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Gradual Transitions in the Educational Process of Students with Special Needs: An In-Depth Investigation of Teacher and Parent Perspectives

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Abstract

One of the most critical stages in the education of students with special needs is the early transition, a period that profoundly influences not only their academic achievement but also their social-emotional adjustment. This qualitative case study explores the transition processes of children with special educational needs from the Guidance and Research Center (GRC) to preschool and from preschool to elementary school, based on the perspectives of teachers and parents. The study involved seventeen teachers (special education, preschool, and elementary) and eleven parents, selected using maximum variation sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using content and thematic analysis techniques. The findings were organized under two main themes: (1) Facilitators and Barriers in Transition and (2) Stakeholder Proposals for Effective Transition. The findings reveal that stakeholders prioritized social-emotional development over academic skills, emphasizing trust, adaptation, and communication. Key barriers included parental emotional strain, fear of stigmatization, lack of information, limited institutional coordination, inadequate resources, and inconsistencies between GRC reports and classroom observations. Children's early transition experiences often involved separation anxiety, behavioral challenges, and adjustment difficulties, while stakeholders employing game-based activities, visual supports, and gradual adaptation strategies as facilitators. Effective transition practices were associated with strong parent-teacher cooperation, individualized support, and environments responsive to children's needs. Stakeholder proposals highlight the importance of strengthening inter-institutional communication, enhancing guidance services, increasing material and staff resources, implementing digital coordination systems, and expanding parent education and psychosocial support. The study underscores the need for a holistic, collaborative, and individualized approach to promote smooth transitions and foster both academic and social-emotional adjustment for children with special needs.

Keywords Transitions · Early childhood · Special educational needs · Teachers · Parents

Introduction

Although educational transitions are often perceived as natural developmental milestones, they represent complex and critical turning points that can substantially shape children's academic, social, and emotional development (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). A successful transition process is closely associated with positive developmental outcomes, including gains in cognitive and literacy skills, adaptive behaviors, and social adjustment (Rous & Hallam, 2012). In early childhood education, the transition to preschool is particularly significant, as its effects extend beyond the initial period of adjustment and may influence children's developmental trajectories over the long term (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015). Supporting this view, a longitudinal study conducted by West et al. (2010)

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demonstrated that a smooth transition into school settings significantly contributes to students' long-term psychological well-being and academic achievement. Conversely, when children experience transitions as negative or poorly supported, these experiences may function as risk factors, with adverse consequences for academic performance and overall developmental health across the lifespan (Donaldson et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, the transition to formal schooling can be highly challenging for many children due to multiple contextual and instructional factors. Discrepancies between home and school environments, including increased academic demands, reduced individual attention, more complex social interactions, longer school hours, and the introduction of new rules and routines, may complicate children's adjustment to school settings (Fontil et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2021; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Moreover, the growing emphasis on academically driven instruction in kindergarten has further intensified the transition process. In their comparative study, Bassok et al. (2016) found that between 1998 and 2010, kindergarten teachers placed an increasing priority on advanced literacy and mathematics instruction, while substantially reducing time devoted to the arts, music, and child-initiated activities. Taken together, these conditions may hinder children's physical, social, and emotional adjustment to new learning environments, underscoring the need to examine and strengthen existing transition practices critically. This need is particularly pronounced for students with special needs, who, in the context of this study, are defined as children formally identified and assessed by the GRC as requiring additional educational support due to various developmental, cognitive, communicative, neurological, and health-related conditions (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, specific learning difficulties, speech and language disorders, epilepsy, and chronic health conditions), as well as other related developmental and learning needs. As noted by Rous et al. (2007a), although transitions are unique to each child and family, the transition experiences of students with special needs often pose heightened challenges for children, their families, and the professionals who support them.

Research consistently indicates that students with special needs experience multiple, domain-specific difficulties during educational transitions. For instance, Jiang et al. (2021), in a study examining five key areas of difficulty during the transition to kindergarten (making friends, following schedules, meeting academic demands, working within groups, and being organized), found that over 70% of children experienced difficulties in at least one domain, while more than 30% struggled across all five. Their findings further indicated that students with special needs face significantly greater transition-related difficulties than their peers. Multiple interrelated factors contribute to this heightened vulnerability. Disruptions in service continuity, including changes in service type, service providers, service settings, and service delivery frequency, have been identified as key factors complicating transition processes for students with special needs (Daley et al., 2011; Rous et al., 2007a). In addition, Marsh et al. (2017) documented that children with autism spectrum disorder experience school transition difficulties associated with relative emotional immaturity, increased externalizing behaviors, and challenges in self-regulation. Transitions also place significant emotional demands on parents, who frequently report feelings of guilt, fear of judgment, and elevated stress levels, which may further impede children's adjustment to new educational contexts (Fontil et al., 2020). Given the increasing number of children with special needs, there is a growing need for effective, evidence-based transition practices within educational settings. Accordingly, both families and teachers require structured and compassionate guidance to navigate the transition process successfully (Daley et al., 2011; Fontil et al., 2020; Sands & Meadan, 2024). In response to this need, the present study adopts a holistic approach to examining transition processes for students with special educational needs from the GRC to preschool settings and from preschool to elementary school, with a central focus on teachers' and parents' perspectives. The study aims to systematically identify facilitators and barriers to the transition process as perceived by parents and teachers. Furthermore, grounded in the study's findings, it seeks to contribute to the design of high-quality transition practices for students with special needs by offering practical, evidence-based recommendations that emphasize children's individual needs and support inter-institutional collaboration and continuity.

Parent and Teacher Experiences in Transition

Research on parent experiences during the transition to kindergarten consistently highlights several key challenges, including heightened emotional distress, limited access to information, concerns regarding school readiness, and difficulties in communication and collaboration with educational professionals. Families of children with developmental delays report higher levels of general and transition-specific anxiety compared to families of typically developing children (Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). In addition to anxiety, caregivers frequently experience complex emotional responses such as guilt, feelings of inadequacy, and fear of judgment throughout the transition process (Fontil et al., 2020). Parents also express concerns regarding schools' preparedness to accommodate their children's developmental needs, particularly in relation to the physical environment and available support services (Bakkaloğlu, 2013; Walker

et al., 2012). A recurring issue in the literature is the lack of timely and comprehensive information provided to families. Parents emphasize the need for early access to information about transition procedures, available services, and legal rights in order to make informed decisions; however, many report insufficient guidance during this period (Homerin & Dodds, 2024; Waters & Friesen, 2019). Parent experiences indicate that communication and collaboration constitute critical areas of need for families during the transition process. A meta-analysis study by Douglas et al. (2022) underscored the importance of open, ongoing communication and coordination among service providers across all stages of transition. When families are actively involved in planning and decision-making processes, they report feeling more empowered and competent; conversely, inadequate communication, limited collaboration, and restricted participation are frequently reported barriers (Douglas et al., 2022).

Teachers play a central role in preparing children and their families for educational transitions and in providing continuity of support throughout this process (Lehrer et al., 2017). However, the literature indicates that teachers' transition-related experiences are shaped by a range of structural and professional challenges. These challenges include limited professional preparation, resource constraints, limited involvement in transition planning, and communication difficulties across educational settings. In particular, insufficient training and knowledge related to supporting children with special needs during transitions have been consistently identified as a key concern in the literature (Fontil et al., 2020; Starr et al., 2016). Such limitations may contribute to lowered expectations for children and raise concerns that behaviors considered unacceptable in early intervention settings become more readily tolerated in school environments (Starr et al., 2016). In addition, teachers report difficulties in adequately meeting the needs of children with special needs within existing classroom structures and under limited resource conditions (Walker et al., 2012). Limited involvement in the transition process represents another significant challenge for teachers. Many report having few opportunities to meet children and their families prior to school entry, feeling excluded from transition planning, and experiencing frustration as a result (Starr et al., 2016). Consistent with these findings, kindergarten teachers have explicitly expressed a desire to be more actively involved in transition processes (Sands & Meadan, 2024). Furthermore, communication and collaboration across educational contexts emerge as additional barriers shaping teachers' experiences (Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). Teachers frequently report a lack of information regarding children's pre-kindergarten experiences, as well as practical difficulties in coordinating early childhood educators and elementary school staff (Purtell et al., 2020). Accordingly, strengthening early childhood educators' capacities to establish effective partnerships with families and to coordinate with professionals from multiple disciplines is considered essential for improving transition practices (Waters & Friesen, 2019).

