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# Bridging the first step: special educators, routines, and predictable transitions to school for children with ASD in Norway

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**Introduction:** The transition from kindergarten to school is a major developmental milestone for all children, and it is particularly demanding for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) due to their heightened need for structure, predictability, and emotional security. This study investigates how special educators in one Norwegian municipality facilitate this transition, emphasizing continuity in routines, collaboration, and pedagogical strategies that support children with ASD.

**Methods:** A qualitative research design was employed, consisting of eight in-depth interviews with special education teachers from four different institutions in the municipality. The interviews gathered diverse professional perspectives on transition practices, challenges, and collaborative processes.

**Results:** Findings reveal that early planning, systematic familiarization through visit days, and continuity in daily routines are essential in fostering predictability and emotional security for children with ASD. Interdisciplinary and inter-agency collaboration—including kindergartens, schools, Educational-Psychological Services (PPT), and parents—plays a critical role in ensuring tailored support and cohesive transition processes. Key challenges include limited time, lack of formalized routines, and resource constraints, which can hinder the implementation of individualized measures. Despite these obstacles, flexible adaptations, early initiation of transition routines, and strong parental involvement were found to significantly improve the transition experience.

**Discussion:** The study contributes to the field of special education by identifying effective practices that promote inclusive, predictable, and emotionally secure transitions for children with ASD. The findings have important implications for policy development, professional practice, and future research, particularly regarding the need for formalized procedures, sufficient resources, and strengthened collaboration across institutions.

## KEYWORDS

autism spectrum disorder (ASD), interdisciplinary collaboration, routines and predictability, special education, transition to school

## Introduction

The transitioning process from kindergarten to school is a significant change in a child's life, with long-term implications for the child's wellbeing, learning, and development. For children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the transition can be particularly demanding due to their heightened need for predictability, routine, and clear structure

(Nuske et al., 2019). Disruptions to familiar environments or routines may lead to stress, anxiety, and reduced adaptability (Nordøen and Laberg, 2021; World Health Organisation, 2024), making the transition from kindergarten to school a particularly vulnerable period.

In Norway, approximately 7 in 1,000 children are diagnosed with ASD (Folkehelseinstituttet, 2019). In 2023, over 56,000 children aged 5–6 attended kindergarten (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2024), all of whom are legally entitled to start school the year they turn six (Opplæringslova, 2023). As the prevalence of ASD continues to rise, schools and kindergartens will increasingly encounter children with diverse needs, placing greater demands on professional competence, collaboration, and tailored educational support (Hogsnes, 2019).

Although research underscores the value of structured, well-coordinated transition processes, further inquiry is needed—particularly regarding how kindergartens and schools can meet the needs of children with ASD. Successful transitions require interdisciplinary collaboration, consistency, and child-centered planning (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2008; Hogsnes, 2019; Chahboun et al., 2024), and educators also play a crucial role in achieving positive outcomes in the transition process.

This study explores how the transition to school is facilitated in one municipality for children with ASD, focusing on the role of special educators in public kindergartens and schools in creating routines that foster structure, predictability, and emotional security through continuity. The metaphor *building a bridge* illustrates the importance of establishing strong connections between kindergarten and school to ensure a coherent, secure, and supportive transition. By investigating pedagogical strategies and inter-agency cooperation through the research question “How do special education teachers experience the transition from kindergarten to school for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and what routines and practices are in place to support a predictable and safe transition?”, the study aims to identify both challenges and effective practices. The findings seek to inform practitioners and contribute to the broader field of special education research, identifying practices that effectively promote inclusive and developmentally appropriate transitions for children with ASD, offering implications for policy, practice, and future research.

To explore the research problem, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with special education teachers from four different institutions. The aim was to capture a variety of perspectives on the topic. To discuss the results of the interviews, we will start with a presentation of ASD based on the ICD-11 diagnostic manual. Thereafter, we give a description of the transition process from kindergarten to school in the Norwegian context, focusing on continuity.

## Autism spectrum disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that emerges early in life and is characterized by persistent difficulties with social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviors. The symptoms vary depending on the child's age, experiences, and possible comorbid conditions, and are influenced by their linguistic and cognitive development (Vivanti, 2020).

ASD is a heterogeneous diagnosis. A heterogeneous diagnosis means that there are significant differences in how the condition manifests from one child to another—this is the essence of a spectrum disorder.

ICD-11 consider ASD as a range of conditions combined into a single diagnosis and defines two primary criteria: intellectual functioning and adaptive functioning. Regarding intellectual functioning, the diagnosis involves significant challenges across various cognitive domains, including reasoning, working memory, information processing, and verbal comprehension. There is considerable variation in the extent to which these functions are affected in individuals with ASD (World Health Organisation, 2024). Individuals with ASD often experience limitations in adaptive behavior, which includes impaired abilities in conceptual, social, and practical skills necessary for managing everyday life challenges. Conceptual skills refer to the ability to apply knowledge in practice, such as reading, writing, numeracy, problem-solving, and decision-making. Social skills include the capacity to understand and regulate interpersonal relationships, adhere to social norms, follow rules and laws, and avoid exploitation. Practical skills involve the ability to manage daily tasks and function independently in everyday life (World Health Organisation, 2024).

ASD therefore presents a variety of symptoms, including repetitive behaviors and limited interests, physiological symptoms, intellectual and cognitive functions and challenges in communication (Rossignol and Frye, 2012; Chaste and Leboyer, 2012; Gaugler et al., 2014; Horvath and Perman, 2002; Maski et al., 2011; Sandin et al., 2014). Research emphasizes the distinctiveness of different educational settings in combination of various symptoms, social aptitude and behavior, interests and academic skills (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Keane et al., 2012; Jordan, 2005).

