

Article

Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Parental Involvement in Inclusive Education

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Abstract: (1) Background: It is widely agreed that mutual partnerships between school staff and parents of students are key to creating robust frameworks of inclusive education for students with disabilities. This study explores special education teachers' perceptions of involving parents of students with disabilities in mainstream schools in Jordan. (2) Methods: This research employs a descriptive quantitative method in the form of a Google-Forms-based online questionnaire with closed-ended questions. (3) Results: The findings indicate that parents were moderately involved in the education of their disabled children; that these parents perceived teachers and school principal to be instrumental in encouraging their involvement in this respect; and that parents face many obstacles to such involvement in their children's education. (4) Conclusions: The findings point to a need for policymakers to create legislation that enables and mandates the involvement of parents with children with disabilities in inclusive education settings in order to implement constructive models of parental involvement where parents can be treated as equal partners in the educational process.

Keywords: inclusive education; parental involvement; special education teachers; students with disabilities



Citation: Hyassat, M.; Al-Bakar, A.; Al-Makahleh, A.; al-Zyoud, N. Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Parental Involvement in Inclusive Education. *Educ. Sci.* **2024**, *14*, 294. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14030294>

Academic Editor: Helen Payne

Received: 6 January 2024

Revised: 23 February 2024

Accepted: 7 March 2024

Published: 11 March 2024



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1. Introduction

1.1. Inclusive Education

The term "Inclusive Education" (IE) refers to a system wherein students with disabilities are educated in mainstream schools alongside their typically developing peers [1,2]. This entails offering equal access to education accompanied by delivering reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities [3]. Since the establishment of the Salamanca Statement in 1994, most countries around the world have enacted laws and legislations to maintain IE systems and have seen a tremendous increase in research in this area, especially in Western countries [4,5]. Over the last decade, a large body of research has suggested that IE is the best practice for students with disabilities, as it increases their academic performance and achievement, creates opportunities to seek higher education, improves vocational skills, develops developmental skills, and reduces maladaptive behaviors [2,5–11].

IE in Jordan has been greatly influenced by the ratification of international conventions and legislation, funds from international organizations, and increasing acceptance of the social model of disability [12–14]. In 2017, the passing of Law No. 20, which concerns the rights of people with disabilities in Jordan, expedited IE to all students with disabilities in primary, secondary, and higher education [15]. This legislation was put into practice in 2019, when 150 students with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream public schools which offered reasonable accommodations for their needs [16]. Following this, in 2020 Jordan's Ministry of Education launched the 10-Year Strategy for Inclusive Education (2020–2030).

This project aims to increase the enrollment of students with disabilities in mainstream schools and to facilitate accommodations for said students in these schools [17]. Despite these significant steps forward, IE in Jordan is still beset by numerous obstacles, including ineffective coordination and communication across various authorities, negative attitudes from local communities regarding disability, inconsistent funding, a lack of empirical research, issues with schools and curricula, and an absence of reliable statistical data about disability [12,18,19].

In Jordan, IE is practiced within three frameworks: full inclusion, partial inclusion, and attached special classrooms. Full inclusion entails disabled students spending the entire school day in regular classrooms with their non-disabled peers, with assistant teachers available as needed. In partial inclusion, disabled students are taught in mainstream classrooms but can access extra support services in other locations in the school, such as resource rooms. Finally, the attached special classroom framework involves disabled students being taught in a separate classroom from their non-disabled peers on school grounds and integrating with them via the school's extracurricular activities.

1.2. Parental Involvement in Educating Children with Disabilities

As a result of moving towards more family-centric delivery of services to children with disabilities, existing research encourages professionals to maintain good relationships with parents [20]. Contemporary approaches seek to enable families to manage and receive the resources they need instead of waiting for these to be provided [21]. In order for such approaches to be successful, parents of children with disabilities must be active participants in the educational process, which is referred to as Parental Involvement (hereafter abbreviated to "PI") [20,22,23]. PI can lead to positive outcomes for both parents and children: for parents, it promotes resilience, reassurance, well-being, a sense of capability, and satisfaction with the provision of services [24–26]. For children with disabilities, PI improves development, enriches learning outcomes, increases academic achievement, and decreases the chances of withdrawal from school [23,27–29]. In Ma et al.'s [30] meta-analysis of 46 English-language papers relating to PI that were published from 1990 onwards, a strong positive correlation between PI and students' performance in schools emerged regardless of parents' demographic characteristics. Further, Bariroh [31] found PI to be a significant predictor of motivation to learn among students with disabilities.

