

Students' Voices in Inclusion: A Basis for a Program Development PlanJennica Mae C. Alberto 

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Abstract: Inclusive education fosters equitable learning opportunities, participation, and a sense of belonging among students with diverse abilities and learning needs. This study explored the perspectives and experiences of Junior High School students regarding inclusive education in three O.P. Siena schools in Luzon during the 2025–2026 academic year. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was utilized, involving 56 students selected through stratified random sampling for the quantitative phase, followed by qualitative inquiry. Descriptive statistics and Pearson product-moment correlation were used to analyze quantitative data, while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative accounts. The findings indicated positive perspectives across five dimensions: attitude toward inclusion, peer relationships, academic collaboration and participation, social interaction, and sense of belonging. The sense of belonging received the highest mean, with relationships observed among the five dimensions. The strongest correlation was between academic collaboration and participation and social interaction. Qualitative findings identified four themes: acceptance through inclusion, relationships through peer support and interaction, learning through collaboration and assistance, and belonging through respect and classroom membership. Despite these experiences, challenges included limited social engagement beyond classroom activities, uncertainty in interacting with learners with disabilities, and limited understanding of disability and appropriate support strategies. Integrating these findings underscores the importance of strengthening peer relationships, collaborative learning, respectful interactions, and inclusive social opportunities. These results provide a foundation for a student-centered inclusive education program that promotes participation and belonging among learners in the schools.

Keywords: inclusive education, students' perspectives, peer relationships, social interaction, sense of belonging,

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a big deal worldwide. It's all about making sure students with different abilities and learning needs get a fair shot, can join in, feel accepted, and really belong. It's not just about placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms. The goal is to create environments where every student, whether they have disabilities or not, can engage by learning together, socializing, and building positive relationships with their classmates. This all-encompassing approach helps students feel like they truly belong and are included, which boosts educational fairness and keeps them engaged (Goering et al., 2022; Trani & Hart, 2023). Inclusive teaching methods welcome diverse viewpoints and encourage student participation, which in turn enhances engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes (Jackson et al., 2024; Trani & Hart, 2023). Understanding how students see things is crucial because their experiences can highlight the finer details of acceptance and participation that policies might overlook (Cook-Sather et al., 2023).

In the Philippines, inclusive education is supported by Republic Act No. 11650, also known as the Inclusive Education Act of 2022. This demonstrates a strong policy commitment to providing equal learning opportunities for all individuals. However, challenges remain, including limited resources, teacher preparedness, availability of support services, social acceptance, and institutional capacity. Schools play a vital role in fostering environments where all students feel a sense of belonging and respect. While policies establish the foundation, it is crucial to assess the actual experiences of students in schools to fully understand the impact of inclusion (Balikci et al., 2025). Both Philippine and international research highlight that addressing systemic issues and prioritizing student perspectives are essential for the effectiveness of inclusive education (Goering et al., 2022; Trani & Hart, 2023). The

three O.P. Siena schools in Luzon have been implementing inclusive education programs since 2018, offering an excellent context to explore how Junior High School students experience inclusive classrooms. This focus on Junior High School is particularly significant as it is a period of substantial social, emotional, and academic development, where inclusive practices can influence students' attitudes and engagement (Dimacangun & Guillena, 2023). The study's quantitative component examines five key areas reflecting students' experiences in inclusive classrooms: their attitude toward inclusion, relationships with peers, academic collaboration and participation, social interaction, and sense of belonging. These areas collectively capture students' emotional responses and behavioral engagement, providing insights into both the cognitive and social dimensions of inclusion and their interconnections (Choi et al., 2025; Mauldin et al., 2022; Payne et al., 2024). Students' perspectives on these areas are crucial for identifying strengths and weaknesses in inclusive classroom practices, which can inform improvements in teaching and learning environments based on data. Furthermore, by analyzing how these five areas interrelate using quantitative data, we can gain a deeper understanding of how factors such as acceptance, collaboration, and belonging influence each other in fostering meaningful inclusion (I Malik, 2025).

