

Original Research

Are we in the same boat? Parents' and educators' perspectives on kindergarten transition for children with SEN

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Abstract: The transition from early childhood education to kindergarten is a critical developmental period for all children, and one that can be particularly demanding for those with special educational needs (SEN). This article presents findings from a mixed methods case study conducted in two private schools in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. This study investigates how parental attitudes, teacher preparedness, communication gaps, and structural barriers influence school transitions. Findings reveal a consistent divergence in perspective: parents generally regarded transition difficulties as normal and time-limited, whereas teachers identified sustained, complex challenges related to emotional regulation, large class sizes, limited specialist training, and insufficient information about incoming children. Parental reluctance to accept a formal diagnosis was viewed as a significant barrier in both schools. Given the small and unevenly distributed sample, reported divergences are viewed as illustrative rather than generalisable. The study contributes to a growing body of research evidence on inclusive educational transitions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) context. Its originality lies in comparing perspectives within an under-researched educational and cultural context, revealing differences in how parents and teachers perceive transition difficulties. This context-specific evidence has implications for educational policy and practice.

Keywords: Kindergarten transition, Special educational needs, Inclusive education, Parental perceptions, Teacher preparedness, United Arab Emirates

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and significance

The transition from early childhood education to kindergarten is a critical developmental period that involves substantial changes in learning environments, routines, and social expectations. While challenging for many children, this transition can be particularly demanding for children with special educational needs (SEN), whose differences in communication, social interaction, emotional regulation, and learning readiness

may make them more vulnerable to stress and adjustment difficulties.

1.2 Aim of the study

Effective school transition is a shared responsibility involving families, teachers, and schools. With research emphasising the importance of collaboration, teacher preparedness, and parental engagement (Villeneuve et al., 2013). However, misalignment between parents' and educators' perceptions often complicates inclusive transition practices. Drawing on two case studies in Abu

Received: Jun. 26, 2026; Revised: Sep. 11, 2026; Accepted: Oct. 26, 2026; Published: Oct. 27, 2026

Copyright © 2026 Elizabeth F. S. Hannah, et al.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55976/rppe.420261600136-148>

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Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, this article examines the transition challenges faced by children with SEN from the perspectives of parents, teachers, and school leaders. Findings reveal a consistent contrast in perceptions: parents tended to view transition difficulties as typical and temporary, whereas teachers identified sustained challenges in emotional regulation, skill development, admissions processes, and classroom constraints. These findings highlight the need for more coordinated, systemic approaches to support inclusive school transitions for children with SEN.

2. Literature review

2.1 The multidimensional nature of transition challenges

The transition of children with SEN has become increasingly complex over the past two decades, largely due to the growing diversity of programmes designed to support children. Despite this positive trend, transitions in early childhood frequently described as stressful experiences for both children and their families (Rous et al., 2007). Children with SEN and their families often encounter significant difficulties navigating transitions across different educational settings (Oelen et al., 2026). This complexity is particularly evident for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), whose social communication and interaction challenges make the transition to school more demanding. Parents of children with ASD commonly describe this process as stressful and difficult (Connolly & Gersch, 2016).

Research highlighted that children with SEN may experience greater difficulties during the transition to school due to challenges in social interaction, self-regulation, adaptive behaviour and academic readiness. These difficulties can affect their ability to establish peer relationships, follow classroom routines and participate in learning activities, making school adjustment more demanding than for their typically developing peers (McIntyre et al., 2006; Jiang et al., 2021). These challenges are further compounded in the case of ASD, where difficulties in social communication and interaction intensify the transition experience (Connolly & Gersch, 2016).

One key challenge in supporting successful transitions is integrating developmental, educational, health, and social interventions in the transition process (Villeneuve et al., 2013). Families often face difficulties adapting to special education practices, including working with classroom support staff who assist children with personal and learning needs. Additionally, parents must navigate and understand the roles of various professionals, such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech and language therapists, who contribute to the child's

development and independence in school settings (Podvey et al., 2010).

In the Canadian context, Janus et al. (2007) emphasised that preschool children with SEN face complex transitions requiring additional administrative, social, and educational support. Despite increased attention to early childhood development, significant barriers to effective transition remain, often linked to the limited effectiveness of existing policies. Addressing these issues requires strong collaboration and shared understanding among parents, teachers, and professionals across preschool and school settings.

Comparative research by McIntyre et al. (2006) demonstrated that children with SEN tend to experience poorer positive adjustment to school than their typically developing peers. They exhibited higher levels of challenging behaviour, weaker student–teacher relationships, lower social skills, and reduced self-regulation, all of which negatively affect their adaptation to school. The authors emphasised the importance of promoting early social skills, implementing appropriate school-based interventions, and strengthening partnerships with parents to support successful transitions.