The literature identifies two types of PI: home-based and school-based [32]. Home-based PI, as the term suggests, encompasses actions that parents can perform at home, such as behavior modification, providing support with homework, offering opportunities for entertainment, and teaching everyday life skills [33–36]. School-based PI can include attending school meetings, providing information to teachers, volunteering at school events, and participating in children's educational plans [34,37,38]. Common obstacles to effective school-based PI on the part of teachers include lacking awareness of its importance, not perceiving parents as equal partners, and not inviting parents to meet with them; conversely, common obstacles for parents are a lack of consistency in their schedules, feeling inadequate with regard to their roles in the educational process, and being too exhausted by their domestic commitments to be involved in their children's schooling [29,39–41]. In addition, negative experiences of parent-teacher interactions often hinder the effectiveness of school-based PI for both teachers and parents.

Several recent studies have investigated PI in services delivered to students with disabilities within the Jordanian cultural context. In one such study, teachers and principals from specialized schools for students with hearing impairments rated PI levels as low [42]. Similarly, in research conducted by Al-Jabery et al. [43], parents of children with autism spectrum disorders thought that their communication with their children's teachers was insufficient and infrequent. In another study, Blinded for peer-review [44] interviewed 29 parents of children with different types of disabilities enrolled in preschool and receiving early special education services. Parents reported limited levels of involvement through actions such as dropping off and picking up their children, attending school conferences,

and assisting their children with homework. The most cited barrier to their involvement was not being invited to participate in their children's education. Additionally, neither parents nor teachers seemed to be conscious of the advantages of PI [44].

1.3. Parental Involvement in Inclusive Education

Research confirms that effective, ongoing PI is one of the most significant factors in providing IE for students with disabilities [27,45–47]. For instance, Tahir et al.'s [48] qualitative research on factors influencing the delivery of IE concludes that it is essential for schools to prioritize PI for all students with disabilities. Therefore, it is advisable for teachers to engage parents of disabled children in the educational process in order to facilitate the success of IE [3]. One means of encouraging PI is to present the school environment as friendly, empathetic, and instructive, which increases the likelihood of parents being involved in school activities [41].

In recent decades, some Western countries have enacted legislation and policies to secure parents' right to participate in their children's education, which has led to a notable expansion of PI [49]. For example, in the US, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act requires parents to take part in creating and sustaining their disabled children's Individualized Education Programs [38,40,50,51]. Similarly, the UK's Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice stipulates that parents should be treated as equal partners when their disabled children's educational programs are prepared and reviewed [52].

In Jordan, however—where the educational system and socio-cultural context differs distinctly from those of many other countries—little is known about the relationship between PI and IE, with PI being a new concept amongst both parents and teachers [44]. A study by the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [53] concerning IE practice in preschool settings in Jordan clearly indicated that PI levels among parents of children at this educational level were extremely low. Likewise, in Al-Dababneh's [54] survey of the challenges that prevent parents of children with learning difficulties from taking part in their children's education in mainstream schools, parents appeared to lack awareness of the significance of their contribution to their children's learning within an IE framework, did not feel encouraged by teachers to be involved in creating their children's educational objectives, and felt unsupported by school administrators in terms of PI.

As most of the studies conducted in the Jordanian context focus on the perspectives of parents of disabled children, the current study explores special education teachers' views of PI in Jordanian mainstream schools and aims to answer the following questions:

1. From the point of view of special education teachers, to what extent are parents of students with disabilities involved in IE?
2. How do special education teachers view their roles in sustaining PI?
3. From the point of view of special education teachers, what are the roles of school principals in sustaining PI?
4. What do special education teachers consider to be the challenges that hinder parents of students with disabilities from being involved in the educational process?

2. Materials and Methods

This research employs a descriptive quantitative method in the form of a Google-Forms-based online questionnaire with closed-ended questions regarding special education teachers' perceptions of PI in IE, which could be accessed by participants from the 12th of January until the 31st of March 2023.