Existing research, as reviewed in this dissertation, has largely emphasized domains such as teacher readiness. When it comes to resource allocation, policy implementation, and institutional capacity, there is often insufficient focus on what students actually experience in inclusion programs. This highlights a research gap in which we need more evidence that focuses on students' own views in inclusive classrooms. It is not just about looking at overall attitudes anymore; there is a growing understanding that we need to explore how students' attitudes connect with things like peer relationships, academic participation, social interaction, and their sense of belonging. This is crucial for truly understanding how effective inclusion is (Balicki et al., 2025; Boholano et al., 2024). By studying these interconnected aspects among Junior High School students in O.P. Siena schools, we can help fill this gap and provide localized insights that can inform practice. Quantitative evidence that comes directly from students' perspectives is especially valuable for guiding decisions at the school level and helping to create inclusive environments that meet students' social and academic needs (Ogle et al., 2025; Payne et al., 2024). This quantitative article aims to determine how Junior High School students perceive things across five dimensions and to statistically examine how these dimensions relate to each other. By presenting these findings, we can clarify how students view acceptance, relationships, participation, social interaction, and belonging in inclusive settings. This evidence is practically significant because it supports student-centered inclusive education approaches and helps inform targeted school-based strategies to boost inclusion and student engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study, entitled "Students' Voices in Inclusion: A Basis for a Program Development Plan," aims to determine and explain the perspectives and experiences of junior high school students toward inclusive education. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the students' perspectives toward inclusive education in terms of 1.1. Attitude toward inclusion; peer relationships; academic collaboration and participation; social interaction; and sense of belonging?
2. Is there a significant relationship among the five dimensions of students' perspectives toward inclusive education: attitude toward inclusion, peer relationships, academic collaboration and participation, social interaction, and sense of belonging?
3. What are students' experiences, perceptions, and suggestions regarding inclusive education?
4. What challenges and barriers do students encounter in inclusive education, particularly in terms of attitude, organizational, and knowledge-related factors?
5. How can integrated quantitative and qualitative findings serve as the basis for developing a student-centered inclusive education program development plan?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed the quantitative phase of an explanatory sequential mixed-method research design. Its objective was to assess Junior High School students' perspectives on inclusive education, focusing on their attitudes toward inclusion, peer relationships, academic collaboration and participation, social interaction, and sense of belonging. Additionally, the quantitative phase explored the relationships among these five dimensions.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants were 56 Junior High School students enrolled in inclusive classrooms in three O.P. Siena schools in Luzon during School Year 2025–2026. They were selected through stratified random sampling based on school affiliation. The respondents included students with and without disabilities. Participation required parental or guardian consent and student assent.

Research Instrument

The study used a researcher-developed questionnaire consisting of five sections covering attitudes toward inclusion, peer relationships, academic collaboration and participation, social interaction, and sense of belonging. A four-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Experts in special education, psychology, and educational research validated the questionnaire, and pilot testing was conducted to assess its reliability using Cronbach’s alpha.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher obtained permission from the administrators of the three participating schools before collecting the data. Parental or guardian consent and student assent were secured before the survey was administered during school-approved periods. The respondents were given instructions on completing the questionnaire, and appropriate assistance was provided to students who required accommodation.

Data Analysis Procedure

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequency and percentage were used to describe the distribution of respondents. Mean and standard deviation were employed to determine the level and variability of students’ perspectives on inclusive education in terms of attitude toward inclusion, peer relationships, academic collaboration and participation, social interaction, and sense of belonging. Pearson’s product-moment correlation coefficient (Pearson’s r) was used to determine the relationships among the five dimensions, with the level of significance set at 0.05. Cronbach’s alpha was used to assess the internal consistency reliability of the researcher-developed questionnaire based on pilot testing. A coefficient of 0.70 or higher was considered an acceptable general reference for reliability. However, the actual computed Cronbach’s alpha coefficient or coefficients should be reported only after verifying the dissertation’s reliability table or the original statistical output. The data were analyzed and interpreted in accordance with the study’s research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Perspectives Toward Inclusive Education