In the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of children and adolescents referred for assessment of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Folkehelseinstituttet, 2024). This increase appears to be a result of greater awareness and improved recognition of the diagnosis. There are currently no known assessments indicating whether more children are developing ASD symptoms now than before, or whether the rise is due to increased knowledge and identification (Folkehelseinstituttet, 2024).

## Transition from kindergarten to School in a Norwegian perspective

The move from kindergarten to school is a vertical transition, as it involves significant change: children leave familiar people and environments to face new expectations. Vertical transitions refers to multiple disruptions in how a child's daily life is structured (Brooker, 2008; Hogsnes, 2019). These transitions involve breaks in daily routines, which can lead to stress, uncertainty, and challenges with adaptation. Vertical transitions, as the transition from kindergarten to school, represent critical periods in a child's life when the need for continuity and predictability is especially important (Hogsnes, 2019; Ishikawa et al., 2022).

In addition to school visit days, other forms of continuity were found to support predictability for children with ASD. Maintaining consistent relationships with key adults, using familiar visual supports, and aligning daily routines with those already

established in kindergarten can help reduce uncertainty and promote a sense of security. These elements extend transitional support beyond physical visits and reinforce the stability required for successful adaptation.

In Norway, kindergarten is an early childhood education institution for children aged 1–6. It focuses on play-based learning to support children's overall development, wellbeing, and social skills. Public kindergartens are regulated by the Kindergarten Act and the national Framework Plan, which ensure consistent quality and outline core values and goals. While attendance is voluntary, most children attend from age 1, and kindergartens play a key role in promoting inclusion, equality, and all-round development (Barnehageloven, 2005; The Norwegian Directorate for Education Training, 2017; Utdanningdirektoratet, 2024).

Public schools are regulated by the Education Act (Opplæringslova, 2023) and The National Curriculum (Ministry of Education Research, 2017). The Core Curriculum applies to both primary and secondary education, and as in kindergarten, focus on equality, inclusion and all-round development (Ministry of Education Research, 2017).

Norwegian municipalities may have local manuals or frameworks for the transition, but as educational institutions, kindergartens' and schools' core responsibility in facilitating the transition are anchored in the Barnehageloven (2005) and the Opplæringslova (1998). Both Ahtola et al. (2011), Festøy et al. (2024) and Fontil et al. (2019) highlights the importance of institutional collaboration and early information exchange in transitions. The responsibility for collaboration includes identifying necessary support measures and potential challenges that require targeted strategies, preparing children for school entry and fostering a welcoming environment, and ensuring both families and schools receive relevant information to promote continuity (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2008). Chahboun et al. (2024) argue that schools must be equipped for inclusion by ensuring teacher competence, stable routines, and tailored adaptations in both interdisciplinary and inter-agency collaboration. Such interdisciplinary and inter-agency collaboration is for example the after-school program and the Educational-Psychological Service.

The after-school program (SFO), a legally mandated offer for children in the 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grade (1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> grade for children with special needs) further enhances children's sense of belonging by providing familiarity with staff and the school environment (Udanningsdirektoratet, 2021).

The Educational-Psychological Service (PPT) is mandated to secure inclusive educational opportunities and support children with special needs, including those with ASD. Their responsibilities include expert assessments, guidance on adaptations, and staff competence development (Gilberts, 2018; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024, 2017; Barnehageloven, 2005; Opplæringslova, 2023). In the transition processes, PPT may update assessments, contribute to Individual Education Plans, and provide ASD-specific training.

Festøy et al. (2024) points to parental involvement as a critical factor, as parents are key partners in the transition process, offering vital knowledge about the child's strengths, interests, and learning preferences (Kinge, 2020; Josilowski and Morris, 2019; Connolly and Gersch, 2016). Parsons et al. (2020) foreground children's own

voices through digital storytelling, enabling staff and parents to better understand and respond to their perspectives.

Research shows that strong home-school collaboration positively influences adaptation, academic achievements and well-being (Ahtola et al., 2011; Schulting et al., 2005). Parents of children with ASD often navigate complex systems, making acknowledgment, clear communication, and transparent expectations essential for building trust (Scheving and Egeberg, 2015). Connolly and Gersch (2016) reported that parents often feel misunderstood, stigmatized, and compelled to advocate strongly for appropriate school placement and support. Festøy et al. (2024) found that parents generally experience stronger collaboration in kindergarten than in school, where their expertise is sometimes undervalued.

Collectively, this underscore the importance of structured support and cooperation in ensuring smooth transitions.

## Continuity

In this study, continuity is understood as part of institutional culture, reflecting the school's and kindergarten's ability and willingness to involve each other, the children and parents in the transition. Strong relationships between all involved—children, parents, teachers, and specialists—are essential for a successful transition, regardless of the child's prior skills (Hogsnes, 2019; Ahtola et al., 2011; Fontil et al., 2019; Festøy et al., 2024; Schulting et al., 2005).

### Continuity in the physical environment

Children become acutely aware of the physical differences between kindergarten and school, making it essential that they are introduced to key areas such as toilets and play spaces (Hogsnes, 2019). For children with ASD, predictability is particularly significant. Preserving familiar visual structures from kindergarten—such as placing previously used visual aids on their school desk—may facilitate a smoother transition to the school environment (Scheving and Egeberg, 2015). Hogsnes (2014) highlights the importance of continuity in the transition process for all children. Children bring expectations about their physical environment, such as playground equipment, and staff benefit from knowing children's prior play experiences to guide them in the new setting. Children with ASD may benefit from visiting school with familiar kindergarten staff to build trust in the new environment (Hogsnes, 2019).