2.1. Participants and Recruitment Process

The participants in this research were special education teachers working in mainstream public and private schools where the student bodies included children with disabilities. All potential participants had a degree in special education and taught students with disabilities. Recruiting took place via a convenience sampling technique wherein,

once ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Al-Balqa Applied University, a link to the questionnaire and an information sheet about the study were sent to special education supervisors working in Directorates of Education across Jordan. They, in turn, sent the materials to special education teachers in mainstream schools via WhatsApp. The principals of private schools where students with disabilities were enrolled were called by telephone with an overview of the study's aims, after which the questionnaire link and information sheet were sent to them to forward on to teachers. It must also be noted that participants were made aware that filling out the questionnaire was completely voluntary. This process yielded 148 participants in total, descriptive characteristics of whom are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of the research participants.

	Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	34	23.0
	Female	114	77.0
	Total	148	100.0
Qualification	Diploma	7	4.7
	Bachelor	102	68.9
	Postgraduate	39	26.4
	Total	148	100.0
School	Government	91	61.5
	Private	57	38.5
	Total	148	100.0
Inclusion	Full Inclusion	72	48.6
	Partial Inclusion	51	34.5
	Attached Classroom	25	16.9
	Total	148	100.0

2.2. Instrumentation

As mentioned earlier, data were collected via a Google-Forms-based online questionnaire consisting of closed-ended questions. The questionnaire was constructed based on a review of the literature, particularly the results of a qualitative study conducted by Hyassat [44] regarding Jordanian parents' involvement in the education of their disabled children. Prior to the questionnaire being sent out, what Bryman [55] refers to as face validity was assessed, with all questions undergoing review by six academics who had experience with PI and IE research in order to ensure that the questions accurately represented the concept of PI. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha was conducted to test the internal reliability of the questionnaire, all dimensions of which showed acceptable levels of consistency. While the total reliability coefficient for the survey was (0.85), the reliability coefficient for each dimension was: Parental Involvement Actions (0.91); Role of Special Education Teachers (0.85); Role of Principals (0.88); and Perceived Challenges (0.76).

A provisional version of the questionnaire was then administered to 15 special education teachers with a request for feedback, after which further adjustments took place based on their comments [56]. From this process emerged the final version of the questionnaire, which consisted of two parts: the first part collected demographic data about the participants, while the second part was divided into four dimensions that represented key aspects of PI, namely Parental Involvement Actions (11 items), Role of Special Education Teachers (6 items), Role of Principals (7 items), and Perceived Challenges (6 items). A 5-point Likert scale was used to rate teachers' perceptions of the questionnaire items, 5 = always, 4 = often, 3 = sometimes, 2 = rarely, 1 = never. Further, since the respondents were native Arabic

speakers, with some of them being unable to read English with ease, the questionnaire was written in Arabic. (When cited in this article, the content of the questionnaire has been translated into English).

2.3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. The statistical measures used to test the data were means and standard deviations for items, dimensions, and total score. To test the differences between the means for the four dimensions according to the variables of gender and school type, an independent sample T test was conducted. One-way ANOVA was utilized to test the differences between the means for the four dimensions according to the variables of teacher qualification and inclusion type, and Scheffe's method was used for testing the post comparisons.

3. Results

3.1. Parental Involvement Actions

PI actions refer to parental activities that contribute to the education of their children with disabilities. Generally, as shown in Table 2, respondents considered PI actions to be moderate, with a mean of 3.25. The highest mean (3.78) was for "Parents provide us with all information needed about their children", while the lowest mean (2.55) was for "Parents work with us in setting up educational plans for their children".

Table 2. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation of teachers' perception of parental involvement actions arranged in descending order.