Dimensions	Mean	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Attitude toward inclusion	3.32	0.49	Strongly Agree
Peer relationships	3.46	0.53	Strongly Agree
Academic collaboration and participation	3.42	0.50	Strongly Agree
Social interaction	3.32	0.48	Strongly Agree
Sense of belonging	3.55	0.49	Strongly Agree

The numbers in Table 1 show that students are on the same page when it comes to the five key areas of inclusive education. They feel positive about inclusion (mean = 3.32), get along well with peers (mean = 3.46), work together and participate in academics (mean = 3.42), interact socially (mean = 3.32), and feel like they belong (mean = 3.55). Since all these averages are over 3.3 on a four-point scale, it is clear that students have a good view of their inclusive classrooms. This suggests that they not only accept diversity but also have meaningful interactions and are actively engaged with their classmates (Dimacangun & Guillena, 2023; I Malik, 2025). The highest score in terms of belonging (3.55) matches what we know from other studies: feeling like you belong is crucial for student success and well-being in inclusive settings. Research shows that when students truly feel that they belong, it boosts their motivation, persistence, and social-emotional outcomes, especially in diverse educational environments (Ogle et al., 2025). Similarly, the high scores for peer relationships and academic collaboration highlight

how important positive social networks and cooperative learning are in inclusive classrooms. These elements support both the cognitive and social sides of student engagement (I Malik, 2025; Wegemer, 2021). Moreover, the strong scores for attitude toward inclusion and social interaction show that students generally accept and positively engage with peers of different abilities. This confirms that inclusive classrooms in these schools help build meaningful connections and supportive learning communities (Dimacangun & Guillena, 2023). It is important to examine how these five dimensions relate to each other. For instance, good peer relationships can strengthen a sense of belonging, while working together academically often encourages social interaction and fosters positive attitudes toward inclusion (Jackson et al., 2024; Robinson Jr, 2025). Overall, the data reveal that students have strong, positive views across all the measured areas, which aligns with international research linking inclusive education practices, peer support, academic participation, and belonging to positive educational outcomes. These findings offer valuable insights into the strengths and areas that might need more focus within the O.P. Siena inclusive education programs.

Table 2. Correlations Among the Five Dimensions of Students' Perspectives Toward Inclusive Education

Dimensions	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attitude toward inclusion	—				
2. Peer relationships	.549***	—			
3. Academic collaboration and participation	.712**	.743***	—		
4. Social interaction	.739***	.656***	.778***	—	
5. Sense of belonging	.639***	.642***	.730***	.678***	—

Note. Values represent Pearson's r . *** $(p < .001)$. All relationships were statistically significant.

The correlation table shows some interesting and significant positive relationships among the five dimensions of students' views on inclusive education. For instance, having a positive attitude toward inclusion is strongly linked with better peer relationships ($r = .549, p < .001$), more academic collaboration and participation ($r = .712, p < .001$), increased social interaction ($r = .739, p < .001$), and a greater sense of belonging ($r = .639, p < .001$). This means that students who feel good about inclusion tend to have supportive peer connections, engage more in academics, interact socially, and feel like they belong in inclusive classrooms. Similarly, peer relationships are closely tied to academic collaboration and participation ($r = .743, p < .001$), social interaction ($r = .656, p < .001$), and a sense of belonging ($r = .642, p < .001$). This highlights the importance of positive peer dynamics for both academic and social engagement. Academic collaboration and participation also have strong links with social interaction ($r = .778, p < .001$) and a sense of belonging ($r = .730, p < .001$), showing how cooperative learning environments help with social integration and emotional belonging. Social interaction itself is positively related to a sense of belonging ($r = .678, p < .001$), supporting the idea that frequent and meaningful interactions boost students' connectedness within their school communities. These connections align with international research that emphasizes the interconnected nature of inclusive education components. Attitudes, social connections, participation, and belonging all reinforce each other to create equitable and engaging learning environments (Cook-Sather et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2024; Trani & Hart, 2023). They support the view that fostering inclusive attitudes goes hand-in-hand with nurturing social and academic collaboration, which together creates a supportive atmosphere conducive to belonging and participation (Goering et al., 2022). In short, these strong, positive correlations among the dimensions suggest that inclusive education practices should holistically address attitudes, peer relationships, collaboration, social engagement, and belong to fully realize inclusive classrooms where all students thrive (Balikci et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2025).