Taken together, existing research underscores the importance of both parent and teacher experiences in shaping transition processes. However, the literature has predominantly examined parent and teacher perspectives in isolation and has tended to focus on a single transition point (e.g., kindergarten), rather than addressing multiple transition points across early childhood. The present study seeks to address this gap by providing a comprehensive examination of transition processes from the GRC to preschool and from preschool to elementary school through the combined perspectives of parents and teachers. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more holistic, inclusive, and context-sensitive transition practices.

Effective Transition Strategies

The transition process can be both an exciting and demanding experience for children with special needs and their parents. Evidence-based transition strategies play a critical role in facilitating this complex process and promoting positive adjustment outcomes (Fontil et al., 2020). Research consistently emphasizes that successful transitions require attention to interactions and relationships across all levels of the child's ecological system, including the child, family, service providers, educational programs, and the broader community (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Rous et al., 2007a). In their systematic review of transition practices for children with developmental disabilities entering preschool, Fontil et al. (2020) reported a strong consensus among parents, teachers, and professionals that collaborative approaches represent best practice for facilitating a successful school start. Supportive relationships established during the transition process, particularly those between teachers and children, and between practitioners and parents, have been associated with greater satisfaction, smoother adjustment, and more favorable child outcomes. Accordingly, practitioners are encouraged to engage in ongoing information exchange and to implement coordinated, intentional strategies before, during, and after the transition period (Division for Early Childhood [DEC], 2014). Furthermore, preschool programs and kindergarten or elementary school personnel, including both general and special education teachers, are encouraged to prioritize structured opportunities for joint planning and collaboration to support the children's individualized transition needs (Sands & Meadan, 2022).

A successful transition experience for children with disabilities requires that parents are adequately informed about the process and provided with appropriate, individualized

support. Research highlights the importance of family-centered transition practices, particularly those grounded in intensive communication and collaboration, such as one-on-one meetings with teachers or staff and individualized transition planning (Homerin & Dodds, 2024; Sands & Meadan, 2024). However, national survey data from kindergarten teachers in the United States suggest that transition practices tend to rely on more general, non-individualized supports rather than intensive, individualized approaches, despite clear evidence supporting the effectiveness of the latter (Daley et al., 2011). Likewise, Welchons and McIntyre (2015) reported that transition practices in kindergarten and elementary school settings tend to be standardized rather than tailored to children's developmental levels and functional abilities, resulting in uniform preparation approaches that fall short of recommended best practices. Consistent with these findings, Douglas et al. (2022) identified a mismatch between parents' reported transition experiences and research-based recommendations, pointing to a persistent gap between evidence and practice. Taken together, these findings underscore the need for systematic professional development to equip teachers and service providers with the skills necessary to implement flexible, high-intensity transition supports responsive to the individual needs of children and families (Waters & Friesen, 2019).

Gooden and Rous (2018) conceptualized effective transition strategies within three interrelated domains: the child, the family, and the teacher/school context. From the child's perspective, successful transitions to kindergarten are supported by the development of social competence (e.g., forming peer relationships and following classroom rules), the acquisition of functional school-readiness skills (e.g., following directions, working independently, participating in group activities, and using classroom materials), and increased familiarity with the new learning environment. These competencies are best fostered through coordinated experiences across family, school, and community contexts. From the family perspective, active involvement in the transition process is a central component of effective practice. This involvement includes participating in the development of transition plans, engaging in family–school partnerships, accessing information about transition procedures and legal rights, becoming familiar with the school environment, and having families' needs and concerns systematically considered. Within the teacher and school domain, effective transition practices emphasize sustained communication with children and families before and after school entry, as well as collaboration between sending and receiving programs. Teachers and schools are also responsible for understanding each child's developmental history and individual needs, supporting school readiness, aligning curricula and expectations across settings, and developing individualized transition plans. At a broader level, schools play a key role in establishing systemic structures that support transition, clarifying referral and enrollment procedures, contributing to the development of transition policy, and implementing evidence-based practices.

The literature provides a comprehensive framework for effective transition strategies and outlines key practices across the child, family, and school domains. However, transition strategies are most often examined within a single educational transition (e.g., kindergarten) and in isolation, with limited attention to how evidence-based practices are perceived and experienced by multiple stakeholders across successive transition points. In response to this gap, the present study seeks to offer a comprehensive examination of effective transition strategies drawn from the experiences of both parents of children with special needs and teachers working at different transition stages. Strategies identified through parent and teacher experiences are expected to inform the development of effective transition programs and contribute to supporting children, parents, and teachers across multiple dimensions.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Inspired by Pianta and Walsh's (1996) Contextual Systems Model and Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (1998) Bioecological Model, this approach views the transition to school as a process shaped by the dynamic interactions among the child, the school, the classroom, the family, and society. Therefore, the transition process should not be narrowed to the child's individual characteristics but should instead be conceptualized in terms of the relationships the child establishes with the environmental contexts in which they are embedded. The nature of these relationships plays a decisive role in supporting the child during the transition process. Frequent and high-quality communication, shared goals, and relationships focused on the child's development contribute to favorable transition outcomes. Conversely, relationships lacking these characteristics may pose risks to the child and negatively affect their development. According to the model, ideal transition ecology provides a structure that supports connectivity, flexibility, and mutual interaction between the social contexts surrounding the child.

The model suggests that early school transitions can be better understood when considered not only through a child-centered approach but also through the interactions among

multiple contexts that influence the child's competence. The current research aims to examine the transition processes of children with special needs from early intervention to preschool and from preschool to elementary school from this ecological and dynamic perspective, by revealing the interactions between children, families, teachers, and institutions and how these interactions are reflected in transition experiences. The model was selected because it offers a more comprehensive explanation of the factors influencing children's transition experiences and subsequent school life. By understanding the social processes and determinants within the transition ecology, the current research will shed light on the development of policies and practices for smooth and effective transitions in early childhood.

Current Study

The present study examines the transition processes of students with special educational needs from the GRC to preschool and from preschool to elementary school, based on the perspectives of key stakeholders involved in these transitions. Specifically, the study explores how special education, preschool, and elementary school teachers support students with special needs during transitions, the strategies they employ, and the challenges they face. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of the transition process, the study also incorporates the perspectives of parents who have recently experienced these transition processes with their children. Guided by this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What facilitators and barriers do parents of children with special needs, special education teachers, preschool teachers, and elementary school teachers perceive in early childhood transition processes?
2. What strategies do these stakeholders recommend for promoting successful transition experiences for children with special needs?

By examining transition processes through the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on inclusive education by providing empirical evidence on these processes, recognizing that families' and teachers' values, expectations, and practices may serve as both facilitators and barriers to successful inclusion (Walker et al., 2012). Moreover, a clearer understanding of stakeholder perceptions related to transition processes can inform practices aimed at reducing family stress, strengthening family–practitioner relationships, improving inter-institutional coordination, enhancing collaboration among service providers, and ultimately improving outcomes for children with special needs and their families (Douglas et al., 2022).

Methods

Research Model

This study employed a case study design, a qualitative research design, to gain an in-depth understanding of the transition processes experienced by students with special educational needs as they move from GRC to preschool and from preschool to elementary school. As the study aimed to examine in detail the experiences of teachers and parents involved in these transitions, including the difficulties they encountered and the strategies they used, the case study method was deemed appropriate.

Participants

The study included two participant groups: 17 teachers and 11 parents. The teacher group consisted of special education teachers employed at the GRC ($n=5$), preschool teachers ($n=7$), and elementary school teachers ($n=5$). The parent group comprised individuals whose children with special needs had recently transitioned to a new school. Maximum variation sampling, a purposeful sampling strategy, was used to select the participants. This approach aimed to obtain the perspectives of teachers at different institutional levels and of parents with diverse characteristics. Participants were selected based on their voluntary participation. Ethics committee approval was obtained before the study began, and all participants were informed about the study's purpose, process, and confidentiality principles before the interviews started.