No.	Items	Always & Often	Sometimes	Rarely & Never	M	SD	Level
a4	Parents provide us with all information needed about their children	66.2	21.6	12.2	3.78	1.05	High
a11	Parents encourage their children's attendance at school	57.4	31.1	11.5	3.69	1.01	High
a3	Parents take care of their children's personal affairs (e.g., personal care, hygiene, and grooming)	49.4	33.8	16.9	3.46	1.05	High
a10	Parents regularly attend school meetings	46.6	35.8	17.6	3.39	1.00	Moderate
a5	Parents track their children's educational progress	43.3	33.1	23.7	3.30	1.06	Moderate
a6	Parents visit school to discuss their children's concerns	39.9	35.8	24.5	3.23	1.03	Moderate
a1	Parents drop off their children in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon	43.3	20.9	35.8	3.19	1.41	Moderate
a9	Parents take part in school activities and events	33.1	37.2	29.8	3.09	1.10	Moderate
a7	Parents help their children with their homework	35.2	39.2	25.7	3.08	1.02	Moderate
a2	Parents provide an appropriate educational environment at home	28.7	40.5	31.1	2.98	0.97	Moderate
a8	Parents work with us in setting up educational plans for their children	19	35.1	45.9	2.55	1.10	Low
Total					3.25	0.77	Moderate

3.2. Role of Special Education Teachers

This dimension assesses the roles of special education teachers in sustaining PI. Table 3 shows that the respondents rated their contributions to encouraging PI very highly, with a mean of 4.38. The highest-rated item was "I contact parents when I need information about their children", with a mean of 4.66, while the lowest-rated was "I involve parents in decision-making", with a mean of 4.22.

Table 3. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation of teachers' perception of their roles arranged in descending order.

No.	Items	Always & Often	Sometimes	Rarely & Never	M	SD	Level
b5	I contact parents when I need information about their children	94.6	4.7	0.7	4.66	0.603	Very high
b2	I give parents advice and recommendations about how they can deal with their children	87.2	10.1	2.7	4.41	0.832	Very high
b1	I encourage parents to visit the school	87.2	9.4	3.4	4.40	0.823	Very high
b4	I give parents information about school activities	83.1	14.2	2.7	4.34	0.847	Very high
b6	I provide parents with reports about their children's progress	81.8	15.5	2.7	4.29	0.851	Very high
b3	I involve parents in decision-making	81.1	14.9	4	4.22	0.869	Very high
Total					4.38	0.613	Very high

3.3. Role of Principals

This dimension, which assesses respondents' perceptions of school principals' roles in sustaining PI, was rated highly with a mean of 4.08. As can be seen in Table 4, the highest mean, 4.59, was for the item "Our school principal welcomes parents coming to the school", while the lowest mean, 3.51, was for the item "Our school principal offers training for parents to improve interactions with their children".

Table 4. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation of teachers' perception of the role of principals arranged in descending order.

No.	Items	Always & Often	Sometimes	Rarely & Never	M	SD	Level
c6	Our school principal welcomes parents coming to the school	91.9	6.1	2	4.59	0.699	Very high
c2	Our school principal encourages us to respect parents' points of view	86.5	10.1	3.4	4.37	0.802	Very high
c1	Our school principal encourages us to treat parents as partners	82.5	12.8	4.7	4.20	0.841	Very high
c3	Our school principal is keen to support parents and take care of their children	82.5	12.1	5.4	4.18	0.896	High
c4	Our school principal increases parents' awareness of the importance of their involvement	82.4	8.1	9.5	4.15	0.992	High
c5	Our school principal provides us with training opportunities to facilitate parental involvement	60.1	18.9	21	3.63	1.22	High
c7	Our school principal offers training for parents to improve interactions with their children	56.8	21.6	21.6	3.51	1.20	High
Total					4.08	0.734	High

3.4. Perceived Challenges

This dimension assesses special education teachers' perceptions of challenges that prevent parents from being actively involved in their disabled children's education. As shown in Table 5 below, the level of perceived challenges was generally high, with a mean of 3.61. The highest mean (4.24) was for the item "Financial burdens prevent parents from getting involved in their children's education", while the lowest mean (2.82) was for the item "Parents prefer not to communicate with us".

Table 5. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviation of teachers' perception of perceived challenges arranged in descending order.