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Theme 1. Experiencing Acceptance Through Everyday Inclusion

Students described inclusion as equal treatment, respect, encouragement, and opportunities to participate in classroom activities. Learners with disabilities emphasized the importance of being included by classmates, while general education students highlighted the importance of recognizing

classmates with disabilities as members of the class.

The qualitative findings indicate that students' experiences of acceptance and inclusion were shaped by everyday classroom interactions, respect for differences, and opportunities to participate with classmates with and without disabilities. Students' perspectives emphasized the importance of recognizing learners with disabilities as valued members of the classroom, rather than simply allowing them to attend regular classes.

A general education student stated,

"We need to include them because they are also part of our class." (GE1)

A learner with a disability described their experience of being included in classroom activities:

"Kapag may activity, sinasali nila ako at ine-encourage nila ako." (LWD1)

Translation: "When there are activities, they include me and encourage me."

These accounts illustrate that acceptance is expressed through concrete actions, including equal treatment, encouragement and participation. The quantitative results support this interpretation: students reported a positive attitude toward inclusion, with a composite mean score of 3.32. The qualitative findings help explain this result by showing how students experience inclusion through everyday interactions.

Theme 2. Building Relationships Through Peer Support and Interaction

Participants described peer relationships as an important part of inclusive education. Friendship, cooperation, communication, and assistance helped students develop stronger relationships with classmates with different abilities.

A general education student explained the same:

"We help each other, especially when someone needs assistance during activities." (GE2)

A learner with a disability emphasized the importance of support and communication:

"Mas madali kapag may tumutulong at nakikipag-usap sa akin." (LWD2)

Translation: "It becomes easier when someone helps and communicates with me."

These responses show that peer support involves practical actions rather than mere acceptance. Helping classmates, communicating, and providing encouragement can create opportunities for participation and foster stronger classroom relationships.

The quantitative results complement these experiences. Students reported a positive level of peer relationships, with a composite mean score of 3.46. The qualitative findings explain how these relationships are maintained through daily assistance and communication. They also suggested that opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative activities could help strengthen inclusivity.

Theme 3. Participating in Learning Through Collaboration and Assistance

Participants also described academic participation as an essential aspect of meaningful inclusion. Group activities, classroom discussions, and cooperative tasks give students opportunities to contribute and participate according to their abilities.

A general education student stated,

"Everyone should have a chance to join activities because everyone can contribute something." (GE3)

A learner with a disability explained,

"Mas nagiging confident ako kapag kasama ko sila sa activities." (LWD3)

Translation: "I become more confident when I am with them during activities."

Students' valuing opportunities to participate and contribute with classmates reflects established evidence that collaborative learning fosters engagement and confidence. Quantitatively, the composite mean of 3.42 for academic collaboration and participation and the high mean of 3.64 for teacher encouragement highlight the importance of supportive teaching in promoting student involvement. Supportive classrooms, marked by teacher encouragement and interactive strategies such as cooperative tasks and real-world applications, improve engagement by increasing motivation and self-

confidence(Verdeflor et al., 2024). Likewise, pedagogical partnerships foster student agency and ownership, enhancing engagement and classroom equity(Cook-Sather et al., 2021). Emotional support also drives academic motivation and engagement, showing that participation flourishes in nurturing and affirming classrooms(Longakit et al., 2025). Together, collaborative activities and teacher support sustain confident, meaningful student participation.

Theme 4. Developing Belonging Through Respect and Classroom Membership

The thematic summary of the dissertation describes belonging in terms of students feeling accepted, recognized, and valued by classmates and teachers. Respect for differences and inclusion in classroom life are central to this theme. This qualitative interpretation is consistent with the quantitative finding that sense of belonging had the highest dimension mean (M = 3.55, SD = 0.49), and that respecting one another’s differences received an item mean of 3.63.