Five special education teachers participated in the first phase of the study. Their educational backgrounds included bachelor's and postgraduate-level degrees, with some currently pursuing doctoral studies. Two were female and three were male, with professional experience ranging from 1 to 25 years, and were employed in institutions located in Bursa or Istanbul. Special education teachers were included at this stage because they were responsible for the initial assessment and referral process for students with special educational needs. In the second phase, interviews were conducted with seven preschool teachers holding bachelor's or master's degrees or currently enrolled in graduate programs. These teachers had between 5 and 16 years of professional experience and were employed in schools in Bursa or Hatay. The third phase involved five elementary school teachers, two of whom held master's degrees and one who was pursuing postgraduate studies. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 20 years, and all were working in schools in Bursa. Finally, interviews were conducted with 11 parents of children with special educational needs who had recently undergone the school transition process.

All parents resided in Bursa and reported having a middle socioeconomic status.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected using semi-structured interview protocols developed by the researchers. A literature review was conducted during the development of the interview protocols, and previous studies on the subject were examined, followed by the incorporation of expert review and feedback. Four separate interview forms were prepared: three for teachers and one for families. The forms covered the difficulties encountered during the transition, supportive elements, mechanisms for cooperation, and suggestions for improvement. According to participants' preferences, interviews were conducted face-to-face or online, and each lasted an average of 30 min. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Some participants declined to be participate in interviews and therefore completed the interview protocol in written form. Participants were contacted again for clarification or further information on unclear points or those requiring more detail. To enhance data reliability, the recordings were reviewed repeatedly and verified against the transcripts.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content and thematic analysis methods. First, the interview transcripts were thoroughly read to identify units of meaning. Then, appropriate codes were assigned to these units. Sub-themes were created by considering the similarities and connections between the codes. Then, the main themes were developed based on these sub-themes. Two researchers independently conducted the analysis and compared their results to ensure the credibility and reliability of the coding process.

Findings

Stakeholder Views on Facilitators and Barriers in Transition

The first research question addressed in this study is: *"What facilitators and barriers do parents of children with special needs, special education teachers, preschool teachers, and elementary school teachers perceive in early childhood transition processes?"* To explore this question, special education teachers, preschool teachers, and elementary school teachers were initially asked to share their perspectives on their needs and experiences during the transition process.

As shown in Table 1, all teacher groups emphasized the importance of both direct observation and parent-reported information during the diagnostic process. Special education teachers demonstrated a more systematic approach, relying on medical assessments and performance evaluation forms, whereas preschool and elementary school teachers prioritized evaluations based on in-class observations. Across all groups, participants identified social-emotional development as the primary area of need, encompassing students' adaptation to the classroom environment, peer relationships, communication skills, self-expression, and trust-building with teachers and peers. Academic skills were generally regarded as a secondary priority; however,

Table 1 Teachers' views on the needs of children with special needs in the transition process

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary School Teachers
Diagnosis Process	- *Tests appropriate for medical diagnosis, performance assessment* - Reviewing age and school information - Direct observation of the child - Obtaining detailed information from the parent (toileting, self-care, anger management, etc.)	- GRC report and diagnosis - Two–three-week observation period (free time, play, and group activity) - Interviewing parents, previous institutions, and teachers to gather past experiences	- Diagnostic considerations - Several months of observation - Observation and sufficient time are important *for students without a diagnosis*
Identification of Needs	- Priority given to emotional development - Social skills are identified as secondary - Academic skills are evaluated at later stages	- *Priority is given to social and emotional domains (adaptation to the classroom, friendship, self- expression, confidence and comfort)* - Cognitive and academic success is secondary	- Priority social and emotional needs (social cohesion, communication skills, social rules) - Motor and physical needs are also important (basic motor skills such as holding a pencil, physical health, nutrition) - Academics are often secondary (literacy, readiness to learn)
Assessment Tools	- Performance assessment forms, observations and parent interviews - School guidance services	- *Observation,* interview, file review - Teacher-parent- expert cooperation	- Diagnosis and observations - Parent involvement - Guidance and support mechanisms

elementary school teachers placed particular emphasis on motor and physical abilities (e.g., pencil grasp, physical health, and nutrition) as important indicators for school readiness and successful transition. Regarding assessment tools, all stakeholders reported using multiple data sources, including observations, parent interviews, and document reviews, highlighting the importance of triangulated data sources and of parent–teacher collaboration as complementary components of the process.

These findings indicate that social–emotional needs are prioritized in the transition process, with academic skills viewed as secondary. This suggests that teachers emphasize foundational social–emotional competencies—such as adaptation, trust, and communication—before focusing on children's academic performance, underscoring the importance of a holistic approach. Table 2 presents, in thematic form, the perspectives of different stakeholder groups (special education teachers, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, and parents) on the challenges they encounter during the transition and adaptation process.

As shown in Table 2, all stakeholder groups reported substantial challenges at both structural and individual levels during the transition and adaptation process. Parent-related challenges included emotional strain, fear of stigmatization, lack of information, insufficient support, and difficulties in accepting their children's special needs. Comparatively, special education teachers highlighted parents' emotional fears of labeling; preschool teachers emphasized parents' struggles in accepting children with special needs and their reactions to negative behaviors; and elementary school teachers focused on communication breakdowns and a lack of cooperation. Parents themselves underscored inadequate information, communication problems with teachers, and challenges in expressing their children's emotions.

Institutional challenges cited by participants included overcrowded classrooms, insufficient support staff, inadequate physical environments, deficiencies in orientation forms, and gaps in information-sharing processes. These structural barriers were perceived as directly hindering the effective implementation of the transition process. Special education teachers highlighted the inadequacy of referral forms and inconsistencies in diagnostic procedures; preschool teachers emphasized overcrowding and the risk of labeling; elementary school teachers noted curriculum intensity and behavioral problems that complicate classroom management; and parents highlighted delays in GRC processes and insufficient information.

Challenges related to individual student characteristics included attention deficits, behavioral problems, delays in communication and language development, difficulties in anger management, and peer relationship issues. These factors were seen as directly hindering students'

Table 2 Challenges faced by special education teachers, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, and parents during the transition and adaptation process

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary School Teachers	Parents
Parent-related Challenges	- *Emotional exhaustion of parents, fear of stigmatization* - Future worries, stress - Lack of information, doubt about the validity of reports - Resistance to getting a health report - Situation acceptance and expectation mismatches	- *Difficulty accepting special needs and negative behaviors* - Non-compliance with teacher suggestions, lack of cooperation - Irregular implementation of home support - Perception that the teacher is not interested	- *Disconnection in parent-teacher communication* - Not wanting a diagnosis - Cooperation problems due to a lack of support	- Lack of knowledge and awareness - Disconnection in parent-teacher communication - Difficulty in expressing the child's emotions - Need for support and awareness raising
Organizational Challenge	- *Inadequate/ incomplete filling of referral forms* - Incomplete and inconsistent information in educational diagnostics - Inadequate or contradictory medical diagnosis	- *Classroom overcrowding* - Lack of support staff - Inadequate physical environment - *Labeling and exclusion*	- *Crowded classroom* - *Behavior problems* - *Curriculum intensity* - Physical hardware deficiencies	- *Delays in GRC processes and difficulties in receiving reports* -*Insufficient information and guidance in preschool and elementary school institutions* -Lack of transparency in institutions
Challenges Related to Individual Characteristics	- Incomplete reporting of individual status during the evaluation process - Lack of clarity of diagnosis	- *Separation anxiety* - *Difficulty adapting to group rules* - *Communication gaps* - Emotional sensitivities (anger management) - Delays in language development, behavioral problems	-Behavioral problems (such as constant talking, trying to attract attention) - Aggressive behaviors (such as biting, tantrums) -Peer bullying (such as labeling, exclusion)	- Attention deficit, difficulty focusing - Resistance in the learning process - Emotional fluctuations - Problems with compliance with school rules - Communication /behavior difficulties

social–emotional adaptation and increasing the need for additional support during the transition. Preschool teachers particularly emphasized separation anxiety and difficulties in adhering to group rules, whereas elementary school teachers identified aggressive behaviors, peer bullying, and distractibility as more prominent concerns. Parents described their children's emotional fluctuations, struggles in adapting to school rules, and resistance to the learning process as significant obstacles.