No.	Items	Always & Often	Sometimes	Rarely & Never	M	SD	Level
d4	Financial burdens prevent parents from getting involved in their children's education	87.1	8.8	4.1	4.24	0.779	Very high
d3	Parents are not qualified enough to educate their children	71.6	18.9	9.5	3.92	0.973	High
d2	Parents lack awareness of the importance of their involvement	62.9	20.9	16.2	3.66	0.994	High
d5	Parents do not take their children's disabilities seriously or deny them	62.2	20.9	16.9	3.64	1.011	High
d1	Parents do not have enough time for their children with disabilities	50.7	31.8	17.5	3.42	0.969	High
d6	Parents prefer not to communicate with us	27.7	31.8	40.5	2.82	1.041	Moderate
Total					3.61	0.649	High

4. Discussion

The existing literature related to PI in educating children with disabilities mostly focuses on parents' perspectives in the contexts of Western IE systems. This study seeks to fill a distinct gap in the literature by illuminating the perspectives of special education teachers working in Jordan, which operates within cultural contexts very different from Western ones. Notably, the special education teachers in this study confirmed that PI is not yet at optimal levels, reporting only moderate levels of involvement among parents of students with disabilities, and low levels of PI in setting up educational plans for individual students—a troubling finding given that the literature strongly advises parents to be involved in the creation of their disabled children's educational plans [29,43,44]. The PI activities that parents carried out most frequently were providing necessary information to teachers, encouraging their children to attend school, and taking care of their children's personal affairs such as hygiene. To some extent, these findings support the argument that parents of children with disabilities spend more time on home-based PI than on school-based PI, perhaps because home-based PI activities are easier to perform and do not incur extra costs such as transportation expenses [57].

As Collier et al. [51] (p. 118) note, teachers can be highly influential in increasing PI: "Teachers who encourage parent involvement and establish positive relationships with parents of children with disabilities are in a better position to provide the support needed for these parents to constructively engage in their children's education". The teachers in the present study seemed to view their contributions in this light, giving high ratings to their roles in encouraging PI by, for example, sharing and exchanging information with parents, providing advice, and updating them with news about school activities. This runs counter to previous studies wherein parents perceived their communication with teachers as scarce and inadequate [34–44]. The discrepancy between these and the present findings is likely due to the widespread use of digital technology facilitating ongoing communication between parents and teachers. For example, most teachers in Jordan create WhatsApp groups where parents are invited to join so they can share and receive information daily.

While teachers play the most crucial roles in fostering PI, principals can also provide essential support for developing sustainable PI frameworks, especially in IE [58–60]. Participants in this study perceived their school principals as open to parents being involved in their disabled children's education, reporting that the principals welcomed parents, encouraged teachers to treat parents as equal partners in the educational process, and supported parents in caring for their children. These findings align with the literature on the roles of school principals in fostering effective parent-school relationships in the context of IE by displaying respect for parents and building parents' confidence in their own abilities to contribute to their children's education [61,62].

Additionally, participants felt that parents of students with disabilities faced high levels of challenges—which are interlinked and cannot be separated from one another—that limited their involvement in their children’s education. The challenge rated most highly by participants related to financial constraints, which corresponds with DeSpain et al.’s [34] and Lohmann et al.’s [63] suggestion that such constraints can limit parents’ involvement in their children’s education. As Hellawell [64] notes, this is particularly true of children with disabilities, since caring for a disabled child requires the use of special services, which are usually expensive. In the current study, participants viewed parents’ inability to pay for transportation expenses to be one of the major obstacles to PI [65]. This emphasis on finances confirms the findings of Al-Dababneh [54], who found that high-income Jordanian parents of students with learning disabilities were more involved than low-income parents. The Jordanian government does not provide many resources for children with disabilities or their families, meaning that parents often work extra hours to pay for the services they need and may therefore not have time to take part in their children’s education or school-based activities [41,65]. This is likely a contributing factor in participants’ perception of parents not having enough time for their disabled children.

Participants viewed parents as not adequately qualified to be partners in the educational process, in contrast to their view of themselves as capable professionals. This finding reflects the predominance of the expert model in parent-teacher relationships, where teachers demonstrate best practices for parents and parents are not included in educational decision-making [64]. It also corresponds with Blackman and Mahon’s [39] research, which concluded that the only role for parents of disabled children in IE settings was as recipients of advice and support—a hierarchical dynamic informed by parents not understanding their children’s special needs and finding it difficult to meet these needs [39]. Further, participants in the current study perceived parents as being unaware of the importance of their involvement, which may stem from parents believing that the educational process is confined to the school environment and is wholly the responsibility of teachers and school staff [44].