The available article draft does not provide a distinct, direct quotation specifically assigned to Theme 4. To avoid inventing or misattributing participants’ words, no quotations have been added for this theme. If the original dissertation contains a verified quotation for Theme 4, it may be inserted after checking the exact wording and participant label.

Teacher and School Support and Barriers to Inclusion

Qualitative findings also identify teachers, classmates, and school support systems as important in shaping students’ experiences. Teacher encouragement, classroom assistance, and collaborative learning opportunities are all supportive practices. The quantitative result for teacher encouragement (M = 3.64) supports this. This dissertation identifies attitudinal, organizational, and knowledge-related barriers. Attitudinal barriers include uncertainty or limited confidence in interacting with classmates with disabilities. Organizational barriers concern limited opportunities for social engagement beyond structured classroom activities. Knowledge barriers involve a limited understanding of disabilities, individual learning needs, and appropriate support strategies. These findings should be interpreted as barriers identified in this study rather than prevalence estimates for all students or schools.

The comparatively lower item means for including one another in social activities inside and outside the classroom (M = 3.04) provides a specific point of convergence with qualitative concerns regarding limited opportunities for social engagement. The findings suggest that inclusive activities beyond regular lessons and student awareness initiatives require attention.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Bringing together both numbers and personal stories gives us a fuller picture of how junior high school students feel about inclusive education. The numbers show us the overall trends in their perceptions across five areas. The personal stories help us understand these trends by sharing students’ experiences with acceptance, friendships, classroom involvement, and feeling like they belong.

Table 3. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Dimension	Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Explanation	Integrated Interpretation
Attitude toward inclusion	Mean = 3.32	Students described acceptance, equal treatment, and inclusion in the classroom activities.	Positive attitudes are reflected in everyday actions that recognize classmates with disabilities as members of the classroom environment.
Peer relationships	Mean = 3.46	Students described friendship, assistance, communication, and cooperation as important.	Positive peer relationships are characterized by practical support and interaction among classmates.
Academic	Mean = 3.42	Students emphasized	Meaningful participation is

collaboration and participation		participation, collaborative learning, and encouragement from teachers.	supported by opportunities to contribute and collaborate with one's classmates.
Social interaction	Mean = 3.32	Students described the importance of interaction but also identified limited opportunities for social engagement beyond the structured activities.	Schools can strengthen social inclusion by creating more opportunities for interaction, both inside and outside the classroom.
Sense of belonging	Mean = 3.55	Students emphasized acceptance, respect, encouragement, and recognition as classroom members.	Belonging is strengthened when students feel valued, respected, and included in the classroom.

Note. Note: Quantitative means are from the dissertation's reported results. Qualitative explanations summarize the reported themes and findings; they are not direct quotations.

Discussion of the Mixed-Methods Integration

The numbers and stories we have about inclusion in education paint a pretty full picture of what makes an inclusive school environment. It's all about attitudes, relationships, participation, social interaction, and the feeling of belonging. When we look at attitudes toward inclusion, the average score is 3.32. This shows that students feel accepted, treated equally, and included in classroom activities. Basically, when people have a positive attitude, it means they see classmates with disabilities as important members of the class. This matches up with research that says acceptance from both teachers and students is key for real inclusion, affecting how disabilities are viewed and accommodated in classrooms (Caingcoy, 2023; Herman & Baaki, 2024). When it comes to peer relationships, they scored the highest among social dimensions with a 3.46. These relationships are all about friendship, helping each other, and working together. This kind of social support is crucial for theories about relational inclusivity, which emphasize the importance of interdependent connections in creating inclusive school communities that encourage belonging and respectful interaction among diverse learners (Mamas & Trautman, 2025). Academic collaboration and participation scored 3.42, reinforcing these social-emotional dynamics. Students mentioned that teachers encourage them and provide opportunities for collaborative learning, which helps them contribute meaningfully. This aligns with findings that cooperative learning strategies boost social and emotional learning (SEL), enhancing students' self-awareness, social awareness, and decision-making skills, which are crucial for inclusive classrooms (Karmina et al., 2024). Even though students value social interaction (scoring 3.32), they pointed out that there aren't many chances for informal socializing outside of structured settings. This highlights a gap in fostering casual socialization that could further embed inclusion. Educational research suggests that expanding social opportunities beyond formal instruction is essential to deepen inclusion and belonging (Karmina et al., 2024; Mamas & Trautman, 2025). The highest score was for the sense of belonging, at 3.55, reflecting students' experiences of acceptance, respect, encouragement, and recognition as classroom members. This dimension captures the outcome of inclusive efforts, where students' motivation, well-being, and engagement thrive in environments that truly value and respect diversity (Caingcoy, 2023; Ogle et al., 2025). Bringing all these dimensions together, inclusive education isn't just about physical inclusion or academic opportunities. It's a dynamic mix of attitude, supportive peer relationships, collaborative participation, rich social interaction, and a strong sense of belonging. This complex construct requires intentional teacher practices, collaborative cultures, and educational policies that holistically address students' social and emotional needs while affirming their identities and contributions (Basister et al., 2025; Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that junior high school students in the three O.P. Siena schools generally reported positive perspectives toward inclusive education in terms of attitude toward inclusion, peer