Gradual and structured familiarization is central to reducing transition-related stress. Visits to the school with parents or preschool staff, supported by visual tools and structured conversations, helps build predictability (Scheving and Egeberg, 2015). Preparatory strategies such as photos, social stories, and drawings reinforce familiarity, while tools like a "Me Book" introduce the child's interests, communication style, and support needs to school staff.

## Continuity in relationships

Strong peer relationships help children adjust to new school expectations. Maintaining old friendships and forming new ones is key for social participation and classroom support (Hogsnes, 2019). Previous research shows that children with ASD often were more peripheral in the social networks in school and had fewer reciprocal friendships than their typically developing peers, (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Kasari et al., 2011) but a study by Lefstad et al. (2022) showed that children with special needs, some in the autism spectrum, had close friends, and that peer-relationships often were characterized by the children's ability to show each others care and generosity.

Positive relationships with staff also influence children's self-image, engagement and enjoyment in educational institutions (Gray et al., 2023). Attachment theory emphasizes the child's bond with significant adults who provide safety and comfort. Secure attachment offers a base for exploration, while insecure attachment can lead to avoidance or clinginess in uncertain situations (Broberg et al., 2014). Consistent, sensitive adult responses foster trust and resilience, which are especially important for children with ASD who may be more vulnerable to disruptions in continuity (Hogsnes et al., 2025). Relational competence refers to professionals' ability to build trust-based relationships that support learning (Berg, 2007, as cited in Kinge, 2020). Empathy, tolerance, and recognition of strengths are crucial. For children with ASD, predictable and understanding responses from adults can reduce anxiety and enable active engagement (Kinge, 2020).

## Continuity in content and work methods

Kindergarten and school use different methods—play-based vs. learning-based. Sharing information about familiar routines and strategies helps ensure continuity, particularly for children with ASD who need predictable work methods (Hogsnes, 2019). Scheving and Egeberg (2015) emphasize that school staff should observe children in kindergarten to understand their communication, play, and learning styles. This allows for better support and tailored approaches in the school setting.

Predictable routines and visual structures are essential for children with ASD (Martinsen et al., 2016; Nordøen and Laberg, 2021). Framework structures (e.g., schedules) and situation-specific structures (e.g., activity plans) reduce stress and foster participation. Continuity between preschool and school routines strengthens predictability (Scheving and Egeberg, 2015). Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), developed through interdisciplinary collaboration, further ensure that support is tailored to each child's needs (Aarnes, 2014; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024). Chahboun et al. (2024) identify particular challenges for children with ASD, stressing the need inclusive practices where teachers require ASD knowledge and children need preparation to cope with new demands. Similarly, Festøy et al. (2024) emphasize predictability and preparation, recommending mutual visits between schools and kindergartens to build familiarity and understanding. This research points to different but complementary aspects

of facilitation: continuity in structure, skills and support, and predictability.

## Methodological approach

The goal of this study was to explore how the transition to school is facilitated for children with ASD, focusing on the role of special educators in creating routines that foster structure, predictability, and emotional security, through pedagogical strategies and inter-agency cooperation. Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with special education teachers from four different institutions, with the research question *“How do special education teachers experience the transition from kindergarten to school for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and what routines and practices are in place to support a predictable and safe transition?”*.

The study employed a qualitative design to explore participants' subjective experiences through semi-structured interviews due to the methods' ability to in-depth information from participants (Tjora, 2021; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2021; Ruslin Mashuri et al., 2022). Rapport was fostered through clear communication of the interview process, while open-ended questions encouraged reflective responses (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2021). The interview guide followed a structured progression—introductory, reflective, and concluding phases—balancing flexibility with methodological rigor (Tjora, 2021; Ruslin Mashuri et al., 2022).

To answer the research question, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with special education teachers from four different institutions by the first author. The participants were selected because they all have relevant experience, insights, and perspectives on the topic. The project was registered with the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, and follows the guidelines set by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees for Social Science and Humanities (NESH). The participants were given information about the project, potential risks of participation and information about the right to withdraw at any time during the project, and were assured anonymity and confidentiality. This ensured that the informants had full insight into the ethical considerations of the study (NESH, 2024).

All interviews were conducted in person at locations chosen by the participants, allowing for a conversational atmosphere and facilitating observation of non-verbal cues. Although the settings varied, the same semi-structured interview guide was used in each case to ensure consistency and comparability across interviews.

Pseudonyms are used in the transcription, analysis, and discussion. Due to anonymity, it is not specified which institutions the participants has experience with in the presenting of finding. All informants consented to the use of audio recording.

The sample of eight participants was deemed sufficient to achieve thematic saturation. Although the number is small, the participants represented relevant institutions involved in the transition process within the municipality, ensuring diversity in professional perspectives (Table 1). During analysis, no new codes emerged in the final interviews, indicating that additional data were unlikely to generate substantially new insights. In qualitative research with a focused research question and a relatively

homogeneous professional group, such sample sizes are commonly sufficient to capture the breadth and depth of relevant experiences.

## Analysis

The analysis process began during the interview and continued until the submission of the article. Braun's and Clarke (2006) four-phase thematic analysis was used as a frame. In the preparation phase an overview of the data was established. The interviews were transcribed automatically by an online platform during the interviews. Simultaneously the first author took notes of the informants' actions and empirical-analytical reference points as an early stage of the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Tjora, 2021). The transcription from the interview was later listened to simultaneously while the transcript was studied. This was necessary while some words were not transcribed correctly. For example, one informant said "trivsel er viktig" ("wellbeing is important"), but the statement had been transcribed as "trussel er viktig" ("threat is important"). Therefore, it was important to carefully check the transcription to ensure its accuracy. At the same time, it was listened to the audio recording and supplemented with earlier notes of body language and/or pauses during the interview, since such details in the transcript can contain important phenom (Ruslin Mashuri et al., 2022). This phase helped to give an overview of the data, which in turn enabled us to delve deeper into both coding and categorization (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This phase was completed after each transcription.