Respondents in this study perceived parents of disabled children as denying their children’s disabilities or not taking them seriously. Such denial also manifests in the study participants’ perceptions of parents as not wishing to communicate with them—another challenge to effective PI. These findings echo Lohmann et al.’s [63] conclusion that teachers view parents as careless because parents’ work schedules can make it difficult for them to attend school meetings or events. However, cultural norms must also be considered here; as Acar et al. [66] noted in their study of parents of disabled children in three cultural contexts, PI was impacted by parents’ cultural perceptions of disability, particularly in non-Western nations [66]. In Jordan, attitudes toward disability tend towards stigma and denial, with the medical model of disability being far more prevalent than the social model. Hyassat [65] found that, for parents of disabled children in Jordan, attending school events was often a reminder of their children’s “incompleteness” due to their disabilities, which discouraged them from further involvement. This can be exacerbated in inclusive schools, where parents may compare their children’s abilities with those of their typically developing peers.

Although this study offers valuable knowledge about many aspects of PI in IE settings in Jordan, it is nevertheless subject to certain limitations. First, it was difficult to determine the total number of special education teachers currently working in the country, so it was not possible for the sample to be completely representative. To mitigate this, the online questionnaire was open to responses for over two months and reminders were sent to special education supervisors to encourage teachers to complete the questionnaire. Second, using a study sample that consisted entirely of special education teachers means that the findings may be rather subjective, particularly those regarding their perceptions of their own roles in encouraging PI.

5. Conclusions

It is well documented that PI and mutual partnership between school staff and parents of students with disabilities are the foundation of sustainable IE frameworks. Accordingly, this study aimed to explore PI practices in IE settings, the role of special education teachers and principals in promoting PI, and the challenges preventing parents from being actively involved in their children's education. Results indicate that special education teachers perceived parents as being moderately involved in their children's education, while they rated their own roles and, to a lesser extent, those of school principals in encouraging PI more highly. They also pointed out a range of challenges to PI that parents might face, particularly those relating to personal finances.

These findings point to a need for policymakers to create legislation that enables and mandates the involvement of parents with children with disabilities in IE settings in order to implement constructive models of PI where parents can be treated as equal partners in the educational process. The findings also highlight the necessity of educating parents, teachers, and principals about how their partnerships can positively influence children's learning outcomes. This could entail administering training programs to teachers and principals that focus on fostering a welcoming school environment for parents and trusting and respecting parents' views and capabilities. In addition, principals who lead inclusive schools must be made aware of the importance of reinforcing productive collaboration with parents of students with disabilities.

Schools can improve PI by developing positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. This can be achieved by collaboration with governmental institutions and civil society organizations. They may work together to create collective activities to increase people awareness of disability issue and to offer positive experiences about students with disabilities. Further, utilizing technological tools can improve cooperation between schools and parents of students with disabilities. For example, schools can set up a regular online meeting with parents to offer feedback about their children's learning progress. Schools may share videos via popular social media with parents on how their involvement can benefit their children with disabilities. These strategies would ultimately contribute to keeping parents involved in their children's educational process.

Future research may consider examining parents' motivations for being involved in their children's education, as well as the experiences of special education teachers in communicating with parents. Exploring these issues will offer greater insight into many aspects of barriers to PI on the part of both parents and teachers. Furthermore, with the ever-increasing use of social media, it may be useful to examine the influence of such platforms on reinforcing PI and fostering parent-teacher relationships.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.H. and A.A.-B.; methodology, M.H. and A.A.-M.; validation, all authors; formal all authors; investigation, A.A.-M.; resources, M.H. and A.A.-B.; data curation, all authors; writing—original draft preparation, M.H. and N.a.-Z.; writing—review and editing, M.H.; visualization, M.H. and N.a.-Z.; supervision, M.H.; project administration, N.a.-Z.; funding acquisition, N.a.-Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study received approval from Research Ethics Committee/College of Scientific Research at Al-Balqa Applied University, approval granted 11 December 2022. Reference No. A08/12/1978.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgments: The authors wish to thank all of the participants who voluntarily agreed to take part in this study. We acknowledge the use of (<https://quillbot.com/grammar-check>) to refine the academic language and accuracy of some parts of the manuscript. Specifically, we used grammar check option to check the accuracy of some sentences.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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