2.2 The family perspective: Stress, stigma and information needs

A major source of parental anxiety lies in identifying an appropriate school placement. Parents frequently raise concerns related to safety, social inclusion, and bullying. For some, securing the 'right' school offers reassurance that their child will cope and improve; however, many parents also report that the impact of their child's diagnosis and behaviour already places considerable strain on family life (Connolly & Gersch, 2016). During transition to school-based services, families and children experience significant changes in the nature, availability and delivery of support for children with SEN. These changes may include reduced therapeutic provision, discontinuity in professional relationships and a shift from family-centred approaches towards formal school system. This is often accompanied by a decline in parental involvement, and an increase in uncertainty and stress (Kidd et al., 2026). Similarly, Chatenoud et al. (2025) highlighted the evolving support needs of families during the transition to formal schooling. While establishing communication with new professionals following transition presents further challenges (Podvey et al., 2013).

McIntyre et al. (2010) found that parents of children with SEN expressed significantly greater concerns about behaviour, communication, and school readiness compared to parents of typically developing children, although both groups reported similar levels of general anxiety about starting school. These heightened concerns likely reflect the additional challenges faced by children with SEN who lack key readiness skills, with important

implications for practice.

Studies exploring family experiences of transition from early intervention to school settings reveal that, although parents recognise school entry as a necessary step, they often perceive the process as “scary”. Families report losing a supportive and familiar environment provided by early intervention programmes, reduced involvement in educational planning, limited access to training, and difficulty getting timely information (Podvey et al., 2010). Another research project in the Irish context highlights concerns related to labelling and stigma among parents of children with ASD. Parents reported fears of social exclusion, negative perceptions from peers and other parents, and even a reluctance to accept a diagnosis by family members or professionals, who may attribute challenges to parenting practices rather than developmental needs. Furthermore, some professionals are perceived as either overestimating the abilities of more articulate children or underestimating those who are less verbal (Connolly & Gersch, 2016).

2.3 The educator perspective: Training, information gaps and structural constraints

Transitions from preschool to primary school can be a source of anxiety for pupils, parents, and educators (Moir & Johnson, 2021). Evidence from Australia highlighted a range of social and practical challenges, including behavioural difficulties, supervision needs, toileting support, insufficient school preparedness, and resistance to inclusive placement (Walker et al., 2012). Teachers similarly reported challenges in managing behaviour, ensuring safety, meeting diverse learning needs, and coping with limited support, such as insufficient teaching assistants and specialist input.

More recent research continues to reveal the challenges of transition for children with SEN, particularly in international and multilingual contexts. Azad et al. (2025), in a qualitative study with caregivers and special education teachers in the northeastern United States, found that early, frequent, and bidirectional communication between families and schools was a key facilitator of successful kindergarten transition for children on the autism spectrum. The study identified 11 themes across caregiver and teacher perspectives, including shared concerns about daily living skills and the adequacy of school support, highlighting that when parent–teacher communication is purposeful and action-oriented, transition outcomes improve significantly.

Parathian et al. (2026) examined two models of school transition support for 14 children aged 4–5 with SEN transitioning from Early Years settings to mainstream reception classes in England. Using a mixed methods approach, the study found that a nurture-based model, incorporating strong relational continuity, clear communication, and timely access to specialist support, led to more positive outcomes than a standard transition

model. Key learnings included the importance of parental confidence, staff experience, equitable provision, and long-term planning. The authors concluded that inclusive teaching practices can support positive transitions when relationship-building and professional development are prioritised from the outset.

2.4 The UAE and gulf context

Awan and Perepa (2025) conducted a study in Dubai using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to explore the school placement decision-making experiences of five families of children with complex disabilities from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The findings revealed that parents experienced heightened stress, frustration over limited access to impartial information, and a strong preference for settings where their child was treated with kindness and empathy. Importantly, many families navigated a tension between seeking inclusion and fearing inadequate mainstream school responses, a tension that echoes findings from the present study and is relevant for understanding transitions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) context.

At a broader policy level, Al-Ahmed (2025) identified challenges faced by SEN teachers when communicating with parents of children with disabilities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The study found that parents’ reluctance to accept their children’s needs, cultural stigma around disability, and limited collaboration between families and schools were among the most significant barriers. These findings align closely with the patterns observed in the present study and underscore the systemic nature of the parent–teacher communication gap in inclusive education across the region.

3. Focus of study

This paper draws on the same two case study schools as Radwan and Hannah (2025) but reports a distinct data set collected in the post-transition phase from nursery to kindergarten (KG) or the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for children with SEN in Abu Dhabi (age range between 4 and 5 years). Addressing the two research questions below, this study does not duplicate data or findings reported in that earlier publication but shares the same participants. The aim is to enrich the limited literature in this domain by providing information about parents’ and teachers’ views on the transition and the challenges encountered.

Research Questions

1. How do parents and teachers perceive the transition process to school?
2. What challenges do parents and teachers encounter during the transition period?