In the coding phase important points in the data material were labeled to create new and deeper insights, and preparing the data for the subsequent categorization phase (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The overarching notes from the previous phase were coded manually and written down with a pen. Important points were circled down together with detailed notes in the margins, and then summarized to key points (Braun and Clarke, 2006). During this phase, questions were asked such as, "What is this about?" Initially, these questions were general, but they became more specific, for example, in the collaboration theme. Two separate codes were used: one for "collaboration" and one specifically for "collaboration with parents."

Throughout the coding process, codes were continuously compared across transcripts to identify similarities, differences, and potential patterns. Although the first author conducted the primary coding, the emerging codes and provisional themes were discussed with the co-authors to enhance reflexivity and resolve interpretative uncertainties. Final themes were validated by re-examining them against the entire dataset to ensure internal coherence and that they accurately reflected the participants' accounts, following Braun's and Clarke (2006) guidelines for rigorous thematic analysis.

The codes were then used to place the data material into categories/themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved sorting the data into more overarching categories, presented in Table 2.

The categories were established by sorting the codes into categories where they combined to an overarching theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The last phase of the analysis consisted of reviewing and refining the categories and confirming if they formed a coherent pattern. In this last phase sub-categories merge and formed the categories in Table 2. F.ex: "different

TABLE 1 Shows an overview of the participants, their experience and their experience with children with ASD.

Experience	Experience with children with ASD in years	Pseudonyms
Kindergarten	25–30	Nina
School	25–30	Lovice
3 different organizations	25–30	Emma
School	0–5	Johanne
PPT	15–25	Guri
Kindergarten and school	15–25	Clara
Kindergarten and school	0–5	Henrik
Kindergarten and PPT	10–20	Trude

TABLE 2 Overview over categories.

Main analyzed categories
Transition process duration
Visitational days and continuity in practice
Parental and interagency cooperation
Predictability and facilitation

phases of collaboration" and cooperation with parents merged with "collaboration" and formed the category "Parental and interagency cooperation".

## Results and discussion

To interpret the findings, it is important to consider established developmental characteristics associated with ASD. Children with ASD frequently exhibit heightened sensory sensitivity, a strong need for predictability, and significant variation in adaptive functioning and communication abilities. These developmental features help to explain why participants emphasized structured routines, familiarization strategies, and close collaboration as essential facilitators of a successful transition. Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a deeper understanding of how and why the identified practices support children's adjustment to school.

### Transition process duration

Informants report differing views on when the transition from kindergarten to school begins for children with ASD. Some, like Henrik and Lovice, suggest it starts in the final preschool year, while others, including Trude, Guri, and Nina, indicate it may begin 1 to 2 years earlier, depending on the child's needs. Nina emphasizes the importance of early notification for physical accommodations:

*“Sometimes children need physical accommodation, such as a separate room to retreat to. The school must be informed of this need early on so that they have the opportunity to make the necessary arrangement” (Nina).*

School staff, Johanne and Clara, note that the transition effectively starts when the children with ASD are assigned as pupils, usually in the winter term prior to school entry.

All informants agree that the transition concludes when the child with ASD feels secure and familiar with the school environment. Clara notes:

*“It can take up to a year before we as a school feel that the child with ASD is completely settled.”*

When asked how the transition differs for children with ASD compared to those without special needs, the informants highlight both adaptations, routines, and distinctions:

*“The transition for children with autism occurs at the individual level” (Lovice).*

Thus, the transition for children with ASD differs by being individualized. However, this also allows for flexibility and tailoring routines to individual needs. Given the spectrum nature of ASD, adaptable routines may help meet each child’s specific needs.

The empirical finds states that there is significantly more collaboration when there is children with ASD involved, that with children without special needs. Predictability is central to creating a sense of security for children with ASD (Nordøen and Laberg, 2021) and individual-level measures are interventions tailored to the specific needs of an individual child (Moen, 2019). This indicates that the transition depend on the interdisciplinary team, which can create uncertainty.

Even though different municipalities in Norway may have local manuals or frameworks for the transition (including this specific municipality), much is left to the interagency team. All though the Kindergarten Act and Education Act states the importance and responsibility of the cooperation between institutions to facilitate a transition that is safe and of good quality (Barnehageloven, 2005; Opplæringslova, 1998), it does not state how or when the transition is to be conducted.

Lovice and Emma talks about challenges and opportunities during the transition and mentions the lack of written procedures:

*“It’s a bit up to the individuals involved to decide what’s done” (Emma).*

This highlights that the starting point of information exchange and duration of the transition varies according to the child’s needs and institutional perspective. Also, different municipalities and institutions may differentiate transition timing based on the child’s level of difficulty, even though the importance of early information exchange in the transitions process is highlighted in multiple studies (Ahtola et al., 2011; Festøy et al., 2024; Fontil et al., 2019).

Based on informants statements, the transition process may last 1 to 3 years, and the child’s level of difficulty being the

primary factor for the duration of the transition process. Given the spectrum nature of ASD (Rossignol and Frye, 2012; Chaste and Leboyer, 2012; Gaugler et al., 2014; Horvath and Perman, 2002; Maski et al., 2011; Sandin et al., 2014), the time required for children to feel comfortable in school is highly individual. Tailored educational support and child-centered planning is crucial (Hogsnes, 2019; Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2008; Chahboun et al., 2024) and given the special educators experiences with highly differentiated transition process durations, much is left to the special educators personal preferences and competence.

## Visitational days and continuity in practice

All informants cite visiting days as the most important measure. Clara, Johanne, and Trude use the term “adjustment period” to describe these visits. Adjustment refers to familiarizing the child with a new environment through school visits and shorter school days (Drugli et al., 2020), a term commonly used when children start preschool.

