Supporting students with special educational needs during the transition to kindergarten: Multiple case studies

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Abstract

The importance of a smooth transition to school, particularly for children with special educational needs (SEN), cannot be overstated. This process is critical in shaping children's early educational experiences and long-term success. Effective systems and individualised support are essential for children who struggle to navigate this process independently, to help them adapt, feel welcome and thrive in a new environment. This study aimed to fill the gap in the literature on this topic in Abu Dhabi, UAE. An ecological perspective was adopted to examine how teachers and parents support school transitions for SEN students. Data was extracted from semi-structured interviews with teachers and coordinators, while parents' experiences were extracted from parent surveys. In addition, the MOSAIC approach was utilised to understand students' experiences. Results revealed variations in school practices. Intraschool transition practices and small-group support positively impact children's adjustment and development. SEN children showed varied adjustment levels depending on personal abilities and the support provided. The study informs policy and practice to promote more equitable and effective transition experiences by synthesising best practices.

Keywords: kindergarten transition; early childhood transitions; inclusive education; transition practices; special educational needs

Resum. *Suport a l'alumnat amb necessitats educatives especials durant la transició a l'escola bressol: estudi de casos múltiples*

La importància d'una transició fluida a l'escola, especialment per als infants amb necessitats educatives especials (NEE), és fonamental. Aquest procés és crucial per modelar les experiències educatives primerenques dels infants i el seu èxit a llarg termini. Els sistemes efectius i el suport individualitzat són essencials per als infants que tenen dificultats per

transitar per aquest procés de forma independent, ja que els ajuden a adaptar-se, a sentir-se acollits i a prosperar en un entorn nou. Aquest estudi té com a objectiu omplir el buit existent en la literatura sobre aquest tema a Abu Dabi (Emirats Àrabs Units). Es va adoptar una perspectiva ecològica per examinar com els professors i els pares donen suport a les transicions dels estudiants amb NEE. Les dades es van extreure d'entrevistes semiestructurades amb professors i coordinadors, mentre que les experiències dels pares es van extreure de qüestionaris als pares. A més, es va utilitzar l'enfocament MOSAIC per comprendre les experiències dels estudiants. Els resultats van revelar variacions a les pràctiques escolars. Les pràctiques de transició intraescolar i el suport en grups petits tenen un impacte positiu en l'adaptació i el desenvolupament dels infants. Els infants amb NEE van mostrar diferents nivells d'adaptació segons les seves capacitats personals i el suport rebut. L'estudi proporciona informació per a polítiques i pràctiques que promouen experiències de transició més equitatives i efectives mitjançant la síntesi de les millors pràctiques.

Paraules clau: transició a l'escola bressol; transicions a la primera infància; educació inclusiva; pràctiques de transició; necessitats educatives especials

Resumen. *Apoyo al alumnado con necesidades educativas especiales durante la transición al jardín de infancia: estudio de casos múltiples*

La importancia de una transición fluida en la escuela, especialmente para los niños con necesidades educativas especiales (NEE), es fundamental. Este proceso es crucial para moldear las experiencias educativas tempranas de los niños y su éxito a largo plazo. Los sistemas eficaces y el apoyo individualizado son esenciales para los niños que tienen dificultades para transitar por este proceso de forma independiente, ya que los ayudan a adaptarse, a sentirse acogidos y a prosperar en un nuevo entorno. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo llenar el vacío existente en la literatura sobre este tema en Abu Dabi (Emiratos Árabes Unidos). Se adoptó una perspectiva ecológica para examinar cómo los docentes y los padres apoyan las transiciones de los estudiantes con NEE. Los datos se extrajeron de entrevistas semiestructuradas con docentes y coordinadores, mientras que las experiencias de los padres se extrajeron de encuestas a padres. Además, se utilizó el enfoque MOSAIC para comprender las experiencias de los estudiantes. Los resultados revelaron variaciones en las prácticas escolares. Las prácticas de transición intraescolar y el apoyo en grupos pequeños tienen un impacto positivo en la adaptación y el desarrollo de los niños. Los niños con NEE mostraron distintos niveles de adaptación según sus capacidades personales y el apoyo recibido. El estudio proporciona información para políticas y prácticas que promueven experiencias de transición más equitativas y efectivas mediante la síntesis de las mejores prácticas.