Overall, these findings indicate that transition difficulties arise not only from students' individual characteristics but also from parental support levels, institutional conditions, and the quality of communication among stakeholders. Consequently, coordinated support from both families and institutions is essential for an effective transition. Table 3 presents thematic findings on stakeholder groups' (special education teachers, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, and parents) views on children with special needs' reactions on the first day of school and the interventions implemented by stakeholders.

As shown in Table 3, stakeholders reported that during the initial days of transition, children frequently exhibited high levels of anxiety, restlessness, anger outbursts, crying, shyness, withdrawal from communication, and reluctance to attend school. These social–emotional reactions—often accompanied by separation anxiety, difficulties in adapting to a new environment, and challenges in peer relationships—further complicated the process. Comparatively, special education teachers highlighted children's irritability and anger-related behaviors, and preschool teachers noted that emotionality was more prominent among girls. At the same time, aggression was more common among boys, and separation anxiety was widespread. Elementary school teachers emphasized behaviors such as lack of readiness for school, aggression, and crying. In contrast, parents reported that some children experienced tantrums and crying, while others displayed withdrawal and communication difficulties.

Across stakeholder groups, there was a shared emphasis on preventive and supportive strategies such as allocating individual time for children, reinforcing positive behaviors, and strengthening parent–teacher collaboration. Commonly implemented approaches included establishing structured routines, incorporating play-based activities, using visual

Table 3 Child's emotional and behavioral reactions and interventions in the first days

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary School Teachers	Parents
Emotional and Behavioral Reactions	- *Irritability, anger behavioral issues* - Restlessness and anxiety when forced by a parent - Unwillingness to enter the environment or remain unresponsive - Adaptation difficulties	- *Separation anxiety, crying, shyness, fear, tantrums, irritability* - Withdrawal from communication, overreaction - Resistance to taking instructions - Emotionality in girls, aggression in boys -Separation from mother	- *Crying, not wanting to come to school, longing for parents, anxiety, fear, shyness* - Tantrums, aggressive behavior (shouting, hurting) - Problem behaviors to attract attention - Being bullied or experiencing violence - *Not feeling ready for school*	- *Restlessness, irritability, crying, outbursts of anger* - *Introversion, communication difficulties* - Stress at public events, fear of touch - Need for support in motor skills, creativity and self-expression
Preventive and Supportive Interventions	- Time-limited consultation and information with the parent - Concrete and social reinforcements (positive words, smiling faces) - Appointments on different days or holding for those with excessive compliance problems - Limited one-on-one private practices: focus is on involving the parent in the process	- *Individual time and building trust* - Positive behavior reinforcement - *Introducing the environment with visual materials and routines* - Illustrated stories for emotion management - Consistent, flexible behavioral approach - Calming and stabilizing in crisis situations - Parent cooperation and gradual adaptation activities	- *Familiarizing the class with favorite activities* - *Participation through play, fun learning environment* - Emotional support, patience - Sometimes ignoring negative behavior - Respect for individual differences - Parent cooperation and open communication	- Support such as special education, therapy and play therapy - Gradual progression - Discipline and game-based activities at home - Encouraging development in the child's areas of interest - Close communication with teachers, active participation - Empathy, patience and consistency

materials, conducting emotion management activities, and adopting gradual adaptation strategies. Stakeholder-specific emphases also emerged: special education teachers prioritized parent consultation and information-sharing due to limited interaction time with students; preschool teachers focused on building trust, managing emotions through picture books, and employing calming techniques during crises; and elementary school teachers favored acclimatization strategies and creating a positive learning environment through engaging activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that early emotional and behavioral reactions during the transition process can be mitigated through well-designed, coordinated interventions. However, preschool teachers observed that their more play-oriented approach often contrasts with the structure of elementary school, making adaptation more challenging for children. Moreover, insufficient preparation by parents—whether academic, social, or emotional—was seen as exacerbating adaptation difficulties. These results suggest that the effectiveness of interventions depends largely on consistent communication and coordination among stakeholders. Table 4 presents, thematically, the perspectives of different stakeholder groups (special education teachers, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, and parents) on strategies to facilitate adaptation.

Table 4 indicates that stakeholders place significant emphasis on safe and supportive environments, continuity, and visual support in environmental arrangements. Teachers

Table 4 Strategies to facilitate the adaptation process of the child with special needs

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary School Teachers	Parents
Environment	- Evaluation rooms are colorful and full of toys - There are remarkable materials - Safe and supportive environment	- *A safe and understandable environment* - *Daily routines supported with visuals* (now-and-then cards, emotion board) - Routine durations are gradually increased - Positive and supportive attitude, free of labels - Close proximity to the teacher for physical support -Familiar environment and consistent routines	- *Visual materials and technological tools* (smart board, digital games) supported - Continuous observation by sitting close to the teacher's desk	- *Supported by play* - Supporting the child in areas of interest -Empathy understanding
Adaptation Process	- Flexible according to the child - Gradual, based on interest, comfort and readiness	- *Adaptation process is systematic and gradual* - The duration of routines and activities is adjusted according to the child's capacity - Peer support and empathy work	-Differences in assessment and teaching - *Small group work and peer support* - Individualized tasks and responsibilities - Classroom management is consistent and responsive - Easy tasks that the learner can accomplish and is interested in	- Support at home according to the individual needs and characteristics of the child - Monitoring and supporting the child's development
Activity	- Short-term, game-based activities - Educational materials	- *Game-based activities* - Child-oriented activities - Free time and activities according to individual needs	- *Games and fun activities* - *Artistic, nature and technology-based activities* - Focused on emotional activities with girls and social activities with boys -Level-appropriate books and materials	- Support such as therapy and play therapy - Play and discipline-based activities at home - Social skills activities
Parent Support	- Gradual parent separation - Communication and cooperation with the parent	- Close cooperation with the parent	- Regular and open communication with the parent - The parent is active in the process	- Teacher-parent communication

and parents alike stressed that environments in which children feel safe, follow clear routines, are enriched with visual materials, and include engaging elements facilitate students' adaptation to the educational environment. Special education teachers highlighted the design of colorful, toy-filled, and reassuring assessment rooms. In contrast, preschool teachers prioritized maintaining continuity and fostering a secure environment by reinforcing daily routines with visual aids. Elementary school teachers emphasized supporting the learning environment through technological tools (e.g., smart boards, digital games) and seating arrangements that place students near the teacher's desk to enable close observation and timely intervention. Parents, in turn, underscored the importance of tailoring support to children's interests, fostering empathy, and incorporating play within the home environment.

Stakeholders' views on the adaptation process emphasized flexibility, individualization, and gradual progression. Adaptation steps were perceived as most effective when planned incrementally, taking into account children's readiness, interests, and abilities. Peer support, relationship building, and empathy training emerged as key strategies for promoting social–emotional adaptation. Across groups, there was consensus that activities should be play-based, short, child-centered, and responsive to individual needs. Additionally, artistic, nature-based, and technology-supported activities were regarded as essential for boosting motivation and enhancing social skills.

Findings on parental support revealed unanimous agreement on the pivotal role of teacher–parent communication in ensuring successful adaptation. Close collaboration between school and home was viewed as critical for maintaining consistency in children's experiences across settings. Overall, stakeholders agreed that coordinated planning of the environment, process, activities, and parental involvement plays a decisive role in easing adaptation. Nevertheless, a pronounced reliance on a game-based approach in preschool—and the shift away from this structure in elementary school—was perceived as a source of difficulty for some children. Furthermore, inadequate parental focus on preparing children for the elementary school experience was seen as contributing to misalignment between home and school.