4. Materials and methods

4.1 Approval and procedure

After receiving ethical approval from the University of Dundee School of Education and Social Work Ethics Committee (Reference Number E2018-49 & E2018-73, April 2019), the researchers secured additional permission from the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) to contact school principals and invite their participation. Twenty-five private schools were invited to take part in the case study; these schools had the highest number of students with SEN and followed the international curriculum. The negotiations ended with two schools agreeing to participate. Teachers were selected based on the presence of students with SEN in their classrooms. The heads of departments invited all parents with students with SEN in the first school year to complete the survey. Although the first author initially planned to interview teachers, coordinators and parents, after informal discussions with the two schools' coordinators, it was agreed that sending a survey was more convenient due to the limited availability of working parents and the practical constraints of arranging additional visits.

Before data collection in the case study schools, teachers and coordinators completed consent forms. They were given sufficient time to read the participants' information sheet and ask questions before the interviews. Principals, coordinators, and teachers were assured that participation in this study was voluntary and confidential. The first author coded the names of schools, teachers, and students. Participants were informed that they could withdraw during the study or decline to answer any question. For parent recruitment, two school coordinators sent five surveys to parents along with the consent forms. All participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. The first author handled all documentation in sealed envelopes; each package included an additional envelope, allowing parents to return the documents to the school while ensuring anonymity. Only three completed surveys were returned, and two parents chose not to participate.

Data collection took place over two weeks during the 2018–2019 academic year. Interviews were held in the school buildings, lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes each, and were handwritten and transcribed verbatim by the first author. The interview guide covered attitudes and challenges and was developed from the literature reviewed. The parent survey combined closed- and open-ended questions and was developed on the same basis. The first author conducted three semi-structured classroom observations, each spanning a full school day, and served as a non-participant observer throughout.

4.2 Data analysis

Schools were constituted as 'cases' (Pring, 2015). The thematic analysis was primarily abductive; initial themes were derived from repeated readings of interview, survey, and observational data and organised in alignment with the research questions. The first author repeatedly read the data, using manual colour-coding to highlight recurring ideas. Related concepts were grouped into five themes, which underwent iterative review and refinement until a coherent formulation covering the core issues relevant to the research questions was achieved, following the six-step methodology established by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first author conducted the analysis, and the second author reviewed it at each stage to verify consistency and alignment with the data. Data triangulation was employed across the two schools included in the case study and across data sources within each school. Finally, the observation notes were reviewed, highlighted for aspects relevant to the research questions, and integrated with other data sources where applicable. Appendix 1 presents an example of how initial and main themes were developed from the case study data focusing on challenges during the transition.

4.3 Study context

As a result of the UAE government's enhanced inclusive education policy, the number of students with SEN enrolled in public and private schools in Abu Dhabi rose from 4,925 in the 2018–2019 academic year (Statistics Centre – Abu Dhabi [SCAD], 2020, p. 154), to 13,000 in 2024 (Department of Community Development – Abu Dhabi [DCD], 2025). The Department of Special Education has worked to ensure that students with SEN have access to the same Educational opportunities as all students, and may enrol in any school without discrimination (United Arab Emirates Government, 2025). Although equal opportunities are in place, school fees for students with SEN are determined based on ADEK's inclusion policy, which states that additional fees may be charged for the provision of extra support, not exceeding 50% of the approved school tuition fees for other students, applied based on the student's level of need (Department of Education and Knowledge, 2023).

5. Results: Case study 1

5.1 School 1

The first school is a British-curriculum primary school in Abu Dhabi, part of a larger inclusive school group serving over 6,500 students from more than 100 nationalities, previously rated outstanding by ADEK. The school follows the National Curriculum for the English

Language, with Arabic, Islamic studies, and UAE social studies following Ministry of Education guidelines.

According to the EYFS coordinator, the number of students with special educational needs at the school stood at 101 during the 2018–2019 academic year. The majority were identified internally by the school's inclusion department based on teacher referrals, without undergoing external assessment.

This study focused on two Foundation Stage 2 (FS2) classrooms, each with 26–28 students, led by British teachers and supported by non-Arabic-speaking assistants. The first author's observations indicated that both classrooms were well managed, with positive relationships among teachers, students, and support staff. Despite differences in experience, both teachers demonstrated strong classroom practices: Teacher A brought early years expertise and structured, activity-based learning, while Teacher B, though new to the context and with limited SEN exposure, showed confidence and adaptability. Both teachers made efforts to learn some Arabic to support communication with students still developing English language skills.

5.2 The first few weeks

Parents described the first weeks of school as shaped by both emotional challenges and the level of support available to their children. In one case, parents believed that having siblings at the same school would ease the transition. Teacher A, however, observed that this did not prevent daily distress, as the child was placed in a separate building, although he gradually settled and developed a positive relationship with his teacher. In another case, a child with limited communication skills initially struggled to interact with peers and staff, but the attentive support of a responsive teacher facilitated a smoother adjustment, with noticeable improvements and increased enthusiasm for attending school.

