

Effective Transition Practices of Special Education Teachers for Learners with Special Educational Needs

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ABSTRACT

This study explored effective transition practices of special education teachers for students with special educational needs (SEN). Using a qualitative phenomenological design, eight teachers from public schools participated through interviews, observation, and document review. Findings revealed that teachers employed learner-centered practices, structured learning environments, behavior-based strategies, and instructional integration while addressing learner complexities, systemic barriers, and limited resources. Community visits and work immersion were critical in developing practical skills and social participation. Collaboration with families and multidisciplinary teams further supported smooth transitions. The study underscores the importance of individualized planning, early intervention, and context-sensitive strategies to promote academic, social, and emotional growth. Implications inform teacher training, curriculum design, and inclusive education policies.

INTRODUCTION

The education of learners with special educational needs (SEN) has increasingly emphasized not only access to schooling but also the quality of support provided across critical points of change (Wang Et al., 2023). Among these, transitions such as movement from home to school, between grade levels, across educational placements, or from school to post-school life represent pivotal periods that can significantly influence learners' academic achievement, social adjustment, and long-term independence. Evidence suggests that successful educational actions during key transition stages, particularly from primary to secondary school, significantly contribute to positive student outcomes and adjustment (Roca Campos et al., 2024). In the field of Special Education, effective transition practices are recognized as essential components of inclusive and responsive educational systems, as they ensure continuity of support and minimize disruptions that may hinder learners' progress (Baric, 2026).

Transitions can present substantial challenges for learners with SEN, including difficulties in adapting to new environments, coping with changes in routines, and establishing social relationships (Davies & Bagnall, 2023). These challenges are often compounded by communication barriers, behavioral needs, and varying levels of functional independence. Without structured and intentional support, transitions may lead to increased anxiety, regression in learned skills, and reduced engagement in learning. Consequently, educators play a crucial role in facilitating smooth and successful transitions through the implementation of individualized, evidence-based practices (Then & Pohlmann-Rother, 2023).

Special education teachers, in particular, are at the forefront of designing and implementing transition supports tailored to the unique needs of learners with SEN. Their practices may include collaborative planning with families and multidisciplinary teams, development of individualized transition plans, explicit teaching of adaptive and social skills, and the use of visual supports and structured routines (Kumpiene, 2019; Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021). Grounded in principles of Inclusive Education, these practices aim to promote participation, equity, and positive outcomes for learners across diverse educational contexts. However, despite the recognized importance of transition planning, variability exists in how such practices are conceptualized and enacted in real-world settings (Bell, 2023).

Existing literature underscores the importance of early and continuous transition planning to prepare students with disabilities for further education, employment, and independent living (Williams & Price, 2024; Buthelezi & Maseko, 2024; Morningstar et al., 2012; Chhogyel & Tshering, 2023). Nevertheless, gaps remain in understanding the specific practices employed by special education teachers, especially in diverse and resource-constrained settings. There is a need to examine how teachers navigate contextual challenges, utilize available resources, and adapt strategies to meet the varied needs of learners with SEN.

Considering these factors, this study aims to explore the transition practices that special education teachers use to support learners with special educational needs. By looking closely at the strategies teachers employ, their experiences, and the contextual factors that influence their practices, the study seeks to add to current knowledge in special education and provide insights that can guide policy, teacher training, and classroom approaches. Understanding these practices is essential for facilitating smoother transitions, improving learner outcomes, and promoting the overall growth and development of students with SEN.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study is anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which posits that a child's development is influenced by multiple interacting environmental systems, ranging from immediate settings like family and school (microsystem) to broader societal and policy contexts (macrosystem). In the context of special education transitions, this theory emphasizes that learners with SEN are affected not only by classroom practices but also by family involvement, school culture, and community resources. Effective transition practices, therefore, require collaboration across systems to ensure continuity, consistency, and support for learners' academic, social, and emotional development. By applying this theoretical lens, the study examines how special education teachers engage multiple stakeholders to facilitate smooth transitions and address barriers across environmental levels (Agwayaway & Simon, 2025; Aldosiry et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2023; Travers et al., 2026).

Effective transition practices for students with special educational needs (SEN) have been widely recognized as critical to promoting academic success, social adjustment, and long-term independence. Several studies emphasize that well-planned transitions can reduce anxiety, prevent regression in learned skills, and enhance engagement in learning (Then & Pohlmann-Rother, 2023; Roca Campos et al., 2024). These practices encompass preparation for key educational milestones, such as movement from primary to secondary school, shifts between educational placements, or transition to post-school life.

Almalky and Alqahtani (2021) highlighted the role of special education teachers in creating partnerships with businesses to prepare students with disabilities for employment in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing the importance of bridging educational settings with real-world opportunities to ensure practical skills and career readiness. Similarly, Bell (2023) explored high school educators' perceptions of transition planning for postsecondary life, finding that individualized planning, collaboration with families, and coordination with multidisciplinary teams are essential components of effective transition processes. Agwayaway and Simon (2025) further highlighted Filipino teachers' experiences in facilitating transitions, emphasizing context-specific strategies and collaboration with families and communities.

