Challenges Faced by Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the Process of School Inclusion in Ramallah, Palestine

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ABSTRACT:

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Ramallah experience limited access to specialized educational and rehabilitation services. Despite efforts by educational institutions and community organizations, there remains a significant need for comprehensive support systems that address the educational, social, economic, and psychological needs of children with ASD and their families. This study aimed to identify the challenges faced by parents of children with ASD during the process of educational inclusion in public schools in Ramallah, Palestine.

The study adopted a descriptive-analytical approach using a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers based on relevant literature. The instrument consisted of demographic information and four dimensions of challenges: social, educational, economic, and psychological/emotional challenges. The questionnaire was validated by specialists in special education and educational psychology. Reliability analysis showed a high Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (0.972).

The sample consisted of 70 parents of children with ASD enrolled in grades one to three in public schools in Ramallah. Results revealed that educational challenges ranked first, followed by economic, social, and psychological/emotional challenges. Parents reported lack of awareness in schools regarding ASD, insufficient teacher training, absence of individualized educational plans, financial burden related to therapy and educational services, and difficulties related to social stigma and emotional stress.

The study recommends improving teacher training, strengthening inclusive education policies, increasing financial and psychological support for families, and enhancing collaboration between schools and parents to support successful inclusion.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, ASD.

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has become an increasingly important issue in inclusive education worldwide. Children with ASD often experience difficulties related to communication, social interaction, and behavioral adaptation, which affect their participation in mainstream educational settings. In Palestine, inclusive education has received increasing attention following national and international commitments to the rights of children with disabilities. Despite these efforts, schools continue to face major barriers, including limited resources, lack of specialized staff, and insufficient teacher training.

Children with ASD in Palestine face challenges related to diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, and educational inclusion. Previous studies have indicated shortages in specialized services, limited awareness regarding autism, lack of trained professionals, and weak institutional support. Families often experience social stigma, economic pressure, and difficulty accessing educational and rehabilitation services.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Education (2022), many public schools continue to face difficulties in providing inclusive educational environments suitable for students with disabilities. Schools often lack specialized educational tools, trained staff, and individualized support programs required for successful inclusion.

Several international studies have emphasized the importance of cooperation between schools, families, and communities in supporting children with ASD. Fernández Cerero et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of parental involvement and effective communication between schools and families. Hasson et al. (2022) emphasized the need for teacher training and institutional support to improve inclusion practices.

Despite increasing international attention to ASD and inclusive education, there remains limited research focusing specifically on the Palestinian context and the experiences of parents. Therefore, this study aims to identify the social, educational, economic, and psychological challenges faced by parents of children with ASD during the process of educational inclusion in public schools in Ramallah, Palestine.

2. Methodology

- The study adopted a quantitative descriptive-analytical design to investigate the challenges faced by parents of children with ASD in the process of educational inclusion in public schools in Ramallah, Palestine.

Research Sample

- The sample consisted of 70 parents of children with ASD enrolled in grades one to three in public schools in Ramallah. Participants were selected randomly to ensure diversity in age, educational qualification, marital status, and monthly income.

Table 1

- **Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Less than 25 years	16	22.9%
	25–34 years	25	35.7%
	35–44 years	16	22.9%
	45–54 years	8	11.4%
	55 years and more	5	7.1%
Educational Qualification	Bachelor's degree	59	84.3%
	Master's degree	8	11.4%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	Doctorate	3	4.3%
Marital Status	Married	64	91.4%
	Divorced	4	5.7%
	Widow	2	2.9%
Monthly Income	Less than 1200 shekels	21	30.0%
	1200–2500 shekels	28	40.0%
	2501–4000 shekels	9	12.9%
	4001–5000 shekels	8	11.4%
	More than 5000 shekels	4	5.7%

Data Collection Tool

- A structured questionnaire was developed as the primary data collection tool. The questionnaire included demographic information and items related to four dimensions of challenges: social, educational, economic, and psychological/emotional challenges. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale.

Validity and Reliability

- The questionnaire was reviewed by specialists in special education and educational psychology to ensure content validity. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha.