Teachers described the first weeks as a period of considerable variability in children's transition experiences, depending on prior exposure to educational settings and the level of support available. Teacher A noted that children who had attended the school's own nursery generally settled more smoothly than those arriving from other nurseries or directly from home. Teacher B believed that nursery attendance provided valuable social and environmental familiarity, while the EYFS coordinator argued that family support and opportunities for communication and play at home could equally prepare children for school. Teachers also highlighted that language barriers and limited communication skills could prolong the settling-in period. Teacher A stated:

"At first, I didn't know what was wrong with him because he only spoke Arabic, he wasn't able to organise his thoughts and express his needs, and it took me two and a half months to understand his abilities." (Teacher A)

Teachers reported that the transition to the first school

year is stressful for all children, including those with SEN, due to changes in daily routines, separation from parents, and adjustment to new teachers and peers. For students with SEN, limited social skills and heightened emotional responses may further intensify these difficulties. Inconsistent parental expectations, whether unrealistically high or overly modest, were perceived as complicating the transition, particularly during discussions about assessment outcomes and the development of individual education plans (IEPs). Large class sizes further constrained teachers' capacity to meet diverse needs during this critical period.

From an administrative perspective, the EYFS coordinator reported that transitions within the same school were associated with better outcomes:

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

The EYFS coordinator identified several challenges during the transition of students with SEN. The school received reports about some students and, when more information was necessary, contacted the preschool for further discussion. Admission became more complex when students required continuous individual support, such as a shadow teacher, which schools were often unable to provide, shifting financial responsibility onto parents and, in some cases, affecting school admissions. Some parents also refused to accept teachers' observations about their children's difficulties and declined diagnosis, intervention, or meetings on this subject.

"The school informed his family that the [child] needed intervention before his education was affected; his father responded to this warning and started to co-operate with the school." (EYFS Coordinator)

5.3 School 1: Parents' attitudes and views on challenges

Two mothers participated in the parent survey. The first mother reported that her son transitioned to kindergarten from the same school's nursery and had siblings also enrolled there. She described him as a timid child with language delay who had not received any prior therapy or early intervention before starting school. At the beginning of the school year, the family arranged for a personal carer to support him with personal hygiene. She mentioned that:

"He was still not fully independent when he started school, and incidents occasionally happened"

The second mother indicated that her son joined the school from a different nursery and had speech and language delays, without having received therapy or early intervention during his nursery years. He had since begun receiving speech and language therapy at his current school. Classroom observations during Arabic lessons revealed that both children experienced communication

and language delays in their native language, not just in English.

Both parents identified the school placement test as the primary challenge prior to school entry. One mother reported that her main challenge was supporting her son's speech, communication, and academic development to enable him to pass the placement test and engage successfully with peers. She also identified difficulties in personal care, particularly independence in toileting, as a significant concern, noting that such independence is often a prerequisite for admission to private schools. Classroom observation confirmed that the child, a native Arabic speaker, appeared confused when switching between languages, particularly during Arabic classes.

Despite these challenges, both parents described the transition to school as a normal life event and reported no additional difficulties compared to transitions experienced with older siblings. Both parents emphasised the importance of active preparation, including frequent discussions about school and repeated visits to the school, in supporting their children's adjustment. One mother commented:

"Parents should be informed better about what they have to do or to say to their children"

6. Results: Case study 2

6.1 School 2

The second school is one of Abu Dhabi's oldest private English schools, serving over 7,000 students and holding major international accreditations. It offers both American and British programmes, with English as the main instructional language. From KG1 to Grade 8, students follow a general curriculum based on the Cambridge International Primary Programme.

The two teachers held distinct professional backgrounds. Teacher C, an Arab educator with six years of experience, taught a class of 25 students, including one with SEN, supported by a non-Arab assistant. Although she had no formal training in special education, her classroom was well organised into structured activity centres. Teacher D, a licensed special education specialist with five years of experience in both special education centres and mainstream schools, provided targeted support to students with SEN through regular pull-out sessions. During the academic year, she worked with 14 students from KG1 to Grade 2.

6.2 The first few weeks

Teacher C reported significant challenges in supporting the adjustment of the child with SEN. Despite being in the same class as his twin, he showed limited interaction with him, frequent emotional distress during routine transitions,

difficulty following instructions, minimal engagement in group activities, and restricted play patterns. His limited language abilities and incomplete toilet training further hindered participation. Teacher C reported feeling unable to adequately support him due to limited time, the large class size, and having only one assistant teacher.