The perspectives of different stakeholder groups (special education teachers, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, and parents) on supporting the social–emotional development of children with special needs during the transition process are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 indicates that stakeholders primarily emphasized methods and activities to foster children's social–emotional development. Key strategies include enhancing communication skills, implementing social skills modules, organizing group games and free-time activities, and incorporating sports, arts, and peer support. In stakeholder comparisons, special education teachers emphasized verbal communication and structured social skills modules, preschool teachers prioritized group games and peer-to-peer sharing, and elementary school teachers employed sports, arts, and game-based activities as tools for social development while viewing peer support as essential. Parents, in turn, highlighted the importance of children liking their teachers and peers, expressing their emotions, and actively engaging in the social environment.

Findings from participant interviews further revealed that trust, a sense of belonging, and sensitivity to individual differences were central to environmental arrangements supporting social–emotional development. Commonly used materials included audiovisual supports, game-based tools, art supplies, and sports equipment. Specific strategies involved the use of emotion cards, illustrated stories, role-playing activities, board games, and brain teasers to promote children's social interaction.

Overall, strategies to support social–emotional development were grounded in providing safe, supportive environments, planning activities that are responsive to individual differences, integrating audiovisual materials, and ensuring strong parent–school collaboration. However, participants noted that the marked reduction in game-based activities—extensively used during preschool—upon transition to elementary school can hinder children's social–emotional adaptation. At the same time, elementary school teachers often sought to foster responsibility by assigning age-appropriate tasks, a strategy perceived as potentially beneficial for children's social adjustment and self-regulation skills.

Stakeholder Proposals for Effective Transition

The second research question of the study is: *"What strategies do these stakeholders recommend for promoting successful transition experiences for children with special needs?"* For this purpose, the views of parents, special education teachers, preschool teachers, and elementary school teachers on inter-institutional collaboration are presented in Table 6.

As shown in Table 6, stakeholders' recommendations highlight the need to strengthen inter-institutional cooperation through more coordinated, transparent, and sustainable practices. Participants identified several existing strengths that could serve as a foundation for effective transition strategies, including coordination between the GRC and educational institutions, systematic archiving of reports, and generally functional record-keeping systems. Preschool and elementary school teachers noted that cooperation between the GRC and their respective levels is maintained to some

Table 5 Supporting the social-emotional development of the child in the transition process of the child with special needs

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary Teachers	Parents
Method/Activity	- Verbal communication - *Social skills modules* (relationship building, conflict resolution, etc.) - Recognition of emotional reactions	- *Group games and free time activities* - *Sharing and cooperation among friends* - Consistent, flexible behavioral approaches	- *Group work, sports, art and game-based activities* - *Peer support*	- *Positive relationships with teachers and peers* - Expressing the child's feelings
Environment	- *Safe*, supportive environment, sensitive to individual differences	- *Safe and supportive environment* - Gaining a sense of achievement - Accepting the child as an individual and removing labels - Social cohesion and belonging	- *Safe environment and belonging in the classroom* - Patient and consistent approaches to negative behaviors	-Consistency between school and home environments - Love, patience, and consistency at home
Material	-	- Audiovisual materials such as emotion cards, picture stories - Role-playing and empathy building games - Children's books, toys that increase social interaction, board and brain teasers	- Game-based, art and sports activities - Visual material and technology supported applications - Individualized activities	- Coloring at home, kitchen activities - Social circle/club activities
Cooperation	- Close cooperation with the guidance unit - Collaboration with parents and school guidance	- Support with a psychological counselor - Continuous monitoring and intervention - Parent-school adaptation and cooperation	- Parent-school cooperation - Referral to the parent when expert support is needed	- Psychological support and guidance - Guidance and special education support

extent and that archiving systems are generally functional. Parents, however, emphasized that open, rapid, and transparent information exchange between the GRC and schools is their primary expectation.

Despite these strengths, participants frequently highlighted significant shortcomings and challenges in collaboration. Commonly reported issues included deficiencies in paperwork flow, limited information sharing, communication breakdowns, inconsistencies between evaluation and implementation processes, the absence of a shared digital platform, and insufficient staffing. One widely noted concern was the discrepancy between GRC reports and teacher observations. In stakeholder comparisons, preschool teachers underscored the lack of an up-to-date, accessible follow-up system; elementary school teachers described cooperation as irregular and insufficient; and parents pointed to superficial, short-term GRC evaluations, prolonged report preparation, delayed expert input, and inconsistencies between reports and classroom observations.

Drawing on these experiences, stakeholders proposed strategies to improve transition outcomes. These strategies included establishing standardized and up-to-date follow-up systems, developing a shared digital platform to support information exchange, aligning assessment and implementation processes more clearly, and strengthening coordination across educational levels. Parents additionally emphasized the need for more comprehensive and timely assessments, while teachers highlighted the importance of consistent collaboration mechanisms between preschool and elementary school settings. Overall, these recommendations underscore the necessity of a continuous, well-coordinated, and digitally supported inter-institutional system to promote successful transition experiences for children with special needs.

In Table 7, the views of different stakeholder groups (special education teachers, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, and parents) on the role of the parent in the transition process are presented thematically.

Table 6 Cooperation between institutions according to special education, preschool, elementary school teachers and parents

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary School Teachers	Parents
Strengths	- Coordination between GRC and other institutions - *Regular archiving of files and reports* - Classroom visits during the year	- Cooperation between GRC and preschool - *File archiving system and records*	- Cooperation between GRC, special education centers, and elementary school - Guidance service is a process initiator; however, the adequacy of support and guidance is questionable	- Expectation of clear and fast information flow between GRC and schools
Shortcomings and Challenges	- *Incomplete/ inadequate filling of documents by schools during the referral process to GRC* - Limited paperwork flow and information sharing - Effective communication is limited	- *Communication gaps between institutions* - Differences in evaluation and implementation processes - Discrepancy between GRC reports and observations - *Lack of a common platform* - Lack of an up-to-date, accessible tracking system - Insufficient staff – Leaving the decision of GRC to the parents' preference	- *Cooperation between pre-school and elementary school institutions is irregular and weak* - Reports often provide one-time information - GRC test and report deficiencies - Parents' low trust in institutions, reports, and experts	- *Cooperation between GRC and schools is inadequate in some cases* - *GRC evaluations are superficial and short-term, inconsistent with teacher observations* - Prolonged report and file processes - Delayed arrival of expert opinions - Feeling that the parent was not given enough information and guidance during the process

As shown in Table 7, stakeholders' recommendations for promoting successful transitions consistently emphasize the central role of parents' active participation, informed engagement, and supportive approaches. Participants highlighted that effective communication with parents is a key facilitator of successful transitions, particularly when parents are provided with clear, comprehensive, and continuous information on transition procedures, diagnoses, intervention methods, legal rights, and available support services. Preschool teachers, in particular, underscored the importance of delivering information in an accessible, understandable manner, while elementary school teachers emphasized the need to support parents emotionally as they accept a diagnosis and address concerns about stigma. At the same time, stakeholders identified several challenges that inform their recommendations for improvement. Special education teachers reported that parents often lack sufficient knowledge about support education reports, health reports, and GRC procedures. Parents themselves pointed to delays in accessing GRC services, disruptions in individualized education programs, and limited teacher experience or motivation as factors that hinder effective communication. Across stakeholder groups, insufficient information, communication gaps, and limited psychosocial support were identified as barriers that complicate the transition process.

Drawing on these experiences, stakeholders proposed strategies to strengthen parent support during transitions. These strategies included ensuring timely and comprehensive parent information, providing emotional support to parents—particularly during the diagnosis acceptance phase—and fostering consistency between home and school practices. Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening family-centered support mechanisms is critical for sustaining children's academic progress and social–emotional adaptation throughout transition periods. The perspectives of different stakeholder groups (special education teachers, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers, and parents) on in-house and systemic support during the transition process are presented in Table 8.

