

Transition to School for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Exploration of Teachers'
Practices and Parental Experiences

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Abstract

Transition to School for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Exploration of Teachers' Practices and Parental Experiences

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The transition to primary school is a significant milestone that introduces new demands and challenges for children, families, and teachers alike. Children with disabilities, including ASD, are particularly vulnerable, facing distinct and heightened challenges during this critical period. The present study aims to: (1) examine the implementation of recommended transition practices for children with ASD by general education teachers, assessing their perceived importance and primary concerns; (2) explore the experiences and perceptions of parents caring for children with ASD during the transition to school process; (3) investigate the interplay between teacher involvement in the transition process and parental concerns; and (4) identify the impact of parental competence on active involvement during the transition to school for children with ASD. Nine general education kindergarten teachers ($n = 9$) and four parents of children with ASD ($n = 4$) were recruited. A mixed methods approach (semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and scales) was used to address the research questions. Findings revealed significant concerns and barriers in the transition process, including the need for better communication, support services, and individualized transition practices. Despite high parental competence, disparities between teacher involvement and parental concerns underscore the urgency for improved collaboration. This research offers valuable insights for parents, educators, schools, and policymakers striving to enhance the educational outcomes and well-being of children with special needs.

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Dedication

To the pursuit of knowledge and the ones who make it possible.

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Introduction

In the ever-changing landscape of education, the experiences of children with special needs stands as a testament to the transformative impact of inclusive practices. For the purpose of this research, “special needs” will be used synonymously with developmental disabilities (DDs) and when referring to children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In Canada, it has become increasingly common for young children with DDs to participate in inclusive early childhood education (ECE) programs and attend inclusive schools. Children with special needs are frequently educated alongside their neurotypical peers in various settings (Villeneuve et al., 2013). Moreover, within the Quebec context referenced in this study, the term “daycare” will be used interchangeably with “preschool,” reflecting their common usage to describe ECE settings that cater to the developmental needs of young children.

Inclusive education is geared towards promoting the cognitive, physical, and social aspects of healthy development and has been recognized as the preferred approach for children with disabilities since the 1980s (Koster et al., 2009). As they continue to be educated in tandem with their neurotypical peers, the transition to school (TTS) emerges as a critical milestone in the educational journey of children with disabilities. Therefore, it is imperative to first cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the nuances of the TTS, especially within the context of children with special needs.

A Grounded Theory Approach

In this thesis, the grounded theory approach holds significant relevance in investigating transition to school experiences. This methodology generates a general explanation of processes, actions, and interactions, drawing on the diverse perspectives of numerous participants (Creswell

& Poth, 2017). Due to the collective experiences of the study participants in the TTS process, the resulting theory has the capacity to shed light on existing practices and establish a framework for future research. It is important to recognize that the development of this theory is not preconceived; instead, it emerges organically, rooted in data gathered from participants who have lived through the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the context of the present study, the grounded theory approach serves as a foundational method for unraveling the complexities of the transition to school, particularly for children with ASD. By centering on the experiences and viewpoints of those engaged in the TTS, this participant-centric approach ensures that emerging theories are woven from the authentic lived experiences of stakeholders.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model

Bronfenbrenner's pioneering bioecological model, initially known as the ecological systems paradigm, offers a framework to comprehend how a child's development is shaped by their broader environment (Dockett et al., 2014). Given the dynamic nature of learning and development and the value of incorporating diverse theoretical viewpoints in developmental studies, Bronfenbrenner recognized the necessity for a framework encompassing both psychological theories of learning and educational practices. Bronfenbrenner emphasized that development arises from the interplay between the individual and their environment, and consequently advocated for grounding development within environmental systems (Hayes et al., 2017). While Bronfenbrenner's early conceptualization has been influential, later refinements to his theory, as well as a range of different theoretical positions, inform current research. Throughout its evolution, the ecological systems model has consistently included structural and

biological aspects of development as well as sociocultural dimensions (Hayes et al., 2017).