Teacher D described a structured, observation-based approach during the early transition period. Initial classroom observations identified potential learning or behavioural difficulties, followed by further assessment when concerns emerged. Parents were then invited to meetings to share information about children's behaviour, abilities, and home support. These discussions informed decisions regarding appropriate interventions and levels of school-based support.

The school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) reported that the previous educational setting may be contacted when student documentation is incomplete. Parents are first asked to provide the required documents; if further information is needed, the school obtains parental consent before contacting the previous school. However, this is unlikely to happen for all students, given the large number of students and preschool settings in Abu Dhabi. When a shadow teacher is recommended, parents are asked to employ a qualified teacher, who is then interviewed by the learning support department to explain her role and responsibilities.

6.3 School 2: Teachers' views on transition

Teachers reported that the transition to the first year of schooling is stressful for all students but becomes more complex when students with SEN are present. Two key factors were identified as contributing to transition difficulties. First, teachers described challenges working with parents perceived to be reluctant to accept their child's needs, which limited opportunities for early intervention. Second, teachers highlighted limitations in professional knowledge and access to information, particularly when children arrived without prior reports or assessments.

"This lack of background information hindered teachers' ability to understand students' behaviour, learning needs, and responses to classroom expectations during the early transition period." (Teacher D)

Teachers identified multiple interrelated challenges arising from student-, parent-, and teacher-related influences, as well as structural factors. At the student level, teachers reported difficulties related to limited adherence to classroom routines, emotional regulation, and social interaction, noting that students with SEN frequently struggled to form peer relationships. This was observed directly during classroom observation, as the child appeared isolated from peers and did not interact even with his twin.

Parent-related factors were described as the most significant barriers. Teachers' perception that some parents

were reluctant to accept their child's developmental delays was identified as a major obstacle, as it restricted access to assessment and specialised support. Limited parental emphasis on self-help skills, independence, and social values was perceived to hinder children's integration into classroom routines. Insufficient parental involvement and unrealistic expectations regarding individual attention from teachers further complicated the process.

"It is unfortunate to say that [child]'s mother did not attend any regular meeting relating to her child from the beginning of the school year until now." (Teacher C)

Teachers also identified limitations in professional knowledge and training. A lack of expertise in special education contributed to uncertainty in understanding students' behaviours and needs, with some class teachers making premature judgements or failing to account for transition-related anxiety.

"The transition for students with additional support needs is totally difficult for teachers, especially if we do not know what is wrong with the child, as some children come to school without any reports from the previous setting. The parents do not tell us that he has any delays or problems. So, we do not know actually what is wrong with him and why he is not listening, why he's not following instructions and why he's not learning and behaving like others." (Teacher C)

Large class sizes and high student-to-staff ratios were identified as structural barriers. Providing individualised attention was difficult without compromising the support available to other students. Teacher C highlighted insufficient institutional support and recognition when working with students with SEN, noting that without adequate assistance, resources, or specialised training, this contributed to frustration, diminished confidence, and the risk of professional burnout. Although the KG Coordinator stated that the school provides training on special education topics during In-Service Education and Training (INSET) days, teachers' experiences suggest these provisions may not always be sufficient.

6.4 School 2: Parents' attitudes

The father who responded to the survey described the transition to the first school year as a normal experience, noting no additional stress compared to his older children. He explained that his son's adjustment was facilitated by observing and modelling his twin brother's behaviour. At the same time, he stated that his son attended a different nursery, and the family did not discuss the transition with the child or visit the school in advance.

"His transition was normal as he was observing his brother, asking for a uniform and a school bag." (Father)

However, during the first few weeks of kindergarten, his child experienced difficulties in following teachers' instructions, adapting to classroom routines, and coping with limited language and communication skills. The classroom observation made it clear that the child is

non-verbal. The father implied that the teacher's lack of understanding of the child was what led to these difficulties.

"I wish the teacher had asked us for hints on his personality."

The father identified several challenges: separation from the previous school environment and peers, adjustments to a new school system, limited teacher knowledge of SEN, large class size, and the child's challenging behaviour.

7. Analysis and discussion

The findings of this study support, and add to, a growing body of research on the challenges children with SEN face when they move to kindergarten. Across both case study schools, one pattern stood out above all others: parents and teachers appeared to understand the transition very differently. This gap in perception matters because it shapes the support children receive at one of the most important moments in their early education. The parents' sample was small; therefore, this conclusion should be treated with caution.

7.1 Divergence in parental and teacher perceptions

In both schools, all parents tended to see the move to kindergarten as a normal part of growing up. Although their children had a difficult start and took longer to settle, parents expected things to improve naturally over time with teachers' support. All parents drew confidence from their experience with older siblings, assuming that it is a 'one-size-fits-all' experience. This contrasts with the parents of children with autism in the study by Connolly and Gersch (2016), who describe their experience of the transition to school as difficult and stressful. Viewing the transition period as a natural event may have led parents to downplay the associated difficulties; furthermore, their assumptions and expectations likely influenced the level of support they provided to their children at home.