Palabras clave: transición al jardín de infancia; transiciones en la primera infancia; educación inclusiva; prácticas de transición; necesidades educativas especiales

Summary

1. Introduction

The first few years of children's lives are pivotal in establishing an early foundation for learning and well-being so they can succeed as school students or in life as they grow up. Children's brains develop rapidly through their experiences with their families, peers, teachers and the communities that surround them. Children with special educational needs (SEN) are not an exception; they must be allowed to be exposed to different experiences that they can learn from during daily interactions, and to engage with other children with and without disabilities in various activities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Department of Education, 2015). For some children with SEN, the transition to kindergarten will be the first time they have been taught by non-specialist teachers and grouped with peers without SEN (Daley et al., 2011).

School transition is a significant milestone in a child's life, and influences future academic success. For children with SEN, transitions are more complex due to challenges in social communication and interaction (Connolly & Gersch, 2016). Forest et al. (2004) stressed the importance of maintaining preschool achievements during school transitions, while Walker and others have reported improved social skills and confidence in inclusive settings, despite missing children's perspectives, and have argued that successful school transitions require the balancing of change, continuity and collaboration (Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; Walker et al., 2012). Personalised support is vital to ensure inclusion, independence and societal participation as a right for children with SEN (Ravenscroft et al., 2017). Comprehensive research is needed to better address these unique challenges.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study has been influenced by the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). The basic elements of this theory are a recognition that children are influenced and affected by situations in which they spend time. The theory also recognises the importance of family, schools and society, and of the immediacy of interactions and inter-relationships between individuals and contexts. Thus, this model plays a fundamental role in research into school transitions (Dunlop, 2014). Bronfenbrenner's theory outlines five interconnected systems that influence child development: the microsystem, which includes direct environments such as home and school; the mesosystem, which represents interactions between microsystems, such as parent-teacher communication; the exosystem, which refers to indirect influences such as a parent's workplace or school policies; the macrosystem, the broader cultural and policy contexts that shape education; and the chronosystem, which considers the role of time and life changes on development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). This approach stresses the importance of collaboration between different systems and their impact on children's ease of transition, especially when children cannot negotiate the transition independently.

2.1. Specific practices to facilitate the transition of children with SEN into the first year in school settings

The transition to kindergarten represents a critical phase in a child's educational journey, requiring collaboration between professionals across various programmes and care settings. This process is particularly complex for children with SEN, and necessitates tailored transition practices and specialised services to support successful school entry (Gooden & Rous, 2018). However, research shows that the transition experiences of children with SEN often mirror those of typically developing peers, with limited implementation of practices specifically designed to address their unique challenges. Despite acknowledging that children with SEN face more intense and varied challenges, many teachers report using general, low-intensity classroom transition practices for all students without specific modifications for those with SEN (Daley et al., 2011). These generic approaches fail to address the needs of SEN students adequately.

Effective school transitions for children with SEN rely on individualised and collaborative strategies. Key practices include pre-transition school visits, family engagement meetings, classroom adaptations, and ongoing support such as visual timetables and consistent communication between families and teachers (Gooden & Rous, 2018; Vorkapić et al., 2022).

Despite teacher recognition of these practices, a Swedish study reported limited implementation, due to systemic constraints (Lillvist & Wilder, 2017). In contrast, Australia's Gippsland Early Childhood Intervention Advisory Network (GECIAN) exemplifies an integrated model in which early planning, inter-agency coordination and family engagement enhance outcomes (Arnup, 2014). Additional studies underscore the heightened vulnerability of autistic children during school transitions (Azad et al., 2025) and the critical role of teacher preparedness and family-school collaboration in supporting learners with different needs (Sands & Meadan, 2024). Successful transitions thus demand continuous, coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, beginning with early identification and extending across the educational journey.