*“We try to adapt based on how many visits each child needs; some need fewer, while others need many” (Lovice).*

Clara and Johanne mention that the school visits the preschool to observe and get to know the child in a familiar environment. Nevertheless, visiting days to the new school is highlighted as more important, and the informants mentioned it may include eating lunch in the cafeteria, visiting the library, or exploring their designated area in the school. Continuity in the surrounding areas were highlighted:

*“It’s important that everything is the same when they visit as it will be when they start school” (Clara).*

School visits contribute to environmental and physical continuity. By becoming familiar with the new surroundings, children with ASD can feel safer. According to Hogsnes (2019) and Scheving and Egeberg (2015), familiarity with different areas and facilities within the school provides security and continuity during the transition. Scheving and Egeberg (2015) also emphasize the value of visit days, as they offer an opportunity to become more familiar with the school environment and thus create a sense of safety. Therefore, visit days serve as a strategy for gradually introducing the child to their new setting.

Although “adjustment” is a term usually applied to starting preschool (Drugli et al., 2020) there are clear similarities in the transition from preschool to school for children with ASD. Visit days also support predictability. For children with ASD, structure and continuity are essential to ensuring a safe and predictable experience. Continuity in the environment are critical for children on the spectrum. Visitational days can be a useful strategy to achieve this.

Trude, Johanne, Clara, and Nina cite that lack of time and resources is a challenge. Clara explains that they cannot always conduct as many mutual visits as desired. Trude points out that this

can limit familiarity with staff and school environments. Johanne and Nina also report that staff shortages make it hard to maintain routines. Additionally, Clara mentions the financial cost of sending staff to preschools, which leaves the school short-staffed.

As with the transition process duration, this also points to the challenges with the lack of written procedures that codify the number of visitational days. This reflects a known challenge in human services, working with people requires substantial time and resources. Despite these challenges, the importance of continuity and visit days is clear in both the informants' comments and the literature (Scheving and Egeberg, 2015; Hogsnes, 2019). If time and resources are limited, efforts can be focused on maintaining continuity through content, working methods and relationships (Hogsnes, 2019). Visit days remain a key strategy for ensuring predictability, but other forms of continuity can also support this need.

Nina notes that she initiates steps to prepare children with ASD for the systemic change they are about to experience, such as extending work sessions to resemble school periods. Johanne adds that it's helpful when preschools focus on school-readiness, such as longer work periods. This preparation can reduce the number of new experiences in school and provide a foundation for adapting to schoolwork or individualized programs. This reflects continuity in pedagogical practices like content and working methods, allowing the school to build upon what the child already knows (Hogsnes, 2019).

Several informants highlight the system differences between preschool and school. Lovice and Emma mention that the daily structure is stricter in school, governed by timetables. A timetable clearly outlines when subjects are taught and provides a structured framework for the day. Johanne describes this as "worth its weight in gold." This suggests that schools inherently offer structures that may benefit children with ASD.

In contrast, the curriculum for preschools emphasizes play as a core activity (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). Thus, the more rigid structure in schools may positively benefit children with ASD who require clear expectations and frameworks.

Clara notes that during school holidays, this structure disappears, which can be distressing for children with ASD:

*"School holidays can be very traumatic because the structure is no longer there".*

She explains that holidays are more consistent in preschool than in school, where after-school programs (SFO) take over. This indicates that while the school's structure may support students during the academic year, it may fall short during breaks, resulting in stress, distress, and resistance for children with ASD.

Hogsnes (2019) emphasizes continuity in both physical environment, pedagogical practices and relationships. When preschools share how they have supported a child, the school can use that as a foundation for further planning. Scheving and Egeberg (2015) highlights that an established structure can create continuity for children with ASD, and emphasizes its importance in relation to predictability and the child's sense safety. Chahboun et al. (2024) argue that schools should focus on stable routines and tailored adaptations, but Nina mentions one concern: the final

pedagogical report from preschool is often used as the basis for the expert assessment. The pedagogical report reflects preschool perspectives, and functioning in school may differ. In Norway, it is regulated by law that children's expert assessments must match the legal framework of the institution (Barnehageoven, 2005; Opplæringslova, 2023). These assessments must provide insight into the child's functioning, needs, and profile. Although vertical transitions states the child with ASD's need for continuity and predictability (Hogsnes, 2019; Ishikawa et al., 2022), and research emphasizes the need for different educational settings in combination of various social and academic skills (Humphrey and Lewis, 2008; Keane et al., 2012; Jordan, 2005), if based solely on preschool documentation, the expert assessment may not be fully adaptable because of the differences in practice.

## Parental and interagency cooperation

Both the Kindergarten Act and the Education Act states the parents legal right to cooperating with the institutions regarding their child's education (Opplæringslova, 2023; Barnehageoven, 2005). All informants emphasized the importance of including parents' perspectives in the transition process. Guri states:

*"Listening to the parents is the very first thing, I think that is the very first rule."*

Henrik adds:

*"It is the parents who know their child the best,"*

Johanne reinforces this:

*"They know best what the child needs, so we must listen and cooperate with them."*

Clara explains that she contacts parents as soon as their child with ASD is assigned a place at the school. This allows visit days, orientation, and parental collaboration to begin. Parents are key partners in the transition process, offering vital knowledge about the child's strengths, interests, and learning preferences (Kinge, 2020; Josilowski and Morris, 2019; Connolly and Gersch, 2016). Kinge (2020) notes that parents' knowledge of their child can contribute critical information that increases staff insight and understanding. Similarly, Scheving and Egeberg (2015) describe parents as primary conveyors of their child's experiences, preferences, reactions, and learning styles, arguing that they are uniquely positioned to describe their child. Despite this, research has shown that parents do not always feel heard (Connolly and Gersch, 2016), highlighting the importance of actively involving parents as collaborators. Cooperation with parents provides a more holistic view of the child's needs, strengths, and challenges, allowing schools to create tailored support and a transition period adapted to each child.

