning environments within the school are of great importance for student motivation. This, as emphasized in Bourdieu's Sociology, highlights the context's role in either supporting or limiting students' goal-oriented motivation. The connection between Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital and achievement goal theory becomes apparent at this very point. In other words, it is possible to say that in a rich learning environment where students are supported in every way, the potential for academic success and goal-oriented behavior will be higher. Indeed, research indicates that the cultural capital and habitus provided to students influence their achievement goals (Archer et al., 2012; Dumais, 2002; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Tan & Liu, 2022). In this context, based on Achievement Goal Theory, students' goal-oriented motivation depends on the establishment of underlying reasons or clear purposes for engaging in learning activities (Elliot, 1999) and the provision of the necessary learning environment to achieve these goals (Ames, 1992). In the light of these theories, our research findings, in light of this theory, have shown us that instructional leaders play a role in students' academic aspirations by providing the necessary school environment for students to clarify their academic goals and move towards these goals with confidence.

The results regarding the effect of school type on academic aspiration show that students attending all other school types have significantly lower academic aspirations than students attending Science High Schools. In their study, Blossfeld et al. (2016) examined differences in high school types across countries. They found that high school models differ in admission requirements (exam scores), curriculum and content structures, educational standards, peer environment, expectations of student achievement, and social status. However, they emphasized that these differences create stratifications that cause social injustices within countries and stated: "Such a horizontal distinction often also implies a vertical stratification in terms of curriculum contents, educational standards, social recognition, and prestige" (Blossfeld et al., 2016, p. 381). In Turkey, ScHS have the highest social status, the highest entrance scores, and the highest expectations for student achievement. Students with the highest achievement scores enroll in these schools; naturally, peer groups with high socioeconomic status and a focus on achievement form. In contrast, the perceived social status and expectations for students in other types of schools are relatively low. Furthermore, the vertical stratification created by different types of high schools, as expressed by Blossfeld et al. (2016), may be reflected in academic socialization within the peer environment. This stratification, which arises based on socioeconomic status and achievement level, may result in a peer environment focused on academic achievement or in groups with non-academic goals. At this point, Bourdieu's concept of habitus and his sociology on the reproduction of inequality in education provide a basis for explaining why academic aspiration are lower in other types of high schools compared to ScHS. Although it is not possible to present these theoretical explanations and interpretations as a directly measured or observed correlation in this study, there are studies supporting this interpretation that show clear differences between ScHS students in Turkey and students attending other high schools in terms of both the socioeconomic status provided by their habitus (pre-high school background) and their level of access to educational opportunities, and that their choice of high school -whether voluntary or mandatory- significantly affects their academic achievement (Önür, 2013; Özbaş, 2013; Yücedağlar & Tunç, 2022).

However, beyond all this, the research findings reveal a striking and questionable pattern in explaining the variance in academic aspiration across high school types. As stated in the findings, while IHHS are the furthest from science high schools in terms of academic aspiration, vocational and technical high schools are the closest. The fact that VTHS schools, which accept the lowest-scoring students on the high school entrance exam, ranked second in terms of academic aspiration after ScHS schools was an unexpected result. This situation shows us that students' academic aspiration is closely related to the career opportunities that the high school they attend promises them for their post-school lives. Similarly, in the city where the data were collected, even though one of the schools with the highest scores after the science high school on the high school entrance exam is an IHHS, it is the school furthest from the science high school in terms of academic aspiration, which is related to what the school promises students for their life after high school. VTHS, by their very nature, have the potential to direct students toward professions with a wide range of employment opportunities after high school, rather than primarily preparing them for university. Furthermore, the curriculum of VTHS is designed to be directly functional and practical for students' future professional lives. By contrast, the direct contribution that IHHS make to their students' postsecondary professional lives and their transition to related university departments, such as theology faculties, is limited to a very narrow field. The religious education elements that feature heavily in the teaching content of IHHS do not provide any additional advantage when transitioning to other professions or university departments unrelated to the high school education they have received. In this case, it is concluded that differences in students' academic aspirations across high school types are driven by their rational expectations for the future. The ranking of admission scores does not parallel the ranking of the school type's effect of academic aspiration. The ranking of high schools by admission score is as follows: ScHC, IHHS, AHS, SFAHS, VTHS. The ranking of the magnitude of the school type's effect on academic motivation, based on distance from ScHS, from largest to smallest, is as follows: VTHS, AHS, SFAHS, IHHS. This divergence in the rankings can be interpreted to mean that the effect of the school type variable on academic aspiration stems largely not from the selectivity of admission scores but from the internal dynamics of the school types, that is their organizational characteristics.

Within the scope of the research, the most critical individual-level variable influencing academic aspiration was found to be dispositional hope. Roesch and Duangado (2010) stated that hope is a positive psychological state that motivates individuals to take action. Research has found that, dispositional hope has a strong positive effect on school achievement and academic motivation (Dixson et al., 2025; Ge et al., 2025). Conceptually, the strongest indicators of dispositional hope are clear goals and the planning process undertaken to achieve these goals (Snyder et al., 1991; Snyder et al., 2002). The finding that a student who is focused on their academic goals, in other words, who has high dispositional hope, also has a high level of academic aspiration in this research, provides a structure consistent with the framework of Achievement Goal theory.

