1 Perceptions of Occupational Therapy Practice in Saudi Schools

2 ABSTRACT

3 Introduction and Aim

- 4 This study explores the perceptions of occupational therapy (OT) practices in Saudi Arabian
- 5 schools, aiming to understand how occupational therapists view their roles, challenges, and
- 6 opportunities within educational settings, as well as the impact of their interventions on student
- 7 development and well-being.

8 Methodology

- 9 The research employed a descriptive cross-sectional design using an online survey distributed to
- 10 272 licensed occupational therapists practicing in Saudi Arabia. Participants were selected via
- 11 convenience sampling. The survey comprised both open- and closed-ended questions to gather
- 12 quantitative and qualitative data, which were analyzed using JMP software and thematic
- 13 analysis.

14 **Results**

- 15 The findings revealed that OT interventions are highly effective in promoting academic
- 16 achievement (50.5%), social-emotional development (26.2%), and physical-functional skills
- 17 (23.3%). However, significant challenges persist, including a lack of awareness (40.2%),
- 18 resource limitations (33%), and administrative barriers (22.9%). Despite these obstacles,
- 19 occupational therapists emphasized the critical role of OT in enhancing learning, addressing
- 20 sensory and motor skill deficits, and fostering inclusive environments. Misconceptions about
- 21 OT's scope and purpose were also identified, highlighting the need for awareness campaigns and
- 22 stakeholder education.

23 Conclusion

- 24 The study concludes that occupational therapy has immense potential for improving student
- 25 outcomes in Saudi schools. To realize this potential, it is essential to address systemic challenges
- 26 through targeted awareness initiatives, resource allocation, policy reforms, and interdisciplinary
- 27 collaboration. These efforts will not only optimize the implementation of OT services but also
- 28 contribute to building a more inclusive and supportive educational framework in Saudi Arabia.

29 Keywords:

- 30 Occupational Therapy, Perceptions, School-based occupational therapists, Students, Challenges,
- 31 Resources, Awareness
- 32

33 1. INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

- 34 The definition of occupation is daily activities that are defined, categorized, and assigned
- importance and purpose by people and culture [1]. At its core, the concept is simple: what people
- 36 do to engage in to fill our time [2]. Occupational therapy is a subset of rehabilitation services that
- helps individuals to participate in daily activities, such as pleasure, productivity, and self-care, in
- **38** order to enhance their overall health and well-being [3].

- 39 Not everyone knows the possibility of practicing occupational therapy in schools. School-based
- 40 occupational therapists often use practice models, such as motor learning or sensory integration,
- to guide their interventions toward specific client groups [2]. The Saudi public has a lack of
- 42 awareness about the specific services offered by occupational therapists. There seems to be a
- general lack of understanding about the implications and roles associated with occupational
 therapy. Within this population, knowledge about the valuable contributions that occupational
- therapy. Within this population, knowledge about the valuable contributions that occupational therapists make is at a low level [4]
- 45 therapists make is at a low level [4].
- 46 School-based occupational therapy (SBOT) has gained significant global recognition, as
- 47 evidenced by the inaugural publication on this subject by the World Federation of Occupational
- 48 Therapy (WFOT) in 2016 [5]. This document served as a pivotal point for WFOT in defining the
- 49 occupational therapist's role within school-based practice. It emphasized the importance of an
- 50 occupation-based and educationally relevant approach, with a primary focus on supporting
- 51 student well-being and enhancing their participation. The publication aimed to promote and
- 52 optimize the involvement of occupational therapists in school settings [6].
- 53 The guidance provided by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) regarding
- 54 SBOT is further elaborated upon in this context. AOTA emphasizes the utilization of
- 55 occupational therapy expertise to facilitate children's readiness for and active engagement in
- 56 meaningful learning and developmental activities within the school setting. As a result, SBOT is
- 57 now more explicitly associated with enabling active participation in various school-based
- 58 occupations as a whole [7].
- 59 The main purpose of SBOT is to allow students to engage in school-related activities like writing
- 60 in class, dressing for physical education, or playing during recess [8, 9]. Occupational therapists
- 61 play a crucial role in the school setting since engaging in daily tasks is thought to be good for
- 62 children's growth, health, and well-being [6, 10, 11].
- 63 There is a study that asked occupational therapists about the role of occupation during
- 64 intervention with school students. The participants in the study said the primary focus of school-
- based intervention was to address the child's occupational needs within the educational setting,
- with particular emphasis on supporting performance components for successful engagement in
- 67 occupations. The participants consistently emphasized the importance of involving the child
- 68 within the context of the classroom, highlighting the significance of working within the structure
- 69 of the curriculum as the basis for intervention [2].
- 70 There is not enough research in Saudi Arabia to meet the specific needs and practices of SBOT.
- 71 Although there is no research examining the perspectives and experiences of occupational
- therapists about SBOT, the purpose of this study was to explain the current state and perceptions
- 73 of occupational therapists about school-based practices in Saudi Arabia.
- 74 The researchers aimed to identify the perspectives and experiences of occupational therapists
- about working in educational settings to promote their understanding of the prevailing practices
- 76 in this specific context. The primary objectives of this study aim to thoroughly investigate the
- perspectives, understanding, and experiences of occupational therapists in Saudi schools,
- 78 concentrating on their professional roles, the implementation and benefits of occupational

