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Transition Program for Young Children with Special Needs: Parents' Experiences

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Abstrak

The successful transition process in early childhood led to future school outcomes. The aim of the research was to explore the experiences of parents of children with special needs in transitioning their children to school. The study used a qualitative approach involving 17 parents of young children with special needs receiving education in special schools in Yogyakarta. Focus group discussion was used to collect the data. Data collected from Focus Group Discussion was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings from the study show that parents of children with mild special needs do not have specific preparation in transitioning their children to school, school provided a week at the beginning of the school period for parents to stay and assist their children in the classes. Parents believe that there is no adequate support for transitioning their children to school and that condition exaggerates their anxieties when leaving their children at school. A structured transition program is needed as the implication of this study.

Keywords: *special school; transition program; young children with special needs*

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Introduction

Individuals experience several transitional periods in their lives. The transition implies adjustments and changes in life. Transitions in children with special needs can occur both vertically and horizontally. Vertical transition suggests compatibility with its developmental stages such as the transition from home to school, kindergarten to elementary school, elementary school to junior high school, junior high school to high school, high school to university, employment, and adult transition. Horizontal transition can be interpreted as a transition from one setting to another, for example from home to a place of therapy or from a special school to a regular school and vice versa. The first period of transition can be very difficult for the individuals who experience it.

For most children, starting school is the most important milestone (Bornfreund & Ewen, 2021). Early childhood education is one of the key factors to improve academic and social-emotional outcomes among children (McDaniel, Albritton, & Stuckey, 2021). Success in this transition period can determine future school outcomes (Strnadová & Cumming, 2014). There is increasingly strong evidence that children's positive experiences during the first year of school not only become a valuable start for their next school experience, but it also gives significant contributions to their positive future (Center on the Developing Child Harvard

University, 2021). Starting school may be exciting but it can also cause anxiety both for children and parents. During this period, children and their families face numerous changes such as physical environment, social changes in interactions, and targets that must be met (Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2012); Yet, children with special needs are among those at-risk group who have suffered disproportionately from the consequences of COVID-19 in the relation to development of social, emotional, and academic needs (Bornfreund & Ewen, 2021). Research conducted by Jiang, Justice, Purtell, Lin, & Logan (2021) employing a sample of 688 preschoolers from 45 classrooms show that most of children experience difficulties in the transition period in which more than 70% of the children were reported to have difficulty in at least one area, and over 30% of children had challenges in all five areas. Children adjustment in schools not only depends on the child's ability to respond to new environmental demands, including behavioural expectations and acceptance of regulations and the ability to work independently and interact with others (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017) but also depend on the availability of effective transition program (Bornfreund & Ewen, 2021).

The importance of early age education on its role in development and lifelong education has been confirmed in research (UNICEF, 2020), as well as for children with special needs. The successful transition process in early childhood led to better academic achievement and fewer behaviour problems, improved cooperativeness, and enhanced school-liking (Schneider et al., 2014). Early age education for children with special needs is also synonymous with the concept of early intervention that allows children with special needs to develop optimally if they get quality services as early as possible. This is consistent with research on the workings and plasticity of the brain (Diamond & Whittington, 2015). In addition, early childhood education for children with special needs is related to the development of functional skills that are useful for further learning skills and can also reduce the risk of additional obstacles that can occur due to late interventions.

Transition for children with special needs is more problematic and intriguing (Soni, Reyes Soto, & Lynch, 2022). Some contributing factors include the type of disability where the more severe the disability the more difficult the process. The children's condition may affect their transition process in the new setting (Leske, Sarmardin, Woods, & Thorpe, 2015) and it could be very difficult not only for the children but also for their parents (Soni et al., 2022). Another factor is a change in the support system that is most of the time unattached and far-reaching (Mawdsley & Hauser-Cram, 2013; Curle et al., 2017) or reduced access to the services that they are relied (Bargerion, Contri, Gibbons, Ruch-Ross, & Sanabria, 2015). This also generates extreme pressure on the family (Davenport & Weir, 2022). Third, schools and students have less awareness of the availability of supporting facilities, as consequence they relying on informal support (Hebbeler & Spiker, 2016). Yet, the success of the transition depends heavily on the support available in school and its ability to accommodate children's needs (Bornfreund & Ewen, 2021).