Teachers saw things differently. Their concerns centred on helping children manage their emotions in a new environment, coping with large classes while trying to meet the individual needs of children with SEN. Walker et al. (2012) found that teachers who thought the transition was somehow difficult reported similar challenges. In Abu Dhabi, cultural and linguistic factors are believed to have widened this divide. According to the teachers, all parents were reluctant to accept a formal diagnosis, and the three families spoke Arabic at home while the school taught in English.

This perceptual gap is further illuminated by Azad et al. (2025), in a study in the United States, who found that successful kindergarten transition for children on

the autism spectrum depended critically on bidirectional, action-oriented communication between caregivers and educators. Where such communication was absent or one-sided, as in both Abu Dhabi schools studied here, it was believed that the children did not receive the tailored support they needed during the most vulnerable period of the transition.

7.2 Parental reluctance to accept diagnosis, and access to support

One finding observed in both schools, and believed to impact the likelihood of securing support, is apparent parental reluctance to acknowledge their children's needs; some parents avoided diagnosis, refused specialised intervention, or failed to attend meetings. This left teachers without the information they needed to put appropriate support in place. Research consistently shows that coordinated support is essential for a successful transition (Villeneuve et al., 2013). Yet without parental cooperation, it simply could not happen.

This reluctance is understandable. Connolly and Gersch (2016) found that some parents of children with ASD in Ireland feared that a diagnosis would lead to social stigma or their child being treated differently. Similar concerns have been reported among immigrant families in Canada. In Abu Dhabi, financial pressure also plays a role; if a child is identified as needing one-to-one support or a shadow teacher, the cost usually falls on the family rather than the school. Accepting a diagnosis can therefore mean taking on a significant financial burden; a practical reason, not just an emotional one, for some parents to hold back.

These dynamics echo findings from Dubai, where Awan and Perepa (2025) found that families of children with SEN experienced heightened stress and frustration because they lacked accessible, impartial information when seeking school placements. Many parents navigated a difficult tension between their desire for inclusion and their fear that mainstream schools would not adequately meet their child's needs; that tension mirrors the hesitancy around diagnosis found in the present study. Similarly, Al-Ahmed (2025) identified cultural stigma and parental reluctance to accept their child's needs as among the most significant barriers to effective SEN teacher–parent communication in schools in the KSA, underscoring that the challenges identified in Abu Dhabi are not isolated but reflect broader regional patterns.

7.3 Teacher readiness, knowledge gaps, and professional support

The study found considerable variation in how prepared kindergarten teachers were to support children with SEN from the very start of school. Teachers in both case study schools reported that they had not received sufficient specialist training and often had no records or background

information about incoming children from other nurseries. This sometimes led to misreading a child's behaviour. For example, they might interpret distress caused by the transition as deliberate non-compliance. According to kindergarten teachers, they wanted to do more for children with SEN during the transition but felt held back by insufficient training, a lack of specialist colleagues, and no formal process for sharing information between schools.

This is consistent with findings from Australia, where Walker et al. (2012) reported that teachers struggled most with managing behaviour and working without specialist support when children with SEN started school. To overcome this challenge, teachers' understanding of SEN children's sensory, emotional and communication needs, alongside appropriate support strategies, is believed to facilitate successful transitions to primary school Chen et al. (2020). It can be concluded that where knowledge is limited, support is also may be limited; this makes a focus on teacher training as a priority, rather than an afterthought.

Parathian et al. (2026) reinforce this finding, demonstrating in an English context that transition support models which invested in staff experience, relational continuity, and timely access to specialist resources led to significantly better outcomes than standard approaches. Their conclusion emphasised that inclusive teaching practices can support positive transitions when professional development and relationship-building are prioritised from the outset. This has direct implications for how Abu Dhabi schools approach teacher preparation for the start of the school year.

7.4 Structural barriers: Class size, coordination, and continuity

Alongside individual attitudes, teachers in both schools highlighted practical structural problems. Classes of 25 to 28 children, typically with only one assistant teacher, made it hard to give children with SEN the focused attention they needed, particularly during the first few weeks when they were most vulnerable. Classroom observation by the first author revealed that in classrooms where children were regularly pulled out for individual sessions, teachers held a more positive and accepting attitude than in classrooms where access to specialist support was inconsistent. Furthermore, based on teachers' reports and classroom observation, children who received individual support appeared to show better social and communication skills than those who did not. Research suggests that smaller class sizes may facilitate more personalised support and enable teachers to respond more effectively to children's individual needs (Bondebjerg et al., 2023). Similarly, Moir and Johnson (2021) emphasised the importance of fostering positive relationships and providing individualised support to facilitate their transition. However, empirical evidence

directly linking smaller class sizes and lower teacher-to-child ratios to improved academic achievement and social-emotional development among children with SEN during this transition remains limited.