Table 8 indicates that stakeholders hold differing perceptions and experiences regarding in-house support. Special education teachers reported that existing support mechanisms are generally functional and adequate, while preschool teachers emphasized the consistent and ongoing support provided by guidance services and school administration as a key facilitating factor during transition processes. In contrast, elementary school teachers described guidance services as largely inadequate and limited, noting that administrative support varies considerably across schools. These discrepancies point to the need for more standardized

Table 7 The role of the parent in transition, cooperation, and support needs

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary School Teachers	Parents
Role of the Parent	- *Active participation and consent of the parent is mandatory* - The parent's approach directly influences the process and decisions	- *Involving parents in the process* - Individual interviews and home visits to build trust with the parent - Constant communication and calming	- *Parent acceptance and cooperation are critical to the success of the process* - Need for regular communication and awareness raising	- *There should be teacher-parent communication* -Teacher support is important - Empathy, patience and consistency emphasized -Some teachers have negative attitudes
Communication Problems	- Parents have insufficient knowledge about the support education report, health report and GRC processes - Problems of parents' wrong approach (criticism, inappropriate style)	- Providing clear information to the parent about the process, diagnosis and education methods	- Parents find it difficult to accept the process emotionally - Parents perceive the process as "labeling"	- Delays in accessing GRC and disruption of processes - Lack of motivation and experience in some teachers - Delays in the individual education program
Need for Information	- Provide clear information about the process and methods - Parents should be informed about rehabilitation choices and their right to change - Raising awareness of the risks of misdirection - Parents need expert guidance to support academic and social development	- Parents should be made aware -Need for psychological support and guidance in parents - Guidance and emotional support during the process of accepting the diagnosis - Consistent approach between home and school - The right approach to the child	- Need for psychological support - Help to calm/ accept parents - Individualized homework, reading materials and simple exercises according to special needs	- Providing practical advice and materials at home - Game-supported activities and discipline repetition - Phone and screen time control

and equitable in-house support structures across educational settings. From the parents' perspective, the absence of formal preparation or information processes in most cases contributes to a weak perception of support during the transition, underscoring the need to develop structured, parent-oriented preparation and information mechanisms.

Across all stakeholder groups, several commonly identified shortcomings indicate priority areas for strengthening in-house support systems. Special education teachers highlighted a shortage of qualified personnel in the field and emphasized the need to reduce reliance on temporary or paid teaching staff to ensure continuity of support services. Preschool teachers cited inadequate staffing and resources, limited guidance and support, and the excessive workload of support personnel, suggesting a need for improved human resource planning and allocation. Elementary school teachers stressed insufficient cooperation, weaknesses in guidance practices, and resource constraints, thereby underscoring the importance of developing systematic coordination and collaboration models within and across institutions. Parents, drawing largely on their own observations, expressed concerns regarding children's behavioral problems, exposure to peer bullying, the risk of falling behind academically, and experiences of discrimination or labeling, indicating the need to strengthen psychosocial support mechanisms during transition periods.

Overall, although in-house support systems function adequately in certain contexts, critical issues—including limited guidance services, insufficient resources and personnel, and weak communication and cooperation—were consistently noted as barriers to a smooth transition process. These findings suggest that successful transitions depend not only on the presence of support systems, but also on their continuity, quality, and effective coordination among stakeholders, all of which should be prioritized as key components of transition improvement strategies.

Table 9 presents the perspectives of special education teachers, preschool teachers, elementary school teachers,

Table 8 In-house/systemic support during the transition process

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary Teachers	Parents
Internal Support Conditions	- Support is generally adequate	- Guidance service and school administration are generally supportive	- Guidance services are often inadequate and limited - Administrative support varies	- There is usually no formal preparation or information process by the school or teachers
Deficiencies	- *Lack of qualified teachers in the field of special education* - Reduction of paid/temporary teachers - Lack of up-to-date materials	- *Lack of staff and resources* - Inadequate guidance support - Inadequate support staff and excessive workload	- *Lack of cooperation* - Excessive leniency or insufficient discipline in guidance approaches - *Lack of staff and resources* - Harmonious work of administration, teachers, and guidance	- Worried about behavior problems - Likelihood of being subjected to peer bullying - Falling behind in academic skills - Concern about discrimination and labeling

and parents on suggested improvements to the transition processes for children with special needs.

Table 9 indicates that participants offered multidimensional recommendations to make transition processes more functional and sustainable. Regarding the evaluation process, special education teachers stressed the need to abolish the health report requirement and to establish specialized institutions for diagnosis. Preschool teachers recommended conducting more comprehensive and long-term evaluations, ensuring teachers' perspectives are effectively incorporated, and updating diagnostic criteria. Elementary school teachers emphasized the effective implementation of legislative regulations, the complete sharing of reports, and greater rigor in GRC evaluations.

Across all stakeholder groups, there was consensus on the need to expand the range of educational materials, increase the number of teachers and support staff, and reorganize classroom environments to meet children's needs. Special education teachers particularly highlighted the importance of diversifying materials and increasing teaching staff. Preschool teachers recommended developing individualized transition plans for each child and expanding in-service training. Elementary school teachers prioritized strengthening guidance services, reducing class sizes, and expanding vocational training opportunities. Parents called for accessible materials, the assignment of experienced teachers, the development of content to support social skills and daily living, an increase in special education hours, and improvements to school facilities to better accommodate children's needs.

In the domain of inter-institutional communication, stakeholders emphasized the need for systematic and digital coordination. Regarding parent awareness, preschool teachers advocated for encouraging early parental engagement, while elementary teachers highlighted the importance of establishing mechanisms to ensure parents' active and informed participation. In terms of technology and innovative approaches, both preschool and elementary school teachers recommended developing AI-supported diagnostic systems, digital learning materials, and accessible platforms for monitoring children's developmental progress.

Overall, the findings suggest that strengthening the transition process requires attention not only to its educational components but also to its systemic and technological dimensions. Stakeholders' recommendations point to the need for a multi-layered improvement strategy spanning assessment processes, parental awareness, digital innovation, and broader social awareness to create a sustainable, holistic transition model.

Discussion

Facilitators and Barriers in Transition

Our findings indicate that special education, preschool, and elementary school teachers place importance not only on medical evaluations but also on direct observation and information obtained from families in the diagnostic processes for children with special needs. While special education teachers tend to adopt a more systematic approach based on medical assessments and standardized evaluation forms, preschool and elementary school teachers place greater emphasis on in-class observations. The literature similarly notes that teachers frequently use observation and parent interviews during assessment processes (Özgüç & Yassıbaş, 2021) and that direct observations provide an overall perspective on relevant behavioral problems (Noterdaeme et al., 2002). In this context, direct observation, along with information from parents, is particularly critical for assessing behavioral and social skills. In this regard, the findings support the need to draw on multiple sources of information and to approach the assessment process from a multidimensional perspective when identifying

Table 9 Suggestions for improvement in transition processes from special education, preschool, and elementary school teachers and parents