Furthermore, parents play an important role in successful transition program (Schneider et al., 2014), and parents perspectives regarding this issues critical to be explored (Carter, Brock, & Trainor, 2014). Therefore, transition planning (Murphy, McCormick, & Rous, 2013) should involve collaboration with parents. Consequently, it is important to investigate the practices and processes involved in the transition to school for children with special needs from the parents perspectives.

This research aimed to investigate parents perspectives on transition process experienced by young children with special needs. There is limited research literature on transition to school for children with special needs (Murphy et al., 2013), especially in Indonesian context (Azizah, 2016). Consequently, this study has important recommendation for the practice of transition service for special needs children. The research question is what are parents experiences in transitioning their children at school?

Methodology

This research used qualitative approached as the aim of the research was to explore and understanding the meaning (Creswell, 2014), in this study was the experiences of parents of children with special needs in transitioning their children to school. The research participants were 17 parents of children with special needs attending preparation and first grade in special schools. The participants were chosen purposively and were selected by the school with the criteria of their children attending preschool or first grade at the school. Child diagnoses were based on the educational report provided by the schools. There were six (6) girls and 11 Boys. In terms of the type of disabilities, there were six children with intellectual disabilities, two children with Down syndrome, four children with hearing impairments, two children with autism, one child with visual impairments, and two children with physical disabilities. The study involved one of the child's parents (father: n=8; mother: n=9). The mean of the parents' age was 41.65 years. Most of the father occupation are classified as non-professional jobs whereas all of the mothers are full-time mothers. Detailed information on research participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Participants

Child names*)	Gender	Type of Disability	Parent's age (years)	Parental attendance in FGD	Parental occupation
AW	M	Intellectual disability	42	Mother	Housewife
BD	M	Hearing impairment	42	Father	Labourer
CD	M	Intellectual disability	44	Mother	Housewife
DS	F	Down syndrome	39	Mother	Housewife
EM	M	Hearing impairment	42	Mother	Farmer
FF	F	Down syndrome	42	Father	Farmer
GG	M	Autism	39	Mother	Housewife
HN	F	Hearing impairment	36	Father	Labourer
ID	F	Intellectual disability	49	Father	Labourer
JJ	M	Autism	40	Mother	Housewife
KK	M	Physical disability	50	Father	Labourer
LL	F	Visual impairment	42	Father	Massager
MM	M	Intellectual disability	39	Mother	Housewife
ND	M	Intellectual disability	42	Father	Labourer
OD	M	Physical disability	41	Father	Labourer
PT	F	Hearing impairment	40	Mother	Housewife
RD	M	Intellectual disability	39	Mother	Housewife

Note: *) the initial of the children are pseudonyms

Data collected through focus group discussion (FGD). There were three FGDs derived from the study. This occurred based on the parent availability. The first group comprises seven parents, whereas there were five parents involved in the second and the third FGD. FGD was

conducted at the school during school time. All FGDs were audio-taped and then transcribed for analysis. Subsequently, it was analysed using thematic analysis. There were four themes that generated from the analysis phase that are preparation, communication and collaboration, availability of support, and barriers to transition process. Data analysis process is shown in the Figure 1.

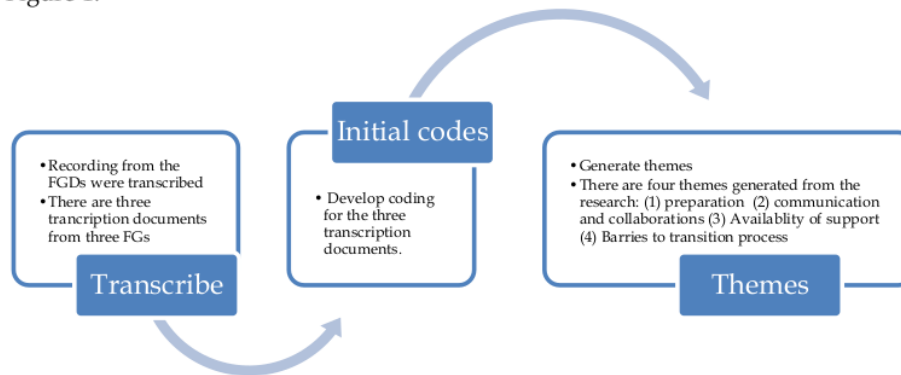


Figure 1 Data analysis process

Result and Discussion

This section will explain and discuss the four themes emerged in the data analysis are (1) preparation, (2) communication and collaboration, (3) availability of supports, and (4) Barriers to transition process.