- therapy services, and the challenges they face. Additionally, the secondary objectives focus on
- 80 assessing stakeholder awareness and evaluating the adequacy of resources and support provided
- 81 to occupational therapists.
- 82 By examining the perceptions of professionals in the field, this study sought to contribute
- valuable knowledge that could inform future developments and improvements in SBOT in Saudi
 Arabia.

85 2. METHODOLOGY

- 86 This study set out to explore the perceptions of occupational therapy practices in Saudi Arabia
- 87 using an online survey platform. This method was chosen for its practicality and efficiency in
- collecting a large number of responses, even though it doesn't provide the same depth as on-site
- 89 studies. It allowed us to delve into various aspects of occupational therapy, including
- 90 perceptions, challenges, resources, collaboration efforts, and opportunities for improvement.
- 91 The focus was on licensed occupational therapists working in Saudi Arabia. Participants needed
- 92 to have a valid occupational therapy license and be actively practicing in the country. We
- 93 excluded occupational therapy students, retired therapists, those on long-term leave, and anyone
- 94 who did not consent to participate.
- 95 We employed a descriptive cross-sectional design to gather qualitative data, concentrating on
- 96 current practices and perspectives of therapists regarding SBOT. The sample size, determined
- 97 using the Raosoft calculator, aimed for a 5% margin of error, 95% confidence level, and a
- 98 population size of 888, as reported by the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties. This resulted
- 99 in a target of 269 occupational therapists.
- 100 Participants were selected through convenience sampling based on their accessibility and
- 101 availability. Data was collected using a self-administered internet survey with both open-ended
- and closed-ended questions, which enabled comprehensive qualitative data collection. The
- 103 survey link was distributed via the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties and online
- 104 platforms, accompanied by a cover letter explaining the study's purpose and ensuring
- 105 confidentiality.

106 Ethical Considerations

- 107 Prior to commencing data collection, approval was obtained from both the King Abdullah
- 108 International Medical Research Center (KAIMRC) and the Institutional Review Board (IRB).
- 109 Additionally, before distributing the questionnaire, informed consent was secured from each
- 110 participant, as detailed in Appendix A. Throughout the research process, stringent measures were
- 111 taken to maintain participant confidentiality. No personal identifying information, such as names
- 112 or IDs, was collected. Access to the data was restricted exclusively to the investigators involved
- in the study, with all collected data securely stored in a password-protected file.

114 *Data Analysis*

- 115 The data were entered and organized using Excel. The questionnaire included both closed-ended
- and open-ended questions, with a total of 272 participants responding to the survey. The closed-
- ended questions were analyzed using JMP18 software to generate statistical insights, while the
- 118 open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. Irrelevant answers were excluded to ensure
- the accuracy and relevance of the qualitative analysis.