2.2. Characteristics of effective transition

School transition is a critical developmental phase with long-term implications for children's academic achievement and retention at school system. Effective transition programmes address a range of factors, including inter-school communication, children's sense of belonging, their social and emotional adjustment, and continuity of educational practices (Singh, 2013). When well-executed, these programmes enhance academic and social skills and foster strong, collaborative relationships between families, schools and communities. International studies show that stakeholders with different perspectives often have common priorities. In a study in Portugal, teachers emphasised family involvement, while parents valued teacher and school characteristics, yet both identified child well-being and engagement as central to success (Correia &

Pinto, 2016). Similarly, Dockett et al. (2007) highlighted the importance of relational and cultural continuity for indigenous Australian students, underscoring the need for holistic, community-based approaches. Overall, effective transition programmes combine learning preparation with strong relationships, using the strengths of children, families, teachers and communities to help children start school successfully.

2.3. Children's perception of the transition to school

Understanding and incorporating children's perspectives, especially children with special educational needs (SEN) is vital for effective educational transitions. Research shows that their self-perceptions and experiences shape how they engage with learning and relationships (Babić, 2017; Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017). Including their voices enhances inclusion and support, yet professionals often prioritize adult viewpoints (Davis et al., 2015; McDonnell, 2003). The FIESTA project noted that children's input is rarely reflected in decision-making, despite its recognized value. Communication challenges should not exclude children from contributing; rather, finding effective ways to engage them is essential (Davis et al., 2015).

2.4. Focus of study

This study reports the findings from research into the transition process for children with SEN from nursery to kindergarten in Abu Dhabi (age range between 4 and 5 years for KG1). Parents, teachers and children took part in the data collection. The specific objective is to provide information about the transition practices that kindergartens offer to children with SEN, the practices that are thought to have the most impact on their transitions, and to enrich the limited literature in this domain.

2.5. Research Questions

1. What are the school transition practices that kindergartens offer for children with SEN?
2. What transition practices are thought to have the most impact on easing school transition for children with SEN?

The study adopted the ecological theory of transition to school developed by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), and utilised a qualitative methodology, namely a descriptive case study design, to explore the kindergarten transition experiences of children with SEN. This design offered in-depth understanding of individual experiences and their context. The qualitative approach was chosen over a quantitative one to capture real-world perspectives of the stakeholders and to incorporate their insights. Multiple data sources were triangulated to ensure the reliability and validity of the data. Audit trails were maintained, to enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings (Cohen et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1. The context

In 2010, the UAE's Ministry of Community Development launched the "School for All" initiative to promote the integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream public education. This initiative spurred significant policy reforms, resulting in a notable rise in SEN enrolment across public and private schools and nurseries (Anati, 2012). By the 2018-2019 academic year, the number of SEN students had grown to 4,925, with the majority (97.6%) enrolled in government schools and only 1.6% in private institutions (MOE, 2010; SCAD, 2020). To support inclusive practices, the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) mandates collaboration between special education coordinators and parents during the initial months of the school year, to ensure that individual student needs are addressed. ADEK also underscores the importance of regular communication between families, school staff and authorities, particularly during the annual review of individualised education programmes (IEPs). On a practical level, schools have begun implementing inclusive transition activities such as parent workshops, student induction sessions and one-on-one meetings with families (Alborno & Gaad, 2014). However, as a relatively young nation with a developing education system, the UAE's inclusive school transition policies remain in their early stages, highlighting the need for continued development and systemic implementation.

3.2. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from ADEK to access private schools in Abu Dhabi. A list of schools for the 2018-2019 academic year was obtained, including contact information. The university granted two ethical approvals: one for low-risk participants (teachers, parents and coordinators) and another for students under 16 years old with SEN, in addition to obtaining a Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) clearance. Consent forms were obtained from teachers and coordinators, who were given adequate time to review the participants' information and ask questions. All participants were anonymised by coding school names, teachers and students. Parental consent was also secured for the survey and for observation and interview of their children. Parents were informed that the class teacher would supervise children's participation and ensure their comfort and security. School coordinators contacted the parents of five students across two schools. Two parents consented to their children participating in observation only, while three parents consented to both observation and interviews, with three surveys returned.