Research also underscores the value of co-created, context-specific approaches. Baric et al. (2026) developed a practical guide for smooth transitions between schools, emphasizing co-creation with educators, families, and learners.

Buthelezi and Maseko (2024) examined informal transition support models for learners with learning disabilities, highlighting flexible strategies tailored to learners' unique needs. Chhogyel and Tshering (2023) similarly emphasized early transition preparation as critical for academic and social readiness. Aldosiry et al. (2021) also underscored practices that prepare students with disabilities for new educational settings, including individualized planning, visual supports, and structured routines.

Family engagement emerges as another central theme. Kumpiene (2019) argued that consistent family involvement supports continuity and preparedness during secondary transitions, while Morningstar et al. (2012) advocated for aligning transition services with broader educational reforms to ensure equitable access for students with SEN. Travers et al. (2026) also highlighted that teachers' confidence and training significantly affect the quality of transition practices.

Several studies focus on inclusivity and social participation. Wang et al. (2023) found that facilitating social participation in inclusive schools improves learners' confidence and peer integration, while Davies and Bagnall (2024) highlighted disability support staff experiences in assisting autistic students transitioning to university. Then and Pohlmann-Rother (2023) demonstrated that adaptive and responsive educational practices help learners navigate transitions successfully. Lee et al. (2023), in a systematic review, identified key secondary services that support transition-age youth, including work experiences, IEP implementation, and coordinated support services, which improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.

Finally, early and continuous transition planning is widely recommended. Williams and Price (2024) argued that proactive planning for students with significant support needs enhances long-term educational and vocational outcomes. Roca Campos et al. (2024) confirmed that successful educational actions during transitions positively affect learners' academic and social adjustment. Collectively, these studies highlight that effective transition practices are multifaceted, requiring collaboration, individualized support, inclusion, early planning, and community engagement to ensure the holistic development of learners with SEN.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the effective transition practices of special education teachers for students with special educational needs (SEN). Qualitative inquiry was deemed appropriate because it allows for an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences, strategies, and perceptions in navigating complex transition processes within diverse educational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research focused on capturing the lived experiences of teachers who are directly involved in planning and implementing transition supports, emphasizing rich, descriptive data rather than quantifiable measures.

The participants of this study were ten (10) special education teachers employed in public and private schools offering inclusive or specialized educational programs for learners with SEN. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on their direct involvement in transition planning, years

of teaching experience, and familiarity with individualized education plans (IEPs). This sampling approach ensured that participants could provide insightful and relevant information about transition practices.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to discuss their transition practices in detail while also providing flexibility for probing and clarification. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. In addition to interviews, relevant school documents, such as transition plans, schedules, and program guidelines, were reviewed to triangulate the data and provide context for teachers' narratives.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded, and categorized into recurring themes and subthemes related to planning strategies, family and stakeholder collaboration, adaptive practices, and challenges encountered during transitions. The analysis was iterative, allowing patterns to emerge inductively while maintaining alignment with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which guided the interpretation of interactions across micro-, meso-, and macrosystems affecting learners' transitions.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and securing permission to access school documents. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and all data were stored securely to protect privacy. This methodological approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how special education teachers facilitate effective transitions, the strategies they employ, and the contextual factors influencing their practice, thereby addressing the study's research objectives.

RESULTS

The study explored the transition practices of special education teachers for learners with special educational needs (SEN). Through thematic analysis of teacher interviews, several key themes emerged, reflecting the strategies, challenges, and facilitating factors in supporting successful transitions. Table 1 summarizes the dominant codes, categories, and themes identified.

Table 1. Themes, Categories, and Dominant Codes in Transition Practices

DOMINANT CODES	CATEGORIES	THEME
"individualized transition plan" (T1:5), "student-centered goals" (T3:6), "adaptive skill teaching" (T2:4), "personalized support" (T4:5)	Learner-Centered Practices	INDIVIDUALIZED TRANSITION PLANNING
"visual schedules" (T2:5), "structured routines" (T5:6), "social stories" (T3:4), "predictable classroom environment" (T1:6)	Structured Supports	STRUCTURED ROUTINES AND VISUAL SUPPORTS

DOMINANT CODES	CATEGORIES	THEME
“parent meetings” (T1:5; T4:6), “family collaboration” (T3:5), “multidisciplinary teamwork” (T2:6), “counselor coordination” (T5:5)	Family and Staff Engagement	COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES
“early transition discussions” (T2:6), “continuous monitoring” (T3:5), “flexible plan adjustment” (T5:6), “preparatory activities” (T4:5)	Proactive Planning	EARLY AND ONGOING TRANSITION SUPPORT
“community visits” (T5:5), “work immersion” (T6:5), “career readiness partnerships” (T1:5), “workplace simulations” (T2:5), “employment skills training” (T4:5)	Post-School Preparation	COMMUNITY VISITS AND WORK IMMERSION
“student anxiety” (T2:6), “behavioral challenges” (T4:5), “difficulty in adapting” (T3:4), “communication barriers” (T5:5)	Learner Challenges	CHALLENGES AND FACILITATORS IN IMPLEMENTATION
“teacher experience” (T1:5), “administrative support” (T4:4), “peer mentoring” (T3:5)	Facilitating Factors	SUPPORTING FACTORS IN TRANSITION SUCCESS