120 RESULTS

- 121 Looking at the responses from 272 participants, we got some detailed insights into how
- 122 occupational therapist perspectives on occupational therapy in schools. The gender split was
- 123 right down the middle with males (n = 136, 50%) and females (n = 136, 50%). Most participants
- 124 were young adults between 18–25 years old (n = 167, 61%), followed by those aged 25–40 (n =
- 125 90, 33%), and a small group over 40 (n = 15, 5%).
- 126 In terms of experience, the largest group had 0-2 years (n = 166, 61%). Next were those with 3-
- 6 years (n = 65, 24%), then 7–15 years (n = 36, 13%), and finally, a small fraction with more
- 128 than 15 years of experience (n = 5, 2%). Geographically, most participants came from the central
- 129 region (n = 107, 39.33%), followed by the eastern region (n = 76, 27.94%), and the western
- 130 region (n = 62, 22.79%). Very few were from the northern (n = 2, 0.73%) and southern regions
- 131 (n = 3, 0.11%), with some participants not disclosing their region (n = 22, 8.08%).
- **132** Table 1

Characteristics **Demographic Information** Frequency Percentage Female 136 50% Gender 50% Male 136 Age in Years 18-25 167 61% 25 - 4090 33% More than 40 15 5% 0 - 2166 61% Years of Experience 3–6 65 24% 7-15 36 13% 5 2% More than 15 Regions 107 39.33% Center Eastern 76 27.94% West 62 22.79% North 2 0.73% 3 0.11% South 22 Did not answer 8.08%

133 Demographic Information of Study Participants (N = 272)

- 134 The first table shows the demographic information of the study participants including gender, 135 years of experience, and the region.
- 136 Regarding the perceived role of occupational therapy (**Table 2**), a substantial majority strongly
- 137 agreed (n = 187, 69%) or agreed (n = 73, 27%) that it promotes student development and well-
- 138 being. However, only a minority strongly agreed (n = 25, 9%) and agreed (n = 33, 12%) that
- 139 students and parents have a good understanding of occupational therapy, while a significant
- 140 portion disagreed (n = 103, 38%) or strongly disagreed (n = 58, 21%).
- 141 Similarly, resources and support for occupational therapy in schools were considered insufficient
- 142 by many, with (n = 112, 41%) disagreeing and (n = 53, 19%) strongly disagreeing, compared to
- 143 only (n = 33, 12%) who strongly agreed and (n = 21, 8%) who agreed.
- 144 Collaboration with school staff was moderately well-rated, with 34.1% (n = 93) strongly
- 145 agreeing and 33.9% (n = 91) agreeing on its effectiveness, while 10% (n = 27) disagreed and 7%
- 146 (n = 18) strongly disagreed.
- 147 Occupational therapy interventions were seen as highly effective in addressing diverse needs,
- 148 with 56% (n = 152) strongly agreeing. They were particularly effective in:
- 149 Improving communication skills (58%, n = 157) •
- 150 Enhancing physical and sensory skills (68%, n = 184) 151
 - Supporting students with learning disabilities (73%, n = 198)
- 152 However, significant resource-related challenges were identified, with (n = 174, 64%) strongly
- 153 agreeing and (n = 61, 22%) agreeing that difficulties and lack of resources hinder the
- 154 implementation of occupational therapy in Saudi schools.
- 155 Table 2

156 Perceptions of Occupational Therapy in Schools (N = 272)

Question	Response	Frequency	Percentage
1. Occupational therapy promotes student	Strongly agree	187	69%
development			
	Agree	73	27%
	Neutral	11	3.99%
	Disagree	1	0.01%
	Strongly	0	0%
	disagree		
2. Students and parents understand	Strongly agree	25	9%
occupational therapy			
	Agree	33	12%
	Neutral	53	19%
	Disagree	103	38%
	Strongly	58	21%