Preparation

Parent who has children with mild disability do not organised specific preparation regarding transitioning their children to school. This include parents of children with visual impairment, parents of children with mild intellectual disability, and parents of children with hearing impairment. Whereas parents of children with more complex needs arranged therapy for their children. This include parents of children with Down syndrome, parents of children with physical disability, and parents of children with autism. Therapy focused on social competence and behaviour. "From the age of three and a half, I seek a referral to Sarjito [name of hospital in Yogyakarta] for GG's therapy. We spent a year in Sardjito, then referred to PLA [Autism Center] in Sentolo for a year and half. Indeed, the program there [PLA] is very structured, from the doctor consultation, developmental skill therapy, other treatment, transition program, and home program. Gaga was completed the program in PLA, then enrolled to this school" (GG's parents).

This findings were very different to another settings where services for young children with disabilities are well-established, such as the USA in which family start early intervention when their children are infant and toddler (Davenport & Weir, 2022); Waters & Friesen, 2019) or in well-established context that adopt The Reggio-Emilia approach such as in Northern Italy (Schneider et al., 2014). Furthermore, findings on this study show that there is no evidence was found regarding the relationship and continuity between the previous school and the school that children enrolled in, yet it is suggested that the relationship and continuity of education provides positive benefits for children, families and teachers (Bornfreund & Ewen, 2021); Grant, 2013). In order to maintain relation and better understand how the school can meet the needs of the child and family, the school may write previous early intervention providers to seek documented suggestions (Morris, Weglar, Ward, & Love, 2021).

Although some studies have shown that one of the most important processes for transitioning children with special needs to school is school visits (Little, Cohen-Vogel, & Curran, 2016), it is not the most important components of an effective transition plan

(Bornfreund & Ewen, 2021). Dockett & Perry (2021) suggested that this visit should begin before the school period begins. This is because children with special needs need longer time in terms of orientation and adaptation to school environment and class routines. Other studies also found that school visits facilitate children with special needs a smooth transition. School visits also provide more opportunities for parents to discuss their children conditions and parents' expectations towards the school. But unfortunately, it do not occurred in this study.

Communication and Collaboration

Research participants reported that not all teachers give opportunities to parents for a discussion and collaboration in transitioning their children to school. However, when registered their children, parents and school have opportunity to discuss child condition and parent' expectation, and how school meet the child's needs and parent' expectation in the best way.

Most of the parent state that there was communication during the school period as well, but it need active involvement from the parent as one of the parent said "Yes, I often talked to teacher whenever I picked up my child, like how he was at the class, what activities my child involved with, his behaviour. I also shared how he is and his activities at home " (CA's parent).

This findings are opposite to research conducted by Murphy, McCormick, & Rous (2013) in which communication with parents before and after school were dominant practices both in rural and urban areas. The form of communication with families can be in a form of face to face communication and through letters.

Pertinent literature shows that a strong relationship between family and school can be predicted by communication and collaboration that occur before entering school and after entering school. Moreover, relationship-building and effective collaboration with families are particularly important (Morris et al., 2021). Effective communication and collaboration in transition to early childhood education is one of way to releasing stress for families derived from difficult transition process. Therefore, this is a very important practice in a transitional period (McFarland-Piazza, Allen, & Webb, 2013). Etscheidt, Schmitz, & Edmister (2022) found that mutual respect and reciprocity between all adults involved in child transition are very essential. However, preschool teachers frequently have considerably less contact with parents than they would like, which complicates problems (Schneider et al., 2014). The best practices for service providers dealing with families that have young children with special needs include communication and partnerships with families. Thus, professionals must create and carry out specific objectives and actions while encouraging strong family-professional cooperation (Waters & Friesen, 2019). Moreover, school districts obtain both short- and long-term advantages when focusing on integrated planning and transition initiatives through communication and collaboration (Little et al., 2016).