Cooperation and communication with the child's parents may also often give insight to the child's network and close friends,

which can give help the school plan class structures and staff, and thereby enables continuity in relationships and social participation and classroom support (Hogsnes, 2019). A good communication practice and acknowledgment of the parents knowledge of the child is essential for building trust (Scheving and Egeberg, 2015) and can help build a strong home–school collaboration that influences the children's adaptation, academic achievements and wellbeing (Ahtola et al., 2011; Schulting et al., 2005).

To include parents' perspectives, informants describe several strategies. Trude notes that parents participate in all meetings while Johanne highlights the regularity of parent meetings, which increases during the transition period. Connolly and Gersch (2016) underscore that frequent meetings are essential for sharing information and jointly discussing matters, ensuring parents' perspectives are voiced. Guri stress humility in collaboration, acknowledging parents' expertise:

*“They know their child best, so we absolutely depend on being humble to bring out their perspectives”.*

Trude adds that cooperation must allow time for discussion and recognize parental vulnerability, while Emma emphasizes respectful dialogue and a listening approach.

Johanne also mentions daily contact as a valuable method for maintaining communication, particularly for guidance and gaining insights into the child's needs. Nina and Guri note that daily contact is more natural in kindergarten during pick-up and drop-off times, whereas school routines often involve after-school programs, limiting parent-teacher interactions. To bridge this gap, Guri suggests using a message book or communication form to share relevant information with parents or respective care, depending on their preferences. Festøy et al. (2024) similarly highlight that parents experience better information flow and cooperation in kindergarten due to these daily interactions. Thus, both formal cooperation meetings and informal daily contact are important for including parents effectively.

Informants also stress the importance of balancing agreement and differing perspectives. Trude, Guri, and Clara acknowledge that disagreements with parents may arise but emphasize attentive listening and honest communication about what is feasible. Scheving and Egeberg (2015) note that clear, understandable dialogue about school activities and pedagogical content strengthens parents' trust and sense of security. Drugli and Onsoien (2022) explain that strong relationships reduce the likelihood of major conflicts, as they create room to discuss differing opinions respectfully. Using all perspectives collaboratively allows professionals to assess the child's functioning holistically and create a more tailored support system (Drugli and Onsoien, 2022, p. 23).

Regarding parents' emotional experiences, informants report that parents often feel anxious during the transition. Lovice and Johanne note that parents anticipate more behavioral outbursts and stress due to changes, while Emma emphasizes the fragility and uncertainty parents experience. As Scheving and Egeberg (2015) states, parents of children with ASD often navigate complex systems, which can provoke a feeling of being misunderstood, stigmatized, and compelled to advocate strongly for appropriate support for their child (Connolly and Gersch, 2016). Parents'

anxiety can stem from perceptions of the school as an institution with limited adaptability. Nina and Lovice both states that over time, and with supportive, early transition routines, parents generally experience the process as less stressful. Henrik highlights that competent and engaged interagency collaboration improves parents' experiences, and first-time parents often feel more apprehensive than those with prior school experience. Scheving and Egeberg (2015) argue that emphasizing the child's possibilities and mastery, rather than limitations, enhances parental security during the transition.

Concerns about inclusion and exclusion emerge as significant for parents. Previous research has pointed out that children with ASD often are peripheral in social networks (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Kasari et al., 2011). Nevertheless, studies also show that the children can have close relationships with peers (Lefstad et al., 2022). Lovice explains that parents' worries often relate to highly publicized cases of exclusion. Informants note that participation in the classroom varies depending on the child's needs, with some children benefiting from small-group participation, while others can manage whole-class activities. Emma notes that tailored strategies, such as small-group work, allow children with ASD to participate meaningfully. Lovice emphasizes that schools aim to include children either in full-class or small-group settings, depending on individual needs. Chahboun et al. (2024) stress that inclusion extends beyond physical presence; it requires strategies that ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students. Safe relationships, peer understanding, and individual adaptations are essential for effective inclusion (Brede et al., 2017). Informants report that peers often show understanding and tolerance toward children with ASD when differences are explained appropriately, highlighting the importance of openness, individualized adaptation, and inclusive strategies.

To achieve good parent cooperation, informants recommend listening attentively to parents' insecurities and perspectives, actively asking questions to elicit relevant information, and fostering reciprocity in collaboration. Drugli and Onsoien (2022) emphasize that parents must be seen as equal, active partners, contributing complementary perspectives to those of professionals (p. 21). Nina highlights listening to parents' concerns as essential to alleviating worries, while Clara emphasizes showing trust and understanding. Henrik stresses clear, jargon-free communication grounded in reciprocity, and Johanne highlights the importance of building parental confidence in school staff. Drugli and Onsoien (2022) note that empathy is critical, as parents may find it difficult to discuss their child's challenges.

Overall, parents' perspectives are both valuable and necessary for creating a holistic understanding of children with ASD. Effective cooperation, grounded in trust, empathy, openness, and respect, allows parents to share concerns and knowledge. This collaborative approach supports the design of tailored educational offers, promotes predictability, strengthens inclusion, and contributes to a smoother, more secure transition for children with ASD.