	disagree		
3 Resources and support are sufficient	Strongly agree	33	12%
5. Resources and support are sufficient	A gree	21	<u>12/0</u> <u>80</u>
	Noutrol	21 52	0 70
	Disagraa	112	1970
	Strongly	52	4170
	disagraa	55	19%
4. Collaboration with school staff is affective	Strongly agree	02	2/ 10/
4. Conadoration with school start is effective	A graa	93	34.1%
	Agree	91 41	35.9%
	Disagraa	41	10%
	Strongly	27 18	704
	disagree	10	1 70
5 OT addresses diverse needs	Strongly agree	152	56%
5. OT addresses diverse needs	A gree	152	33%
	Noutral	90 18	7 0⁄2
	Disagraa	5	770
	Strongly	7	270
	disagraa	/	3%
6 OT improves communication skills	Strongly agree	157	58%
0. OT http://oves.communication.skins	Agree	02	34%
	Neutral	92 17	<u> </u>
	Disagree	6	2%
	Strongly	0	0%
	disagree	0	070
7 OT improves physical and sensory skills	Strongly agree	18/	68%
7: OT improves physical and sensory skins	A gree	77	28%
	Neutral	7	3%
	Disagree	7 <u>4</u>	1%
	Strongly	0	0%
	disagree	0	070
8. OT helps students with learning disabilities	Strongly agree	198	73%
	Agree	57	21%
	Neutral	12	4%
	Disagree	5	2%
	Strongly	0	0%
	disagree	0	0,0
9. Lack of resources hinders OT	Strongly agree	174	64%
implementation	0,000		
▲	Agree	61	22%
	Neutral	27	10%
	Disagree	6	2%
	Strongly	4	1%
	disagree		

- 157 The second table shows the closed-ended questions that were asked to the study participants,158 with frequency and percentage responses.
- 159 Many respondents (n = 219) highlighted lack of awareness, limited services, and a shortage of
- 160 therapists as key barriers. Key themes identified include *Challenges and Opportunities in*
- 161 Implementing OT Services in Saudi Schools (n = 67, 30.58%), Raising Community Awareness (n
- 162 = 55, 25.11%), The Role of OT in Schools and Services provided (n = 51, 23.28%), and
- 163 Importance of OT in Schools (n = 46, 21.00%).
- 164 Among participants (n = 122), the positive impacts of occupational therapy were categorized into
- 165 several themes: General Success Stories (n = 32, 26%), Social and Emotional Improvements (n =
- 166 31, 25%), *Environmental and Physical Changes* (n = 21, 17%), and *Specialized Cases* (n = 18,
- 167 15%), while 20 responses (16.9%) did not provide a clear answer.
- 168 Perceived benefits (n = 202) of occupational therapy included *Academic Achievement* (n = 102,
- 169 For the second sec
- 170 (n = 47, 23.3%).
- 171 Regarding common interventions (n = 257), the most reported were *Fine Motor and Sensory*
- 172 *Integration* (n = 90, 35.0%), followed by *Cognitive and Academic Skills Training* (n = 42,
- 173 16.3%), Social Skills and Emotional Well-being (n = 43, 16.3%), and Environmental
- 174 *Modifications* (n = 29, 11.3%).
- 175 Misconceptions about occupational therapy (n = 155) were centered around *Lack of Awareness*
- 176 (n = 62, 40%), Incorrect Beliefs about OT's Role (n = 48, 30.97%), Confusion with Other
- 177 *Professions* (n = 36, 22.23%), and *No Knowledge* (n = 9, 5.81%).
- 178 Challenges in implementation (n = 179) included *Lack of Awareness and Education* (n = 72,
- 179 40.22%), Limited Resources and Tools (n = 59, 32.97%), Lack of Administrative Support and
- 180 *Coordination* (n = 41, 22.91%), and *Uncertainty* (n = 7, 3.91%).
- 181 Further issues related to implementation (n = 205) were categorized as Awareness and
- 182 *Comprehensive Improvement* (n = 70, 34.14%), *Challenges in Assessment and Planning* (n = 51,
- 183 24.80%), Environmental Adjustments (n = 31, 15.10%), Collaboration with Teachers and
- 184 *Parents* (n = 20, 9.75%), and *Uncertainty* (n = 33, 16.00%).
- 185 Regarding service frequency, most participants expected therapy to be provided *Several times a*
- 186 week (n = 185, 43.85%), followed by Once a week (n = 77, 18.25%), Daily (n = 65, 15.41%),
- 187 *Less than once a week* (n = 12, 2.84%), and on *Rare occasions* (n = 10, 2.37%).
- 188 The referral process typically occurred By teachers/parents after assessment (n = 177, 38.44%),
- 189 followed by referrals from the *Special Education Department* (n = 111, 24.11%), and according
- 190 to *School-specific Policies* (n = 107, 23.23%), although services were reported to be *Rarely*
- 191 Accessible (n = 85, 18.45%).