Availability of support

Participants of the research stated that even though the school welcome any feedbacks and suggestions, there is no adequate support in terms of transition program. There is not structured and systematic transition programs provided by the school to their children. This is not surprising as another research also reported of lack transition plan in schools (McFarland-Piazza et al., 2013) ; Murphy et al., 2013). The result also claimed that some of the parents stated that the school provide policy that parents can stay during the first week of school period and assist their children at the class if the children need assistance. However, there was one parent expressed her disappointment of the school for not allowed her to assist her child in the class. "There was a problem. So my child did not want to go to the class by herself; and the teachers, they forced her in, and forced her to do anything by herself. My child cried. I wanted to help but the teachers did not allowed me to do so. I felt so bad to my own child for being unable to help her. I got really mad" (HN's parents). Parents also feel anxious

to leave children for the first time at school. These feelings intensify if the child cries or does not want to go to class. Parental anxiety will disappear if the child immediately goes into class and is enjoy school activities.

Teacher is the central component in facilitating transition (Grant, 2013). It is not surprisingly as teacher is primary facilitator in a classroom. Therefore, teacher support during transition process is crucial. It is important for the teacher to make the student feel safe and comfortable in first time the student enter the classroom as it will affect the student emotional readiness in learning. Moreover, to be done well, transition planning requires that state and local communities strengthen and coordinate several different systems, including the early childhood and K-12 systems and any other community and statewide systems that support family well-being (Soni et al., 2022).

Parents also reported lack of support. Consistent to this also found in Murphy et al., (2013) in which stated limited preschool program that address transition. Yet, this provision is essential. Example of initiatives found in the literature for effective transition is support program such as summer school program. According to teacher rating, program such as PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) can potentially lead to improved social-emotional outcomes thereby improving preschool-age children's readiness for kindergarten entry (McDaniel et al., 2021). Furthermore, the importance of increasing social competence and positive behavior of children with special needs at the beginning of the school has been tested (eg, Little et al., 2016) so program support for an intervention to improve social skills and behaviour skills becomes significant.

Barriers to transition process

According to the parents, the complexity of disabilities experienced by their children is one of the significant factor contributing to transition process. This is as expressed by Jaja's mother "Jaja are difficult, he still like to go out of class, take a walk, cannot be quiet if asked". The more complex the disability the difficult the transition. Children behavioural issues also becomes concern in other research conducted by Walker et al., (2012), and not only mentioned by the parents but also become issues for the teachers as this behavioural problems could led into disruption to the whole class, extensive teacher supervision and monitoring, and perhaps put other students into danger.

Another obstacle experienced by parents are limited support and inadequate facilities and infrastructure, such as in a school that has limited space so that new class children must be educated together with their higher classmates. The change of infrastructure also mentioned as challenged in the research conducted by McFarland-Piazza et al., (2013). Inadequate facilities not only become parents concern but also teachers. Teachers need to make adaptation to classroom physical environment so can accommodate the students' need regarding the space and facilities (Schischka, Rawlinson, & Hamilton, 2012)

Conclusion

Parents experiences in transitioning their children from home to schools are vary. The level of complexity of children disabilities contribute to the transition process. While parents of children with mild disabilities do not make any preparation for the transition process, parents of significant disabilities took their children for educational and/or medical intervention such as therapy. Connection with previous schools in preparing transition process are not available. Communication and collaborations between teachers and parents conduct in informal ways through after school hours when pick up their children. However, parents are given opportunities to share their expectation when registering their children into school. Support for transition services is limited except for one week permission to assist their children in the classroom. It is evident that children's success at school starts with a smooth transition. Therefore, planning and implementing an effective transition program is fundamental. Parents and teachers shared the same portion of responsibility of transitioning

their children to school. It is very clear from the research that parents feel anxious when sending their children for the first time to school. Ensuring the children adequately transitioned is crucial not only for the children but also parents, and teachers.

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