All though Henrik states:

*“The most important thing is cooperation with the parents”.*

Students with ASD have the right to personal assistance, technical aids, and physical adaptations to ensure satisfactory learning outcomes (Opplæringslova, 2023). Effective cooperation between PPT, kindergarten, school, and other relevant services is essential to identify and meet the child's specific needs (Scheving and Egeberg, 2015). Additional services, such as speech and occupational therapists, child and adolescent psychiatric services, physiotherapists, rehabilitation services, and specialist health services, may be included depending on the child's needs. School staff (department heads, special educators and teachers) and kindergarten personnel (special educators, assistants, and pedagogical leaders) also participate, ensuring a holistic understanding of the child.

Cooperation typically follows three phases: information, practice, and school start. The information phase focuses on establishing trust, sharing the child's history and needs, clarifying responsibilities, and planning measures. Documentation includes expert assessments, individualized plans, AAC information, and effective strategies. Clear information transfer supports predictability, continuity, and mastery for children with ASD (Scheving and Egeberg, 2015; Hogsnes, 2019).

In the practice phase, plans are implemented through visit days, preparatory activities, and ongoing meetings. Unexpected issues may require revisiting the plan. Cooperation continues into the school-start phase, involving PPT, parents, and other relevant services, until the child feels secure—often throughout the first school year. Effective collaboration relies on professional understanding of ASD, open communication, and parental involvement, ensuring tailored support that prioritizes the child's best interests and need for predictability (Chahboun et al., 2024; Kinge, 2020).

## Predictability and facilitation

When asked about the expectations that children with ASD may have toward the new school environment, the informants generally indicate that such expectations are limited. Trude shares an example of a child who had created a self-made book about the school, talked extensively about it, and expressed excitement. This child had also participated in several school visits, which were enjoyable. However, Trude emphasizes that children with ASD often do not have the full cognitive or social prerequisites to understand what school entails. Similarly, Nina reports that she has not observed children with ASD fully comprehending that they are about to start school. Both informants stress that preparatory work is important to ensure the school environment is not entirely unfamiliar, even if children with ASD cannot completely grasp the concept of school.

Clara supports this observation, noting that she has not experienced children with ASD having clear expectations due to their limited prerequisites. Henrik and Johanne highlight that predictability, along with a sense of safety and mastery, is crucial for children with ASD when approaching a new environment. Lovice adds that children with older siblings in school may have slightly more awareness of what school entails, but she still does not observe clear expectations among children with ASD.

Scheving and Egeberg (2015) argue that children with special needs can approach a new school environment with greater security and reduced stress if familiar daily routines and previously established materials from kindergarten are maintained. This aligns with the informants' perspectives, suggesting that even if children with ASD do not fully understand the transition, using the child's existing structures and routines from kindergarten can help them feel safer and less stressed.

Overall, the informants suggest that the primary expectations children with ASD have relate to their basic needs being met—most importantly, safety and predictability. Nordøen and Laberg (2021) emphasize that predictability is essential for children with ASD to experience a coherent and understandable everyday life. By maintaining familiar structures, routines, and clear frameworks from kindergarten, schools can help children with ASD navigate the transition with reduced anxiety and a stronger sense of control, even if their conceptual understanding of school is limited.

When asked about reactions to a new school environment, Lovice describes common behaviors such as refusal to cooperate, restlessness, and acting out. She notes:

*“Children with ASD are much more tired the first period at school because there is so much new and so many new impressions” (Lovice).*

Nordøen and Laberg (2021) explain that children with ASD are more sensitive to sensory stimuli than children without ASD. While all children may feel tired during the first weeks of school, children with ASD often experience greater fatigue due to heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli. Johanne agrees, suggesting that shorter school days at the start may help limit sensory overload. Emma adds that children may also experience despair, stress, misunderstandings, reluctance, and distress—reactions similarly described by Martinsen et al. (2016).

To mitigate these reactions, informants emphasize the importance of clear structuring and continuity in relationships, content and work methods. Emma explains that situational structures, which specify *when*, *what*, and *who* will carry out a task, provide more detailed guidance than a general framework. Such structures promote calmness and help children maintain an overview of daily life (Martinsen et al., 2016; Hogsnes, 2019; Nordøen and Laberg, 2021; Scheving and Egeberg, 2015).

All informants stress the importance of building upon the child's existing structures to facilitate predictability, as the structures are:

*“[...] a support system for the young ones. They are like a crutch. If you take them away, that is very problematic.” (Lovice)*

Emma emphasizes that school staff must understand the purpose of these structures, highlighting the need for knowledge transfer during collaboration. Trude adds that using established systems promotes predictability, while failing to use them hinders it. Staff knowledge is essential in this process, both knowledge about ASD and about pedagogical practices that foster structures and predictability (Chahboun et al., 2024; Scheving and Egeberg, 2015) Predictable routines and structures are essential for children

with ASD (Martinsen et al., 2016; Nordøen and Laberg, 2021; Festøy et al., 2024) as they reduce stress and foster participation. Henrik notes:

*“What promotes predictability is, of course, daily schedules and structures.”*

Hogsnes (2019) supports this, stating that using familiar working methods and content from preschool provides continuity and predictability. Scheving and Egeberg (2015) highlight that knowledge transfer and competence development are crucial during the transition. Emma describes how structured tasks help children experience mastery, for example, by making tasks visible and sequenced, and completing steps in order. This type of structuring, known as situational structure, provides clarity about what will happen, when, and with whom (Martinsen et al., 2016).

Factors hindering predictability include limited resources and staff sick leave. Johanne observes:

*“Absence is a big factor; we don’t get the opportunity to have or go on as many visits as we want because there is absence.”*

Clara adds that sick leave is common in human services but has a greater impact when working with children with ASD, making routines less predictable. Missed visit days or postponed meetings can reduce the child’s familiarity with the school environment and staff, weakening both continuity and collaboration. Having multiple staff involved in the collaboration can mitigate these effects, as responsibilities can be shared. Though this approach is resource intensive, and might influence continuity in, and the quality of, the relationship between staff and the child with ASD, and further affect the child’s wellbeing and academic performance (Broberg et al., 2014; Gray et al., 2023).