Theme	Special Education Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Elementary Teachers	Parents
Evaluation Process	- Abolition of the health report requirement - Establishment of separate, well-equipped institutions according to types of special needs - Institutional buildings and environments should be designed in accordance with the diagnosis	- *Conducting more comprehensive, long-term evaluations in GRCs and similar institutions* - *Inclusion of teachers' views in evaluation processes* - Updating diagnostic criteria according to the needs of the age - Health centers and midwives/doctors are effective in early detection and referral to GRC - Expanding mandatory early screening programs	- *Long-term, systematic observation during the evaluation process* - *Establishing early, accurate and repeated diagnostic processes*	- Legislative arrangements should be made and implemented effectively - Files and reports should be shared on time and in full - Making GRC assessment practices more rigorous
Education Process	- *Increasing material diversity* - Inspection of existing private education institutions - Increasing the number of teachers in the field of special education - Updating resources	- Preparation of transition plans specific to each child in cooperation with the school, parent and GRC - *In-service trainings should be increased* - *The number of auxiliary staff should be increased* - Classroom physical environment should be organized according to children's needs - Every school should be required to have a guidance service -—Raising awareness on special needs issues and reducing prejudices in society	- *Increasing vocational trainings* - *Strengthening guidance services* - Reducing class sizes - Providing additional support staff for teachers	- *Provide accessible and effective materials* - *Trained and experienced teachers should be assigned* - *Content should be created to prepare for daily life and develop social skills* - Special education hours should be increased - State-funded venues for artistic and sporting activities should be increased - The physical conditions of the school (toilet, service, etc.) should be organized in accordance with special needs
Inter-Institutional Communication	- *Communication between GRC and other institutions should be increased* - Establish a centralized, digital filing and data sharing system	- *Systematic, joint meetings between pre-school and elementary school* - Coordination must be strengthened	- *Continuous information sharing between preschool- elementary school- GRC-special education* - Making progress reports detailed, up-to- date, electronic and accessible	- *Schools should communicate constructively and supportively with parents* - Access to the digital system and information should be provided - Improving GRC- school coordination - Increasing information flow and improving coordination
Parent Awareness	-	- *Parents should be encouraged to developed early awareness* - Increasing psychological counseling and guidance support to parents - Ensuring active participation of parents in the process	- *Parent education and awareness raising* - Establishing mechanisms to ensure the active and conscious participation of parents in the process	- Parents should be provided with continuous education, guidance and psychological support - Active involvement and awareness raising of parents - Materials and methods used in the education process should be communicated to parents accurately and clearly
Technology and New Approaches	-	- Development of AI-supported diagnostic and educational technologies	- Create an accessible digital system where children can be tracked - Digital learning materials should be popularized - Development of support resources such as AI-based chatbots	-

children's special needs. In our study, participants identified social–emotional development as the primary area of need, while academic skills were considered secondary—a finding consistent with Denham's (2006) research on early childhood. In conclusion, this study reinforces the view that assessment processes for children with special needs should be multidimensional and interdisciplinary, and that social and emotional development should be evaluated with equal importance to academic skills.

Findings revealed that family-related challenges emerged as another key area of consensus among stakeholders. Prominent difficulties included parents' emotional strain (Turnbull et al., 2015), lack of information (Kancınar et al., 2024; Yüksel & Tanrıverdi, 2019), fear of stigmatization (Goffman, 1963; Yüksel & Tanrıverdi, 2019), and difficulties in accepting their child's special needs (Ercan et al., 2019). Parents of children with special educational needs are known to experience elevated levels of parenting stress (Cheng & Lai, 2023; Shaffer et al., 2020). In this context, families face multidimensional challenges not only in adapting to their child's special needs but also in managing relationships within their social environment. In particular, lack of information hinders families' ability to make accurate referrals and informed decisions, while fear of stigmatization and difficulty in acceptance limit their pursuit of social support and exacerbate emotional strain. Another noteworthy finding of this study is that family-related challenges varied by educational level. Special education teachers working in GRCs who are directly involved in the diagnostic process placed greater emphasis on emotional strain and stigmatization; preschool teachers highlighted difficulties with acceptance; and elementary school teachers highlighted communication gaps. These differences suggest that the challenges families experience are not homogeneous but vary in prominence by the child's educational stage.

The findings indicate that institutional barriers constitute another critical dimension frequently highlighted by stakeholders. The issues emphasized by participants—overcrowded classrooms (Cankaya & Korkmaz, 2012; Ersan & Kartal, 2020; Kalıntı Karagöz & Ulutaş, 2024), insufficient staffing (Dönmez & Dayı, 2024), limitations in physical conditions (Aktaş et al., 2023; Uzun et al., 2024; Walker et al., 2012), inconsistencies in GRC processes (Kalıntı Karagöz & Ulutaş, 2024), and inadequate information sharing—point to a systemic challenge in the education of students with special needs. These results align with previous research indicating that institutional inadequacies are among the most significant factors limiting the implementation of inclusive education. The emphasis by elementary school teachers on curriculum intensity and behavioral problems suggests that, in practice, instructional programs in the context of inclusive education lack flexibility and place additional demands on teachers. Another noteworthy finding is that, although institutional challenges exist across all educational levels, they are more pronounced at the elementary level. Given that the elementary period is a critical stage for laying the foundation of students' academic and social skills, institutional shortcomings at this stage directly affect not only the quality of the educational process but also students' long-term development. This difference underscores the urgent need to strengthen institutional capacity and enhance teacher support mechanisms at the elementary school level during the transition process.

The findings of this study indicate that, during the initial days of transition, children with special needs exhibited strong emotional reactions such as heightened anxiety, temper tantrums, shyness, crying, and withdrawal from communication. The literature similarly notes that, during transition periods, children often experience difficulties adapting to new environments, with anxiety, communication avoidance, and behavioral problems emerging as common challenges (Rous et al., 2007a). Stakeholder perspectives revealed differing points of emphasis: special education teachers described these behaviors primarily as irritability and aggression; preschool teachers highlighted separation anxiety (Foti, 2020); and elementary school teachers drew attention to feelings of unpreparedness for school (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Petriwskyj et al., 2005) alongside aggressive behaviors. Parents, meanwhile, emphasized temper outbursts and withdrawal. Although all stakeholders reported anger and irritability, their manifestations varied by educational stage. In preschool, such behaviors were more often expressed as reluctance to separate from parents, whereas in elementary school, they appeared as reluctance to attend school and feelings of unreadiness. These findings suggest that emotional and behavioral challenges during transition exhibit stage-specific variations. Participants in this study also proposed several strategies for preventing such difficulties. Play-based activities (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Margetts, 2002), visual representation of routines (Dettmer et al., 2000; Margetts, 2002), reinforcement of positive behaviors (Conroy et al., 2005), and collaboration with families emerged as the primary preventive interventions agreed upon by stakeholders. The consistent identification of play- and routine-focused approaches as protective factors across all groups underscores the importance of continuity between preschool and elementary school. However, the sharp reduction in play-based structures at the elementary level was seen as a major risk factor hindering children's adaptation. Indeed, Sands and Meadan (2024) note that ecological discontinuities in transition can serve as a significant barrier to children's successful adjustment.

The findings indicate that participants consistently viewed safe (Marcineková et al., 2020), continuous, and

visually supported environments as facilitating children's adaptation. In particular, the presence of a safe environment reduces children's anxiety levels, enabling them to adjust more comfortably to new settings. The emphasis on safety by all stakeholders is, therefore, both an expected and consistent finding. In our study, the principles of flexibility, individualization, and gradual progression emerged as central to the adaptation process, while peer support, play-based activities, and empathy-focused practices were identified as critical for social–emotional adjustment. The literature similarly underscores that the transition process is multidimensional—encompassing not only the child but also the family, school, and system levels—and that effective planning, coordination, and individualization are essential for a successful transition (Rous et al., 2007b). Furthermore, children who can maintain continuity in their prior educational experiences demonstrate higher motivation, stronger relationships with peers and adults, and greater achievement (Harper, 2016). Conversely, an unhealthy ecological structure can lead to a lack of communication and social support, exacerbate disconnections, and ultimately contribute to academic underachievement (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In this context, the findings suggest that the adaptation process should be addressed not only from a pedagogical perspective but also from psychosocial and institutional perspectives. Accordingly, the management of transitions requires a holistic approach that integrates strategies supporting adaptation at both the individual and institutional levels.

In this study, participants emphasized social–emotional development as the primary focus during the transition process. Social skills play a critical role in ensuring a smooth transition to primary school (Lim et al., 2021). Indeed, school readiness skills for inclusive settings largely encompass social–emotional competencies and academic abilities (Odluyurt, 2018). In preschool teachers' evaluations, children's success at school was considered to depend on a holistic combination of academic readiness, language proficiency, social competence, motor skills, and self-care abilities (Johnson et al., 1995). These findings from the existing literature are consistent with the findings of the present study. Participant perspectives in our research varied by educational stage: special education teachers highlighted verbal communication and module supports (Rous et al., 2007a), preschool teachers prioritized group games, and elementary school teachers emphasized sports, art, and play-based activities. Parents, on the other hand, considered positive relationships with teachers and peers to be the most important facilitators in the transition process. This variation reflects the diversity of stakeholder perceptions regarding transition and underscores the importance of multidimensional support mechanisms. Findings on material use revealed that audiovisual tools—such as emotion cards, illustrated stories, and role-playing—were particularly prominent. Previous studies have also noted that visual supports are effective tools for facilitating children's adaptation to new environments and for regulating behavior during transitions (Dettmer et al., 2000).