The students' ages and abilities were considered during the ethical approval process. The first author, supported by the class teachers, explained the assent form to them, and they were informed that they could stop the interview at any time. All students signed the assent forms, alongside teacher wit-

nesses. A key ethical consideration was addressing potential disclosures of child abuse or harm. Although such disclosures were not anticipated, the first author's protocol required reporting any incidents to the school administration (Smith, 2016). Data storage, access and publication plans were clarified, ensuring data confidentiality. Observations of non-participating children raised no concerns, as no data were collected from them.

3.3. Data Collection

This study involved an empirical investigation of contemporary real-life phenomena (Yin, 2014). Therefore, a case study approach was chosen to collect evidence about the school transition process. The primary purpose was to provide narrative accounts about schools' policies and practices to support the transition, and to involve the students in the study. The MOSAIC approach was used to understand students' experiences. This approach was developed by Clark and Moss (2011) for children under five, although it can also be used with older children who have communication difficulties. In this study, photographs, interviews and classroom observations were employed. During interviews, children were encouraged to share their thoughts through open-ended prompts and classroom pictures, to help them express feelings or preferences. Observations focused on engagement indicators, such as children's facial expressions, body language, peer interactions and participation in activities. For non-verbal children, particular attention was paid to movement patterns between learning corners, response to routines, and levels of comfort or distress in various settings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and SENCOs (special education needs coordinators), and surveys were sent to the students' parents. Additionally, documents concerning school policies, practices and parent communication during the transition were reviewed.

3.4. Participant recruitment

For practical reasons, the first author chose to conduct the study exclusively in Abu Dhabi city, where 190 private primary schools were offering a range of curricula (ADEK, 2020). The study also focused on schools following the international English curriculum, as these schools tend to be more inclusive, accepting students from diverse backgrounds and nationalities. In March 2019, invitation emails were sent to 25 school principals from schools with the highest number of students with SEN, as listed by ADEK. Only five principals expressed interest in participating. After further discussions, two principals agreed to participate. The class teachers in school A have qualifications in special education, while the class teachers in school B have no background in the field.

   Among the five children involved in the study, three were verbal and participated in interviews, while two were non-verbal and lacked alternative communication methods. They were in their first year of kindergarten and had no

official SEN diagnosis, but all received additional support through a learning support plan (LST). Only one child moved to the kindergarten from the nursery in the same school, while the other four moved from different nurseries. Table 1 shows the case study participants.

Table 1. Case Study Participants

School A	School B
2 students	3 students
2 class teachers	1 class teacher
The head of kindergarten	The SEN coordinator
1 assistant teacher	1 special education teacher
2 mothers	1 father

Source: Based on data obtained by the first author.

3.5. Data Analysis

For this study, schools were designated as "cases" (Pring, 2015), and a thematic approach was applied to analyse qualitative data systematically. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method guided the thematic analysis process to ensure coherence. Interview transcripts were created verbatim, and teachers' responses were organised for comparison. Initial themes and patterns were identified, and descriptive statistics were used to analyse survey data from parents, with open-ended responses grouped to establish early themes. Findings from teachers and parents revealed broader themes and sub-themes, which were reviewed and refined for coherence. Data from the MOSAIC approach were transcribed, allowing parallel analysis of emerging themes. Document analysis provided additional context, highlighting key aspects relevant to the research questions. This comprehensive approach led to refining and finalising the main themes for discussion.

4. Results and Discussion

Parents were given a list of practices derived from Pianta et al. (1999), to choose the ones the kindergartens offered at the beginning of the school year, and open-ended questions were offered to discuss the support the schools had provided. Data from analysis of the documentation, the teacher and coordinator interviews and the parent surveys revealed four groups of practices: practices identified by schools' management, practices identified by teachers, practices identified by parents, and practices for children with SEN (Table 2).