- 192 Common student challenges in receiving occupational therapy services included *Limited Therapy*
- 193 Session Availability (n = 188, 44.55%), Difficulty Applying Skills in Real Life (n = 163, 38.65%),
- 194 Lack of Motivation/Engagement (n = 150, 35.48%), and Resistance from Parents/Guardians (n = 150, 35.48%)
- **195** 135, 31.96%).
- 196 Discussion
- 197 This study offers a comprehensive overview of the benefits and challenges of implementing
- 198 occupational therapy (OT) services in Saudi Arabian schools, along with practical
- 199 recommendations for improvement.
- 200 Key Benefits of Occupational Therapy

201 Occupational therapy has proven highly effective in meeting the academic, social-emotional, and

- physical needs of students. One of the most significant areas of improvement is academic performance, with 50.5% (n = 102) of participants noting improvements in handwriting, reading,
- attention span, and cognitive abilities. These outcomes are in line with research by Case-Smith et
- al. (2015), which found that OT interventions focusing on fine motor and cognitive skills
- 206 enhance academic performance and participation in school settings (12).
- 207 For students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- 208 (ADHD), sensory integration strategies have shown great effectiveness. According to Ashburner
- et al. (2010), these strategies significantly improve focus, sensory regulation, and engagement in
- the classroom (13).
- 211 The second major benefit identified is social and emotional development (n = 53, 26.2%), where
- 212 OT interventions led to improvements in emotional regulation, peer interactions, and self-
- 213 confidence. Participants reported that therapy helped students develop coping mechanisms for
- 214 managing stress and interacting positively with their peers, thus fostering inclusive and
- supportive classroom environments. These findings are supported by Bazyk et al. (2015), who
- emphasized the role of OT in enhancing mental health and promoting emotional resilience
- among school-aged children (14).
- Additionally, physical and functional skills (n = 47, 23.3%) were notably improved through OT interventions targeting motor development, sensory processing, and activities of daily living.
- 219 Interventions targeting motor development, sensory processing, and activities of dairy fiving. 220 Students with physical disabilities benefited from tailored strategies and environmental
- adaptations, enabling them to develop greater independence and navigate school settings more
- effectively. This finding aligns with Villeneuve and Hutchinson's (2012) research, which
- highlights the importance of accessible environments and individualized interventions for
- 224 promoting inclusion and functional participation (15).
- 225 Challenges in Implementing Occupational Therapy
- 226 Despite the proven benefits of occupational therapy, the study reveals significant challenges
- 227 impeding its effective implementation. The foremost challenge is a lack of awareness (n = 72,
- 40.22%) among key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and administrators, regarding the

- role and scope of OT. Many participants reported that occupational therapy is often
- 230 misunderstood or conflated with other support services, such as physical therapy or special
- education, which reduces its perceived value. This challenge is consistent with Missiuna et al.
- 232 (2012), who emphasized that limited awareness contributes to the underutilization of OT services
- in school systems, hindering student outcomes (16).
- A second critical issue is resource constraints (n = 59, 32.97%), including a shortage of
- 235 occupational therapists, insufficient funding, and a lack of tools and materials necessary for
- therapy implementation. Schools, particularly public institutions, often struggle to meet thedemand for OT services due to limited budgets and staffing. Gupta and Singhal (2004) similarly
- and sufficient barriers in delivering adequate sufficient barriers in delivering adequate
- therapy services, particularly in regions where specialized support is still developing (17).
- 240 The study also highlights administrative obstacles (n = 41, 22.91%) as a significant gap, with
- 241 insufficient coordination between occupational therapists, school staff, and administrators
- 242 hampering service delivery. Participants stressed the need for stronger communication and policy
- support to align OT goals with broader educational frameworks. This finding reflects Whiting et
- al.'s (2019) work, which emphasized the importance of administrative collaboration and
- interdisciplinary teamwork in achieving successful OT integration in schools (18).
- Further challenges include limited therapy sessions due to scheduling constraints (n = 188,
- 247 44.55%), difficulties in transferring therapy skills to real-life situations (n = 163, 38.65%), and
- resistance from parents or guardians (n = 135, 31.96%). These issues reduce the effectiveness of
- therapy interventions, particularly when strategies are not reinforced at home or in the classroom.
- 250 Strengths