Effective Transition Strategies

Findings related to the second research question indicate that inter-institutional cooperation and support mechanisms play a decisive role in the transition process. Similarly, Cook et al. (2017) emphasize that strengthening intersystem information sharing can minimize the disruptions and ecological discontinuities that naturally arise during early transitions, thereby providing stronger support for children's early academic and social functioning. Although our study found that a certain degree of coordination is maintained between the GRC and other institutions, shortcomings in paperwork flow, limited information sharing, communication breakdowns, insufficient digital platforms, and staffing shortages constrain the process's functionality. The literature likewise notes that bureaucratic obstacles—such as inadequate integration of documentation (Janus et al., 2007)—and deficits in information sharing (Cook et al., 2017) constitute significant barriers during transitions. Addressing these issues fundamentally depends on effective communication. As highlighted in the literature, comprehensive management of transitions relies on communication and collaboration (Roth & Columna, 2011). The findings underscore that transitions are not merely technical procedures but dynamic, multidimensional processes that necessitate interdisciplinary coordination and information exchange. In this regard, establishing effective communication channels will not only strengthen inter-institutional coordination but also facilitate families' active engagement in the process, thereby enhancing the overall quality of transitions.

The findings of this study show that all stakeholders emphasized the decisive role of parents' active participation and attitudes toward the process in determining the success of transitions. Yüksel and Tanrıverdi (2019) similarly highlight the critical importance of informing families during the transition process. Likewise, Rous et al. (2007b) stress that parents should be supported through frequent, ongoing communication with professionals to personalize transition planning. McIntyre et al. (2007) further note that parents' motivation to participate in transition planning presents an opportunity to develop strong family–school partnerships, underscoring the importance of parental willingness and engagement in the process. In our study, special education teachers highlighted parents' lack of knowledge about reports and procedural details, preschool teachers

emphasized the importance of regular communication, and elementary school teachers highlighted parents' difficulties with acceptance and fears of stigmatization. Parents, in turn, reported delays in accessing the GRC, disruptions in individual education programs, and a lack of experience or motivation among some teachers. These findings align with those of Hanson et al. (2000), who found that the transition of children with disabilities to preschool services is often problematic, with information exchange, communication, family participation, and decision-making mechanisms playing critical roles. Our results further indicate that families should not only be informed but also provided with psychosocial support. Ercan et al. (2019) report that psychosocial support for families in rehabilitation institutions is important for reducing transition-related anxiety. Without such support, parental anxiety can become a major factor limiting the quality of the transition process. Indeed, McIntyre et al. (2010) found that parents of children with special needs reported significantly greater concerns than parents of typically developing children regarding their child's behavior, communication, academic readiness, and overall preparedness for school.

The findings indicate that stakeholders differ in their perceptions of in-house support. While special education teachers generally regarded existing supports as adequate, preschool teachers noted that guidance services were mostly supportive, whereas elementary school teachers emphasized their inadequacy. From the parents' perspective, the limited availability of formal preparation and information processes contributed to a weak perception of support. The literature also reflects these variations. Nazlı et al. (2021) reported a moderate level of interaction between GRCs and school guidance services, whereas Janus et al. (2007) pointed to a lack of coordination among institutions. In our study, common deficiencies identified across all stakeholder groups included shortages of teachers and support staff, limitations in guidance services, a lack of collaboration, and a scarcity of resources. Similarly, the literature has documented that shortages of trained personnel, insufficient numbers of special education teachers, limited institutional support, lack of resources, and inadequate collaboration constrain transition processes (Marja et al., 2025; Nazlı et al., 2021; Sands & Meadan, 2024; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). Additional barriers to successful transitions include insufficient time and funding to coordinate parent activities and interschool arrangements (Fowler et al., 1991). These findings suggest that the transition process is directly linked to institutional capacity and that, in the absence of a strong support system, it becomes dependent on individual efforts. However, transition processes should not be left to individual initiative; rather, they should be carried out systematically through inter-institutional collaboration, strengthened guidance services, and adequate personnel and resources (Rous et al., 2007b). In line with this view, Rosier and McDonald (2011) emphasize that families, services, communities, and schools share the responsibility of supporting children's school readiness.

Findings indicate that participants' recommendations underscore the need to strengthen not only the pedagogical but also the structural and technological dimensions of the transition process. Special education teachers proposed eliminating the requirement for health reports and establishing specialized institutions aligned with diagnostic needs. Preschool teachers emphasized the importance of conducting more comprehensive evaluations, incorporating teachers' perspectives into the process, and increasing in-service training opportunities. Elementary school teachers focused on the effective implementation of legislation, strengthening guidance services, and reducing class sizes. Parents, in turn, recommended diversifying educational materials, assigning experienced teachers, and improving school facilities. A point of consensus across all stakeholder groups was the necessity of systematic digital coordination and the adoption of technology-based solutions. Recommendations such as AI-assisted diagnostics, digital learning materials, and online platforms for tracking children's development point to the potential contributions of digital transformation to inclusive education. This highlights that, in addition to pedagogical interventions, the integration of technology is essential to enhancing the quality of transition processes. Accordingly, future policies and practices should be planned within a holistic framework that integrates pedagogical, structural, and technological dimensions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Adopting a multidimensional perspective, this study identified key facilitators and barriers shaping the transition processes of children with special needs across educational stages. The findings highlight that these transitions should be addressed not only from a pedagogical standpoint but also through their familial, institutional, socio-emotional, and technological dimensions. Results indicate that parents experience considerable emotional strain due to a lack of information, fear of stigmatization, and difficulties in accepting their child's needs. This underscores that periodic informational meetings alone are insufficient; psychosocial support mechanisms must also be strengthened to support families during transition periods. Accordingly, enhancing the quality of transition processes requires a holistic approach that provides families with both regular, comprehensive information and targeted psychosocial interventions aimed at reducing anxiety.

At the institutional level, the findings revealed that overcrowded classrooms, inadequate guidance services, teacher and specialist staff shortages, and gaps in inter-institutional coordination limit the overall effectiveness of the transition process. These shortcomings were found to be more pronounced at the elementary school level, a critical stage when the foundations of children's academic and social development are laid. In this context, increasing institutional capacity, strengthening guidance and support services, and enhancing inter-institutional communication through digital solutions are priority areas for improving transitions and ensuring effectiveness.

The study also found that during the transition process, children exhibited strong emotional reactions—such as heightened anxiety, anger, and withdrawal from social interaction—with these challenges varying across educational stages. The findings indicate that stakeholders widely employ play-based activities, visual support, and peer support as protective factors. However, the reduction of play-based structures at the elementary level emerged as a risk factor that hinders children's adaptation. This result underscores the need to sustain play-based learning opportunities and flexible pedagogical practices, particularly in the early years of primary education.

Finally, a point of consensus among all stakeholders was the need for systematic digital coordination and technology-based solutions in transition processes. Recommendations such as AI-assisted diagnostics, digital learning materials, and platforms enabling online monitoring of children's development are particularly noteworthy in the context of the future of inclusive education. In this regard, technology should be viewed not merely as a supplementary tool but as an integral component of a comprehensive support system that ensures continuity and effectiveness in transition processes.

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Data Availability The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Bursa Uludag University (Protocol code 2025–01, approval date: 03 February 2025).

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants prior to participation in the study.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Statement Artificial intelligence tools (specifically ChatGPT by OpenAI) were used in a limited and controlled manner for language editing, text organization, and improving clarity during manuscript preparation. All research questions, study design, data collection, analyses, and interpretations were conducted entirely by the authors.

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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