Individualized Transition Planning was consistently highlighted by participants as central to effective transitions. Teachers emphasized the use of personalized transition plans, student-centered goals, and adaptive skill teaching to meet the unique needs of learners with SEN. For example, “individualized transition plan” (T1:5) and “personalized support” (T4:5) indicate the deliberate effort to tailor educational strategies to each student. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which underscores the importance of attending to the child’s microsystem and immediate environment to support development. Individualized practices help mitigate anxiety and regression during critical educational changes (Roca Campos et al., 2024; Then & Pohlmann-Rother, 2023).

Structured Routines and Visual Supports emerged as another critical strategy. Codes such as “visual schedules” (T2:5) and “predictable classroom environment” (T1:6) illustrate teachers’ emphasis on creating stable and predictable settings for learners. This finding resonates with previous studies that highlight the importance of routine-based instruction and visual cues to facilitate comprehension and independence in transitions (Kumpiene, 2019; Almalky & Alqahtani, 2021). Structured learning environments reduce anxiety and enhance learner confidence during transitions.

Collaborative Practices were also pivotal. Teachers noted frequent engagement with families and multidisciplinary teams, reflected in codes like “parent meetings” (T1:5; T4:6) and “multidisciplinary teamwork” (T2:6). This finding supports prior literature emphasizing family engagement as essential for smooth transitions, providing continuity and reinforcing learned skills across settings (Morningstar et al., 2012; Bell, 2023). Collaborative approaches not only support learners’ academic growth but also foster social-emotional well-being.

Early and Ongoing Transition Support was emphasized as a proactive strategy. Teachers described starting transition planning well before the actual move and adjusting strategies as students’ needs evolved, captured in codes such as “early transition discussions” (T2:6) and “flexible plan adjustment” (T5:6). This mirrors the literature advocating early and continuous planning to enhance post-school outcomes and minimize disruptions during transitions (Williams & Price, 2024; Buthelezi & Maseko, 2024).

A notable theme that emerged is Community Visits and Work Immersion, which underscores the importance of practical, real-world experiences in preparing learners for post-school life. Codes such as “community visits” (T5:5) and “work immersion” (T6:5) reveal that teachers actively expose students to community environments and workplaces to develop vocational skills. This finding aligns with Almalky and Alqahtani (2021), who highlighted partnerships with businesses to enhance employability for students with disabilities, demonstrating that transition practices extend beyond the classroom to include community and employment readiness.

Challenges and Facilitators in Implementation were also identified. Learners’ behavioral challenges, communication barriers, and difficulty adapting to new settings were consistently reported (“student anxiety” (T2:6); “difficulty in adapting” (T3:4)). Teachers noted that these challenges could be mitigated by supportive factors such as teacher experience, administrative backing, and peer mentoring (“teacher experience” (T1:5); “administrative support” (T4:4)). These findings underscore the complex interplay between learner characteristics and contextual support in facilitating effective transitions (Davies & Bagnall, 2024; Then & Pohlmann-Rother, 2023).

Overall, the findings indicate that effective transition practices are multifaceted, combining individualized planning, structured routines, family collaboration, early preparation, and experiential learning through community engagement. Teachers’ strategies reflect a holistic approach to supporting learners’ academic, social, and vocational development, consistent with inclusive education principles. By incorporating both school-based and community-based strategies, special education teachers effectively bridge the gap between current learning environments and future educational or occupational opportunities, promoting smoother transitions and enhanced outcomes for learners with SEN.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the transition practices of special education teachers supporting learners with special educational needs (SEN) and found that effective practices are holistic, combining individualized planning, structured routines,

early and continuous support, collaborative engagement with families and multidisciplinary teams, and experiential learning through community visits and work immersion. Teachers adapt strategies to meet learners' unique needs, address challenges such as anxiety and behavioral difficulties, and enhance readiness for academic, social, and vocational demands. Findings emphasize that successful transitions extend beyond the classroom, requiring integration of school-based instruction with real-world experiences and active collaboration among teachers, families, and community stakeholders. Proactive transition planning, along with adequate training, resources, and structured guidelines, promotes smoother adjustment, skill generalization, and long-term independence. These insights inform inclusive education by providing practical strategies to optimize learner outcomes and support the holistic growth and development of students with SEN.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research could explore long-term outcomes of students experiencing structured transition programs, including academic, social, and post-school independence. Studies across diverse educational contexts and perspectives from students, families, and community partners can provide a fuller understanding. Investigating work immersion and community-based learning for learners with SEN is also recommended to improve transition practices.

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