251 The study boasts several notable strengths that enhance its value and reliability. Firstly, it offers 252 a comprehensive scope, thoroughly examining the benefits, challenges, and perceptions of 253 occupational therapy (OT) services in Saudi Arabian schools. By focusing on key areas such as 254 academic achievement, social-emotional development, and physical-functional improvements, 255 the study identifies the domains where OT interventions are most impactful. Secondly, the 256 inclusion of a large sample size of 272 occupational therapists ensures robust representation of 257 the target population. Additionally, the study employs a mixed-method approach, combining 258 quantitative data from closed-ended questions with qualitative insights from open-ended 259 responses. This approach provides a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and 260 perspectives. Furthermore, the study effectively identifies key gaps and challenges—including 261 deficits in awareness, limited resources, and administrative barriers-laying the groundwork for

- targeted interventions.
- 263 Limitations

264 Despite its strengths, the absence of direct observation in schools prevents the study from 265 providing a contextualized understanding of OT carries delivery and everyday prestical herrises

providing a contextualized understanding of OT service delivery and everyday practical barriers.

266 Future Recommendations

267 The study offers several key recommendations to enhance the implementation of occupational

- therapy (OT) services in Saudi Arabian schools. First, raising awareness through workshops,
- campaigns, and community outreach is vital to educate teachers, parents, and administrators
- about the role and benefits of OT. Additionally, training programs for teachers and parents,coupled with improved interdisciplinary collaboration among therapists, educators, and
- administrators, are essential for providing comprehensive support to students. Increased resource
- allocation, such as hiring more occupational therapists and providing necessary tools and sensory
- spaces, is crucial to meet the growing demand, particularly in public schools. The study also
- advocates for policy development to integrate OT as a core educational service, recommending
- at least two therapists per school to effectively address academic and functional needs.
- 277 Furthermore, schools should focus on improving service delivery by ensuring consistent therapy
- sessions and developing strategies to help students generalize learned skills. Finally, the study
- highlights the importance of community engagement through culturally sensitive outreach and
- parental involvement, along with further research on the long-term impact and practical
- 281 implementation of OT to optimize its effectiveness in educational settings.

282 Conclusion

- 283 The study underscores the substantial benefits of occupational therapy in Saudi Arabian schools,
- 284 particularly in enhancing academic achievement, social-emotional development, and physical
- and functional skills. However, significant challenges, including a lack of awareness, resource
- 286 limitations, and administrative barriers, must be addressed to optimize the impact of OT
- 287 interventions. By implementing targeted awareness campaigns, improving interdisciplinary
- collaboration, allocating sufficient resources, and promoting systemic policy reforms, Saudi
- schools can better integrate OT services and support students' diverse needs.
- 290 Acknowledgment
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- 293 invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and unwavering support throughout the research
- 294 process. Their expertise and encouragement have been pivotal in shaping the direction and
- quality of this study.
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- 297 Their willingness to share their insights and experiences provided the essential foundation for
- this work and significantly enriched its findings.
- Additionally, we acknowledge and appreciate the support of **[KAIMRC]**, which granted us the necessary permissions to complete this study.

- **301** Ethics Statement
- 302 The Scientific and Institutional Research Board approved the study (XXXX/XXX/X) and met
- 303 the ethical principles guidelines of the **Declaration of Helsinki**. We confirm that we have read
- the Journal's position on issues involved in ethical publication and affirm that this report is
- 305 consistent with those guidelines.
- 306 Consent
- 307 Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their legal guardians included in the308 study.
- **309** Conflicts of Interest
- 310 The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
- **311** Data Availability Statement
- The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon
- 313 reasonable request.
- **314** Permission to Reproduce Material from Other Sources
- 315 Not applicable.
- 316 Study Registration
- 317 Not applicable.
- 318 References

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