Table 2

- **Cronbach's Alpha Values for the Study Dimensions**

Dimension	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Social challenges	9	0.941
Educational challenges	11	0.989
Economic challenges	9	0.915
Psychological and emotional challenges	7	0.734
Total	36	0.972

Statistical Analysis

- Data were analyzed using SPSS version 20. Means, standard deviations, t-tests, and one-way ANOVA were used to analyze the data. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.
- **Procedure:** Step-by-step description of how the study was conducted
- **Data Analysis:** Statistical or qualitative analysis methods

3. Results

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of the Main Dimensions

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank	Degree
Educational challenges	4.30	0.60	1	High
Economic challenges	4.10	0.55	2	High

Dimension	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank	Degree
Social challenges	3.99	0.51	3	High
Psychological and emotional challenges	3.91	0.52	4	High
Total	4.08	0.49		High

The findings revealed that parents of children with ASD face a high level of challenges regarding educational inclusion in public schools in Ramallah. Educational challenges received the highest mean score, followed by economic, social, and psychological/emotional challenges.

Parents reported that schools lack sufficient awareness regarding how to deal with students with ASD. They also highlighted inadequate teacher training, lack of individualized educational plans, and limited educational resources suitable for children with autism.

Economic challenges included the inability to afford special educators, behavioral therapy sessions, and additional educational support. Parents also reported that health insurance does not adequately cover autism-related services.

Social challenges included difficulties related to communication, social interaction, understanding social instructions, and social isolation. Psychological and emotional challenges included emotional exhaustion, stress, and the burden of responsibility associated with caring for children with ASD.

Social Challenges

The highest-rated social challenge was difficulty understanding and following social instructions, while social isolation within the home received the lowest mean among the social items.

Educational Challenges

Educational challenges ranked first overall. Parents emphasized lack of awareness in schools regarding ASD, inadequate teacher preparation, limited individualized educational support, and difficulties related to peer interaction and bullying.

Economic Challenges

Parents reported high financial pressure associated with therapy, educational assistance, and specialized support services. Many families indicated difficulty affording behavioral therapy and specialized educational support.

Psychological and Emotional Challenges

Parents reported emotional exhaustion and psychological stress related to caregiving responsibilities. Many participants indicated that caring for their child caused them to neglect their own emotional and personal needs.

Demographic Variables

The findings showed no statistically significant differences in the challenges faced by parents according to age, educational qualification, marital status, or monthly income.

The results suggest that the challenges associated with educational inclusion are experienced similarly among families regardless of demographic background. The findings indicate that the main barriers are related primarily to educational systems, institutional support, and availability of specialized services rather than parental demographic characteristics.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that parents of children with ASD in Ramallah experience significant educational, economic, social, and psychological challenges during the process of school inclusion.

Educational challenges represented the most significant barrier. Parents emphasized lack of teacher training, insufficient awareness about ASD, absence of individualized educational plans, and inadequate educational resources. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the importance of specialized support and teacher

preparation in inclusive education.

Economic challenges also represented a major burden for families. Parents reported difficulty affording therapy sessions, educational assistance, and specialized services. Limited governmental and institutional support increases pressure on families and affects children's access to educational opportunities.

The study also highlighted social and emotional difficulties experienced by parents and children. Social stigma, communication difficulties, and emotional exhaustion continue to affect the well-being of families of children with ASD.

Overall, the findings emphasize the need for comprehensive inclusive education policies that address the educational and psychosocial needs of children with ASD and their families.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that parents of children with ASD in Ramallah face substantial challenges related to educational inclusion in public schools. Educational challenges were identified as the most significant, followed by economic, social, and psychological challenges.

The study recommends:

- Providing specialized training programs for teachers working with children with ASD.
- Increasing awareness about autism and inclusive education within schools and communities.
- Strengthening cooperation between schools and families.
- Providing individualized educational plans and specialized educational materials.
- Expanding psychological and emotional support services for families.
- Increasing financial support and improving access to therapy and rehabilitation services.

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