The lack of communication between nurseries and kindergartens posed a similar problem. In most cases, kindergarten teachers had no connection to the child's prior educational environment, and they received little to no documentation at the start of the school year. This meant they had to assess children from scratch during the very period when children were most unsettled and least able to show what they could do. This suggests the absence of a formal, standardised mechanism for transferring information about children with SEN from one educational setting to another. Rous et al. (2007) found that this kind of discontinuity between settings is a risk factor for children with SEN during transition.

7.5 Children's adjustment and the role of prior experience

Children's previous experience was widely believed to influence how smoothly they settled into kindergarten. Based on teachers' feedback, the child who had attended the same school's nursery adapted more easily. According to his teacher, he was already accustomed to the routine and the school environment. Additionally, teachers observed that children from supportive families, who prepared them for the transition and followed school guidelines on required support, adjusted more smoothly. This contrasted with children coming directly from home or another nursery, who took longer to settle in. This is consistent with the wider research literature (Rous et al., 2007).

One factor that emerged prominently was the language challenge. All children and their families were Arabic speakers entering schools that taught almost entirely in English. For these children, the move to kindergarten meant adjusting not only to a new setting and new people, but also to a new language of instruction. Teachers in both schools observed that this double pressure was most acute for children who already had communication and language delays, extending their settling-in period considerably. The issue of language challenges was raised by the families of children with ASD in Canada in a study by Fontil and Petrakos (2015). This multilingual dimension deserves more attention in future research and policy.

8. Implications for inclusive transition policy and practice

The number of children with SEN in mainstream Abu Dhabi schools has grown considerably, reflecting a genuine commitment to inclusive education. However,

the findings here suggest that the support systems needed to help these children at the point of school entry have not kept pace with this growth. The transition for children with SEN in Abu Dhabi is largely inconsistent, varying between schools and even between teachers within the same school.

A more joined-up approach is essential. This means creating formal channels for sharing information between nurseries and kindergartens, investing in teacher training so staff feel confident from the first day of school, and developing ways to engage parents that take account of cultural concerns and financial pressures.

9. Strengths and limitations

The study's main strength lies in its use of multiple data sources: interviews, parent surveys, and classroom observations that incorporated perspectives from parents, teachers, and school coordinators, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the transition process and highlighting differences between stakeholders' views. The study also contributes valuable insights from the under-researched context of inclusive education in Abu Dhabi.

The study's small sample size, involving a limited number of teachers, coordinators, and parents from two schools, restricts the generalisability of the findings. The parent-teacher divergence reported here is best read as an illustrative, exploratory pattern from two cases rather than a stable finding across contexts. The interview data from teachers and coordinators are also considerably richer than the survey-based parent data, and this difference in depth should be borne in mind when comparing the two groups' perspectives directly. The parent survey may have been affected by social desirability bias, and the small number of respondents prevented statistical analysis. The research focused solely on two large-scale, international-curriculum private schools in Abu Dhabi, which may limit the transferability of the findings to public schools or settings following different curricula. The resources, staff-to-student ratios and family circumstances documented here are unlikely to generalise directly to less-resourced contexts. Additionally, some contextual data may not fully reflect recent developments in the UAE's inclusive education policies, and this invites future research. Finally, this article did not include the perspectives of children with SEN themselves, relying exclusively on adult viewpoints.

10. Conclusions

This study explored how children with SEN experience the transition to kindergarten in Abu Dhabi, UAE, and the challenges parents and teachers face during this process. The findings are clear: the transition is neither brief nor

a minor adjustment. For children with SEN, it can be a prolonged and demanding experience, shaped not only by a child’s individual needs but by the attitudes of those around them, the resources available to schools, and the presence or absence of coordination between settings.

The most consistent finding across both case studies was the gap between how parents and teachers understood the transition. Parents generally saw it as a normal life event and expected difficulties to resolve on their own. Teachers experienced it as genuinely challenging, not just for a few weeks but across the school year. This gap in perception is not simply a matter of different opinions, but it has real consequences. When parents downplay difficulties or resist engaging with schools, children are less likely to receive the early, coordinated support that research believe essential for a successful transition (Villeneuve et al., 2013).

The study found that some parents withhold their children’s diagnostic documents or preschool reports to avoid barriers to mainstream school admission or additional financial costs. However, this can limit access to essential support during the transition to kindergarten. It appears that parental reluctance to accept their child’s needs, stigma, and particularly financial pressures influence educational decisions for children with special educational needs (SEN). These findings highlight the need for further research into societal attitudes towards SEN in Arab communities and their impact on parental decision-making.

Teachers, meanwhile, were doing their best in genuinely difficult conditions. Large class sizes, limited specialist training, and the near-total lack of information about incoming children with SEN placed them in a position where they could not always respond appropriately, even when they wanted to. Misreading a child’s distress as non-compliance or not knowing that a

child had previously attended a specialist setting are not failures of individual teachers. They are the foreseeable consequences of insufficient preparation and systemic coordination.