Table 2. Kindergarten transition practices, based on document analysis and the views of adult stakeholders

1. Practices identified by school's management	1a. Practices targeting children and parents	• Build effective and timely communication with parents. • Open-door policy. • The school provides a counsellor and child advisor. Assigning older buddies to younger students. • Hold periodic meetings for all students. • Individual meetings to discuss issues that arise for some students. • Annual seminar for parents to guide supporting children's learning and behavioural development. • Time slots to meet with the phase coordinator/head of integration to ensure that established strategies are implemented according to plan.
	1b. Practices targeting teachers	• The school seeks further continuous professional development for some teachers when dealing with special cases. • Annual survey to measure the school's readiness for inclusion. • The learning support team conducts workshops/seminars for teachers. • Weekly coordination meetings during the school year.
2. Practices identified by teachers	2a. Active practices	• Assessment visit. • Gradual induction. • Receiving notes about the child. • Parents' paperwork (School policy, parents' expected duties, and forms to collect information about the child are given to parents to read and complete). • Parents' evening. • Transition days.
	2b. Inactive practices	• Nursery students and teachers visit the kindergartens. • Communication with the students' preschool settings. • Home visits.
3. Practices identified by parents		• Teachers contacted the nursery to discuss the child. • Regular meetings with the child's teachers.
4. Practices for SEN students		• Classroom structures. • Special aids. • Assessment period extension. • Seeking support from SEN specialists. • Seeking support from shadow teacher. • Familiarise the children with the curriculum. • Push-in (Special education teacher attends classrooms). • Pull-out (Children get individual sessions outside classrooms). • Learning support plan (LSP) instead of individualised education programme (IEP) due to the absence of an official diagnosis.

Source: Based on data analyses by the first author.

Further analysis of the data revealed five themes: parents' role in the pre-transition phase; parents' involvement in the post-transition phase; kindergarten support; what worked well; and children's experiences.

4.1. Parents' role in the pre-transition

Parents primarily focused on securing kindergarten placement by preparing their children academically, developing language skills and teaching self-care routines essential for admission. Some provided speech therapy or hired personal carers to support toileting, dressing and feeding, aligned with Janus et al. (2008), who emphasised the importance of these skills for smooth transitions. However, less attention was given to children's mental and emotional readiness. For instance, one parent had not discussed the transition or visited the new school with their child beforehand. Meanwhile, teachers expressed a desire for parents to better prepare children emotionally by discussing the new school and expected behaviours. This resonates with Dockett & Perry (2013) on the impact of parents' verbal and non-verbal messages during school transitions. Furthermore, this highlights differing levels of parental awareness, which influence the nature and effectiveness of their support.

4.2. Parents' Involvement in the Post-transition

Parents' awareness of kindergarten transition practices varied, despite equal communication opportunities; for example, a father expressed satisfaction with communication but identified no practices. This discrepancy suggests that factors beyond the mere availability of communication channels, such as parents' willingness or comfort in engaging with schools and the nature of the relationship between them and the teachers, might influence their awareness. Parents generally praised the support received, with some commending teachers' efforts in socialising children. This aligns with Walker et al. (2012), as they linked parental satisfaction to their perception of school support for their children.

Teachers in school B noted varying levels of parental involvement, with some parents actively engaging in school activities and attending parents' meetings, while others did not show up at a single meeting throughout the school. However, it is crucial here to shed light on how parents were invited to participate, and if the teachers considered the families' original language as language barriers may be another reason for the family's poor awareness of what is happening in the school and avoiding meetings. Similarly, immigrant families in Canada had the same concern (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015).

4.3. Kindergarten support

Several practices were implemented by the two schools and directed at all students and their families to establish communication and build relationships

between parents, teachers and specialists (Table 2). According to the ecological model, parents who communicate well with their child's teacher may be better able to help their child adjust to their new experiences (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Meanwhile other individual practices, such as home visits, were the least popular practices; teachers and coordinators referred to them as 'inactive practices' that were reduced and stopped over time.

Other outreach activities to establish communication with nurseries were relatively limited. For example, contacting nurseries and arranging group visits between nurseries and kindergartens were infrequent due to Abu Dhabi's great number of nurseries, and they were mainly evident in schools that include nursery units, as Little et al. (2016) noted. The head of the kindergarten at school A said that "The school used to implement some of these practices a few years ago and decided not to conduct any more for financial and logistic reasons".