relationships, academic collaboration and participation, social interaction, and sense of belonging. Among the five dimensions, sense of belonging received the highest meaning, suggesting that students generally perceived their classrooms as accepting and respectful environments. The qualitative findings further illustrated that inclusion was experienced through everyday acceptance, peer support, collaborative learning, and recognition as valued members of the classroom. The correlation results also revealed statistically significant positive relationships among all five dimensions, particularly between academic collaboration and participation and social interaction. However, the comparatively lower rating for including classmates in social activities inside and outside the classroom indicates an area requiring further attention. The qualitative findings likewise identified attitudinal, organizational, and knowledge-related barriers that may affect meaningful inclusion. Overall, the findings suggest that inclusive education requires more than providing access to regular classrooms; it also involves meaningful participation, positive peer relationships, responsive teaching practices, and opportunities for all learners to feel accepted and valued. These findings provide a context-specific basis for strengthening inclusive education practices in the participating schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, schools are encouraged to strengthen inclusive social activities that provide students with and without disabilities with more opportunities to interact beyond regular classroom lessons. Teachers should continue to promote cooperative learning, peer support, respectful communication, and meaningful participation in classroom activities. Schools may also conduct disability awareness activities to improve students' understanding of individual differences and encourage appropriate ways of supporting classmates. Professional development for teachers may focus on inclusive teaching strategies, differentiated instruction, and classroom practices that respond to diverse learning requirements. School administrators may use the findings as a basis for developing a student-centered inclusive education program that addresses peer relationships, social interaction, classroom participation, and sense of belonging. Finally, future researchers may conduct similar studies involving larger samples and additional school settings to examine students' experiences more broadly and evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives over time.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was limited to 56 Junior High School students from three O.P. Siena schools in Luzon during School Year 2025–2026. The findings reflect the perspectives and experiences of the participating students and may not represent those of students in other schools or locations. The study also relied on survey responses and qualitative accounts, which may be influenced by individual experiences and perceptions. Therefore, the results should be interpreted within the context of the participating schools.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future researchers should conduct similar studies involving a larger number of students from different schools and locations to gain a broader understanding of inclusive education. Further studies should explore other factors affecting students' experiences, including peer acceptance, social interaction, teacher support, and barriers to participation. Researchers may also evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed inclusive education program to determine whether it improves students' participation, peer relationships, and sense of belonging in the future.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study observed ethical principles throughout the research process. Permission was obtained from the appropriate school authorities before data collection, and participation was voluntary. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses were maintained. Appropriate consent and assent procedures were followed, considering that the participants were junior high school students. The collected information was used solely for research purposes and was handled with respect for the participants' privacy, dignity, and rights.

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AI DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to assist in improving the language, grammar, clarity, and formatting of the manuscript. The authors have reviewed and revised the AI-assisted content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, and final presentation of the research.