The study also highlights two contextual factors that deserve more attention. The first is the role of prior educational experience: children from nurseries connected to the receiving school, and those with supportive families, settled more easily than those arriving from unfamiliar environments or who received inadequate preparation. The second is the challenge of language transition for Arabic-speaking children entering English-medium schools, a pressure that falls disproportionately on children who already have communication and language delays, and which significantly extends the settling-in period.

Abu Dhabi has made real progress in expanding access to inclusive education, but inclusion in policy is not the same as inclusion in practice, and the gap is most visible at transition points. What is needed now is a more deliberate, system-level approach: formal mechanisms for sharing information between nurseries and kindergartens; sustained investment in teacher training and specialist support; and parent engagement strategies that are culturally informed and practically sensitive. Transition planning for children with SEN should not be left to chance or to the goodwill of individual schools and families. It should be a structured, supported, and adequately resourced process, because getting this transition right matters for everything that follows.

Appendix 1

Research question: *What challenges do parents and teachers encounter during the transition?*

Table A1. Example of the analytic progression from data extracts to initial codes, initial themes and a main theme: challenges during the transition

Source	(1) Data extract	(2) Initial code	(3) Initial theme
Teacher A (interview)	“I have the resources to help the children during their transition in addition to extra support, but the number of students in the class is hindering everybody and doesn’t give me the opportunity to do extra work with small groups or one to one sessions with the special students.”	Class size prevents small-group and one-to-one work	
Teacher D, SEN specialist (interview)	“During the first few weeks of the school year, the teachers can’t give attention to the students with additional support needs because she has more than 25 students in the class and all of them are experiencing the transition from preschool to kindergarten ...”	Large class with all children in transition at once	1. Challenges related to the class size
Parent (father)	Asked about the challenges the family and child faced after transition, the father mentioned the class size, among other challenges.	Parent identifies class size as a challenge	

Classroom observation	The teacher divided the students into 3 groups, each group containing 8 students. The teacher seemed distressed and at some points lost control because the child (Y) was running and throwing things while the other children were sitting and writing.	Teacher overstretched managing a large group	
Teacher A (interview)	“We do not know what is wrong with the child as some children come to school without any reports from the previous setting. The parents do not tell us that he has any delay or any problem. So we don’t know actually what’s wrong with him.”	Children arrive without reports from the previous setting	
School co-ordinator (interview)	“The previous setting may be contacted when the students’ documents are not complete, parents are still asked first to provide these documents; if the school finds that there is a need to contact the previous school, parents’ permission is obtained to contact the school regarding the student’s individual educational plan or transition plan if there is any.”	Information transfer depends on parents and their permission	2. Challenges related to previous reports
Teacher D, SEN specialist (interview)	“... the most stressful one would be the SEN student, but she will not have the chance to give him more time and support during his transition because all of the students need assistance during this time, so I think that having individual sessions in my class is beneficial for teachers and students.”	No individual time for the SEN child; need for individual sessions	3. Challenges related to the level of support from the SEN specialist
Parent (father)	The father mentioned the level of support offered by the school, among other challenges.	Parent identifies level of support as a challenge	
Classroom observation	The teacher and the assistant teacher were moving between the groups when (Y) started to scream because he did not want to sit with the group and do the work. The teacher left him in order to focus on the others.	SEN child left without targeted support	
(4) Main theme Initial themes 1, 2, and 3 were combined into: Structural Barriers: Class Size, Coordination, and Continuity			

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all participants who took part in the study.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this paper, the authors used ‘Claude’ to proofread the text and Grammarly Pro AI for grammar and proofreading.

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools or AI-assisted technologies were used during the preparation of this manuscript. AI tools were limited to the following purposes: language improvement/formatting assistance. The authors critically reviewed, verified, and revised all AI-assisted outputs.

Generative AI tools were not used to replace the authors’ scientific judgment, generate unsupported scientific claims, interpret results independently, or assume responsibility for any part of the research. The authors remain fully responsible for the originality, accuracy, integrity, and ethical compliance of the manuscript.

Author contributions

HR: conceptualisation, data collection, formal analysis, writing—original draft. EH: supervision, methodology, writing—review and editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding. This article is based on a self-funded PhD study.

Institutional review board statement

The University of Dundee School of Education and Social Work Ethics Committee approved this research study (Reference Number E2018-49 & E2018-73, April 2019). The Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) also approved it.

Informed consent statement

The authors obtained informed consent from all participants involved in the study. Parental consent was obtained for children's participation in classroom observations.

Data availability

The datasets presented in this article are not available as permissions were not sought from those providing informed consent. Queries regarding the data should be directed to the author.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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