A coordinator at school A reported that kindergarten teachers mostly reach out to students with a diagnosis or on parental request. This aligns with trends in the USA and Norway, where kindergarten teachers often fail to communicate with preschool teachers (Cook & Coley, 2017; Purtell et al., 2020). Despite the proven importance of preschool-kindergarten teacher communication, as noted by Sands and Meadan (2024), the implications of 'inactive practices' mentioned above are significant: without active coordination and planning, children with SEN are more likely to encounter abrupt changes, unaddressed needs and increased anxiety, which can hinder both their immediate adjustment and long-term educational engagement. This highlights a need for regulations and resources to support such practices without relying on individual schools and teachers' efforts.

As a result of the lack of coordination between settings, designing individual education plans (IEPs) or aligning curricula is rare, and this disrupts academic continuity, especially when teachers are unfamiliar with each other's curricula. Similar findings in the U.S. (Welchons & McIntyre, 2015) point to time constraints, limited resources and late student information as common barriers to collaboration. These issues are echoed in the current study, in addition to the absence of formal diagnoses. As a result, schools develop learning support plans (LSPs) for students with suspected developmental or behavioural concerns. LSPs offer a flexible, need-based approach for setting goals, adapting teaching strategies and providing targeted support in the absence of formal diagnoses or parental consent for curriculum adjustments.

> The Special Education Department develops an LSP instead of the IEP and applies a pull-out strategy without labelling the children. (Special education teacher, school B)

While the document analysis and coordinator interviews revealed that the two schools had policies for teachers training, it appears that implementation was not consistent. It was obvious from classroom observation that teachers with a background/training in special education were more able to deal profes-

sionally with SEN students and had good relationships with them. Starr et al. (2016) also found that limited training relating to SEN left Canadian teachers unprepared, and not meeting children's needs.

4.4. What works well

Teachers agreed that intraschool transition has been shown to effectively address challenges that commonly arise during the transition period, such as sharing information, curriculum continuity, getting information about children and their families from former teachers, introducing the new class and including children in fun activities. These activities are more likely to take place and to reduce the duration of shock in the first few weeks, in addition to supporting the new teachers and parents in establishing appropriate cooperation in the early stage. Aligning with Cook et al. (2019), this study found that distance is the main reason for poor communication.

> Last year, results showed that the students who joined kindergarten from the school nursery achieved better results than those from other nurseries, and 80% of students met their expectations at the end of the school year. (Coordinator, school A)

Teachers have found the "pull-out" strategy effective in reducing the difference in abilities between children with and without SEN, which may help children with SEN to be included more effectively in school overall. This model was known as the resource room and special classes model, and was considered essential to regular schools, both in teaching students with SEN by specialist teachers and as a resource to help regular class teachers meet their needs (Jenkinson, 1997).

One parent noted the significant impact of the teacher's interaction with their child, reporting that the child developed an immediate fondness for the teacher on the first day, which positively influenced their attitude toward the school.

> When the teacher loves her work, her students will be happy. (Parent)

4.5. Children's experiences

It has been reported that the success of the school transition experience can be determined by measuring students' adjustment in school and their development of various skills during the post-transition period and that this contributes to improved academic, social and emotional outcomes, and to fostering engagement and well-being (Gooden & Rous, 2018; Puccioni, 2018). A decision was made by the authors to report on the children's experiences by highlighting some indicators of success during their first school year, including their interest in school, positive peer relationships and overall adjustment, aligning with Correia and Pinto (2016). Two child participants reported positive experiences in kindergarten, with one expressing a preference for the nursery

setting. Both reported having friends in their classrooms and a strong affection for their teachers. Non-academic options such as games corners and outdoor play were highly favoured, reflecting children's preference for enjoyable activities over academic tasks. This is consistent with Australian research highlighting children's prioritisation of fun in early schooling (Mirkhil, 2010), underscoring the value of imaginative and socially interactive play in supporting engagement and enjoyment during early education. Child X at school A indicated this during the child interview:

> Author: Where is your favourite place in school?
> [Child X chose the photographs for the playground and the fancy-dress corner.]
> Author: Why do you like these places?
> [Child X said "play" pointing to the picture of Spiderman.]