Another finding is that gender is a predictor of students' academic aspirations. Accordingly, female students tend to have higher academic aspiration than male students. In a study grounded in gender theory, Vera-Gil (2024) concluded that women are more inclined than men to use their analytical and social skills to achieve better academic performance. Similarly, Cabras et al. (2023) found that female students have higher internal and external academic motivation than male students. This may be related to female students' ability to use academic socialization processes more effectively. Furthermore, based on gender norms, it can also be linked to female students' orientation toward high academic effort. For example, Bergold et al. (2020) found that male students in the high-achieving group were significantly more likely to experience bullying than female students. They attributed the bullying to the perception that high academic achievement and effort among male students are seen as feminine behaviors based on gender norms.

This study found that as the mother's educational level increases, students' academic aspirations decrease, whereas as the father's educational level increases, students' academic aspirations increase. Findings of positive relationships between parents' educational levels and their children's academic motivation and educational achievement have long been reported in the literature (Osborn, 1971; Sewell & Shah, 1968; Tamayo Martinez et al., 2022). Parental education level, within the framework of Bourdieu's sociology, which we used as the basis for this research, represents a social status. From this perspective, the positive relationship between father's education level and student's academic motivation is a finding consistent with this theory. Indeed, Karahoca and Ozrecberoglu (2025) found that as fathers' educational level increased, the pressure on their children to succeed decreased; they interpreted this as highly educated fathers developing a tendency to guide rather than pressure, motivated by a desire to be role models.

However, the negative relationship between mother's educational level and academic aspiration may necessitate interpreting the mothers' role on their child's academic motivation at an emotional level, rather than a cognitive level based on social status. Wang et al. (2020), in their study examining the effects of parental education on students' non-cognitive outcomes, found that highly educated parents set higher educational expectations for their

children and exerted greater pressure on them to manage their daily lives. In this study, the negative relationship between mothers' education level and students' academic aspiration can be interpreted as an indication that the expectations and pressures of educated mothers may cause burnout and anxiety in children. Although studies emphasize the necessity of parental reinforcement, they also show that unrealistic expectations and excessive pressure cause stress and high anxiety levels in students (Sakaki et al., 2026; Seema & Rani, 2024). In conclusion, the negative relationship found in this study between maternal education level and academic aspiration can be interpreted as indicating that, because of their biological and social roles, highly educated mothers may become a pressure factor that negatively affects their children's academic aspiration rather than guiding them. Although it may not be possible to consider this inference as the primary interpretation of the relevant finding, it is thought that presenting it as one of the possible explanations would be appropriate.

Conclusion and Implications

This research concludes that high school students' academic aspiration is influenced by both individual and school-level variables and should be evaluated within a broader context. Dispositional hope, gender, parental education level, instructional leadership, and school type are key variables predicting academic motivation. School type diversity negatively affects academic aspirations due to patterns that are thought to be linked to inequalities in access to educational services. However, on the other hand, the schools that prepare students directly for a profession also has the potential to increase academic aspiration due to the alternative career opportunities it offers students for the future.

This study has implications for Turkey and other nations with similar high school policy agenda. There is a need for more longitudinal and policy-oriented studies on high school diversity to help decision-makers develop policies that prevent the diversity of schools -which can be seen as a natural consequence of educational and social structures -from becoming a tool for social stratification. Efforts to increase the effectiveness and demand for vocational schools should be supported by sustainable policies. School administrators, on the other hand, may be advised to dedicate a significant portion of their daily routine to proactive initiatives to improve the quality of learning and teaching at school, focusing on developing sensitivities that mitigate the negative effects arising from differences in school types. For principals working in school types where academic aspirations are relatively low, providing more leadership in teaching can help prevent this status-based discouragement. In order to maintain academic motivation at the desired level, teachers and parents have the important task of adopting a common approach to guidance and facilitation, without pressuring their children to achieve academic success.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study has three limitations. First, although this study covers all high schools of all school types in the city where it was conducted, generalizability of the results could be increased by applying it at the national or regional level and across different school levels. The second is that it does not provide in-depth information on why different school types affect academic aspiration. Therefore, researchers could examine the factors that shape academic aspiration in different school types. More studies are needed to examine the "school type" related reasons associated with the decline in academic motivation despite relatively high entrance scores. Finally, in this study, no data were collected to explain the negative effect of a mother's high level of education on a child's academic expectations. This finding needs to be verified in future studies by analyzing it in conjunction with data on factors such as parental pressure, parenting style, or family expectations.

Author(s) Contribution Rate

Author 1: [51%], Author 2: [49%].

Ethical Approval

Ethical permission (Decision No. 2023-198, Date: November 9, 2023) was obtained from Ethical Committee of Uşak University for this research.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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