Nina highlights systemic challenges:

*“I experience that the school has teaching until the summer break, so the contact teacher cannot come and get to know children with ASD, and the child cannot come to school to get to know the contact teacher.”*

Addressing this requires systemic adjustments to allow contact teachers to engage with children before school starts while balancing other responsibilities.

Guri emphasizes that early initiation of transition routines is a key promoting factor:

*“Starting the process early, so there is time to carry out all the routines.”*

Early preparation, typically beginning 1 to 2 years before school entry, allows sufficient time for visit days, collaboration meetings, and gradual familiarization with the new environment. Informants agree that early routines are advantageous, though events like sick leave can still disrupt predictability.

A further implication of the findings is the lack of formalized, municipality-wide transition procedures. In the absence of standardized routines, transition practices rely heavily on the professional judgment and initiative of individual educators and

institutions. This variability may create inconsistencies in support for children with ASD and their families. Strengthening formal guidelines could enhance alignment across agencies and contribute to more predictable and equitable transition processes. The findings indicate that, in practice, the transition process often relies heavily on the expertise and professional judgment of special educators. While this flexibility can be beneficial, it also underscores the need for clearer institutional guidelines and support structures to ensure consistency and coherence across cases.

In sum, reactions to a new school environment for children with ASD are often heightened due to sensory sensitivity and unfamiliarity. Predictability is promoted through situational structures, visual supports, continuity of routines, and early, well-coordinated collaboration among staff and parents. Challenges such as staff absence, sick leave, and systemic constraints can hinder predictability, highlighting the need for proactive planning and flexible support strategies.

## Conclusion

The current study explored special educators’ experiences regarding the transition from kindergarten to school for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), focusing on routines and practices that facilitate a predictable and safe transition. Eight qualitative interviews and a theoretical framework highlighted key implications for practice and research, emphasizing the importance of individual adaptation, systematic preparation, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

The informants’ reflections on the transition from kindergarten to school indicate that early and repeated familiarization, strong collaboration, and sufficient resources are crucial for a smooth process. They emphasized that children benefit from having more time to visit the school and from systematic familiarization and observation in secure environments; however, limited resources often make multiple visits challenging.

Collaboration also emerged as a key factor. The informants highlighted that positive cooperation between kindergarten and school, between institutions and parents, and across agencies—combined with accessible resources, expertise in ASD, and consistent use of established systems—enhances the transition process. Both collaboration and continuity reduce novelty, increase predictability, and promote a sense of safety for children with ASD.

Overall, an ideal transition relies on early familiarization, knowledgeable collaboration, sufficient resources, and consistent structures to reduce stress and support children’s sense of security. When preschools share how they have supported a child, schools can use that information as a foundation for further planning. This suggests that early collaboration, assessment, and visit days can establish predictability and continuity, supporting children with ASD in a secure transition.

Routines that support transitions for children with ASD involve individualized measures, interdisciplinary collaboration, parental involvement, visit days, and system-level preparation. Implementing these routines may strengthen continuity and predictability, laying the foundation for a positive school start and future academic success.

Special educators perceive the transition as complex, with significant individual variation. Adapted measures, such as visit days, help children familiarize themselves with the school environment and staff, increasing predictability and facilitating relationship-building. Visual supports and collaboration between kindergarten, school, educational psychology services (PPT), and parents ensure continuity and security. Overall, individualized adaptation, structured preparation, and collaboration are essential for a safe and predictable transition.

Barriers include the absence of formal routines, limited time, and scarce resources, which restrict visit days and hinder early relationship-building. Opportunities arise from flexible, individually tailored measures. Visit days help reduce overload and increase predictability, while ongoing communication with kindergartens helps maintain continuity. Collaboration among educators from different agencies enables a holistic understanding of each child and supports tailored strategies for a safe and successful transition.

## Implications for practice—measures that help in the transition from kindergarten to school

Collaboration among PPT, schools, kindergartens, and parents is essential for predictability. Visit days, systematic familiarization, and attachment work at school start support children's adjustment and readiness for academic and developmental goals. Key challenges include lack of formal routines and limited time and resources. Successful transitions require flexibility, individual adaptation, close collaboration, and adequate support structures.

## Limitations and future research directions

Further research could compare transitions for children with ASD across mainstream schools, special schools, and co-located kindergarten-school centers to identify barriers, opportunities, and factors influencing suitability for individual children.

This study was a small study based on the experiences of eight special educators in kindergarten and school. An additional limitation is that the study was conducted within a single Norwegian municipality. Local structures, resources, and routines inevitably shape transition practices, and the findings should therefore be understood as contextually situated. While the insights may be transferable to similar settings, they should not be assumed to reflect practices in all municipalities or national contexts. Future studies would benefit from expanding the sample size to include diverse municipalities and institutional contexts, enabling broader comparisons across regions. Incorporating quantitative or mixed-methods approaches could also capture measurable outcomes related to adjustment, inclusion, and academic progression. Comparative research across different educational systems would further strengthen understanding of how structural and cultural variations influence transition practices for children with ASD.

The dataset provided a rich and detailed picture of the experiences of the people involved. The study was grounded in

diverse theoretical sources, and measures were taken to minimize bias while empowering informants to speak freely. Although the findings are not statistically generalizable, they may be transferable to similar contexts. Overall, the chosen approach generated credible and nuanced insights relevant to the research question.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by SIKT-The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

TT: Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Conceptualization, Writing – original draft. KL: Validation, Writing – review & editing. AP: Validation, Writing – review & editing. MS: Validation, Writing – review & editing. SC: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Validation.

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