Classroom observations revealed that well-structured learning environments play a vital role in fostering this engagement. Children in spacious classrooms that include activity corners show more independence and less disruptive moments during academic activities. Teachers motivate academic achievements by allowing engagement in favourite activities after finishing academic tasks. Thus, to support diverse skill development and interaction, kindergartens should integrate play-based learning.

Children's adjustment and success in the classroom are strongly influenced by the clarity of rules and routines. When teachers used structured strategies, such as visual timetables and daily reinforcement, children showed better understanding, behaviour and confidence. In less structured environments, unclear expectations led to confusion and disengagement. This aligns with Yelverton and Mashburn's (2018) findings highlighting that children thrive in well-structured environments where interaction aligns with their developmental understanding. These findings underscore the importance of predictable routines in supporting children's behavioural development and sense of security in the classroom.

> Child X wanted to impose his own rules in the classroom, crying and not listening to my instructions. Gradually, and due to the presence of a fixed routine that was communicated clearly and consistently, he became more committed, and learned to wait for the next activity. (Teacher, school A)

Observation showed that grouping children by similar academic levels boosts performance and motivation. SEN students in small reading groups showed higher achievement, confidence and self-esteem than in regular classes. These individualised sessions might foster motivation, and with consistent use can improve outcomes across the wider classroom environment.

4.6. Strengths and limitations

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is one of the first to integrate the views of students, teachers and parents, thereby enriching research and literature on school transitions in the UAE. It has its strengths and limitations. A key strength is its use of diverse data collection methods and the involvement of various adult stakeholders (parents, teachers, special education specialists, SENCOs and coordinators). This approach offers triangulation of sources and methods, whereby data from parents is complemented by teacher interviews and documentary data, providing a comprehensive understanding of each group's transition practices.

Like all studies, this study has limitations (Ross & Zaidi, 2019), which were considered. A major constraint was the small participant pool, particularly of parents. Additionally, due to time, distance and financial constraints, the study's focus on Abu Dhabi Emirate means its findings should be applied cautiously to other emirates or broader contexts. The case study's post-transition exploration was limited to children with SEN in just two schools, constrained by time and limited nursery cooperation. There was potential sampling bias in Case Study A, as the school may have chosen highly cooperative parents, possibly skewing perspectives on transition.

Finally, the use of surveys presents challenges in verifying the accuracy of responses due to their remote nature. Similarly, while the MOSAIC approach is valuable for capturing children's perspectives, it has constraints in settings where verbal communication is limited, potentially leading to the underrepresentation or misinterpretation of children's voices. These limitations underscore the need for more inclusive, multimodal data collection methods and careful interpretation of child-generated data. They also highlight the importance of further cross-cultural and longitudinal research to enhance our understanding of effective transition strategies for children with special educational needs (SEN).

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study has illuminated the multifaceted nature of school transition experiences for children with SEN, highlighting strengths and shortcomings in current practices including in parental involvement, kindergarten support and classroom implementation. The extent of implementation often depends on teacher awareness and the level of the kindergarten's commitment and readiness to support SEN students. Key findings emphasise that while intraschool transitions and small-group support were particularly effective, inactive practices such as communication between nursery and kindergarten and home visits may delay implementation of tailored support and may hinder children's adjustment and development.

To reinforce these insights, several recommendations can be made:

— For teachers: Adopt structured classroom routines, consistently use visual aids, and implement small-group interventions to support children with diverse needs. Teachers should also collaborate with nurseries to gather relevant information before the start of the school year.
— For schools: Adopt an ecological framework that emphasises collaborative support between all stakeholders. Schools should provide professional development for teachers that focuses on strategies to support children with SEN during school transitions, promote positive parent-teacher communication and foster collaborative relationships.
— For policymakers: Create regulatory frameworks and allocate resources to support high-intensity transition activities such as home visits.
— For parents: Support children's school transition by providing essential information during school registration, visiting the new school together and maintaining open and positive communication with teachers.
— For future research: A national study comparing transition policies in Abu Dhabi's international schools should explore how different curricula influence practices, and identify key factors affecting the student transition process.

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Ethics and Consent

This research received institutional ethics approval from the University of Dundee, School of Education and Social Work Ethics Committee, Reference Number E2018-16.

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