Bronfenbrenner's original model views the child's ecological context as comprised of a hierarchy of four nested and interacting systems that exert both direct and indirect influences on the child, namely: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Upon recognizing the impact of time and history on development, Bronfenbrenner introduced the fifth system, known as the chronosystem (Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Starr et al., 2016).

Microsystem

The microsystem is defined as a “pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced over time by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, as cited in Crawford, 2020, p. 1). In the realm of child development, the microsystem refers to the proximal relationships that children establish with important individuals, either within the confines of their home environment or beyond it. Important individuals are primarily parents or caregivers and may include early childhood education personnel, early intervention (EI) providers, and kindergarten teachers (Crawford, 2020; Starr et al., 2016). In addition, the microsystem entails an individual's personality, beliefs, and temperament. As noted by Crawford (2020), systems within the microsystem may affect the individual both independently and in conjunction with one another.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem refers to the communication and interactions between the various elements of an individual's microsystem, including family, school, community, and peer groups (Hayes et al., 2017; Starr et al., 2016). In early education, this extends to relationships between family members and EI providers. The mesosystem sheds light on the interdependence of these elements, illustrating how they collectively impact an individual's development (Hayes et al.,

2017). For instance, a child's experience at school can significantly influence their interactions with family, and conversely, family dynamics can impact a child's school life. In an educational context, it is important to grasp the complexity of the mesosystem as it recognizes the multifaceted nature of children's lives and encourages collaborative efforts and holistic educational approaches to support their growth and development.

Exosystem

The exosystem encompasses more distant but nonetheless influential factors external to the individual, such as educational policies and curriculum design (Hayes et al., 2017). Within the exosystem, it is essential to recognize that not all microsystems directly involve the person at the center. For example, within the framework of a parent's employment, the child is not inherently part of the workplace system. However, the child can be significantly affected by this system if the parent is required to work long hours, misses important school events, or returns home stressed due to work pressures (Crawford, 2020). Given its impact on resource accessibility, parental engagement, and the overall support system available, the exosystem wields a profound influence over children's educational experiences.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem represents the overarching cultural and societal factors that influence an individual's development and experiences within the broader context of their environment (Hayes et al., 2017). Essentially, the macrosystem weaves a complex web of interactions among the various micro-, meso-, and exosystems. As described by Crawford (2020), the macrosystem can be likened to a societal blueprint for a particular culture or subculture. For instance, in the case of an immigrant family, while the adults may not speak the host language, the child may become proficient in both their native language and the host language, due to

their immersion in school and interactions within the micro- and mesosystems (Crawford, 2020). Understanding the macrosystem is vital in early education, as it encompasses the cultural, societal, and systematic influences that mold educational practices, policies, and expectations, fundamentally shaping children's experiences.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem, a pivotal addition to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, underscores the significance of the historical context in which people and processes are located (Dockett et al., 2014). It encapsulates not only an individual's aging and maturation but also the time or era in which they exist and develop (Crawford, 2020). This temporal dimension is crucial in understanding how a child's trajectory is shaped by the historical period they inhabit. For instance, children and adolescents who came of age during the onset of the Great Depression experienced markedly different circumstances than those born shortly after this period (Crawford, 2020). The chronosystem serves as a dynamic backdrop that emphasizes how historical events, societal shifts, and cultural changes directly influence child development.

Transition to School

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework serves as a fundamental perspective for comprehending the transition to school as it frames development as an ongoing process within a multitude of contextual influences (Dockett et al., 2014; Starr et al., 2016). According to Bronfenbrenner, ecological transitions, such as the shift to formal schooling, occur when an individual's position within the ecological environment undergoes alteration due to a change in role, setting, or both (Dockett et al., 2014). The ecological systems model recognizes that numerous contributors influence transition experiences, with each contributor's perspectives and expectations shaping these experiences (Dockett et al., 2011). Furthermore,

Bronfenbrenner's model assigns responsibility for facilitating an effective transition to school to all parties involved in the process (Docket et al., 2011). This aligns with the contemporary shift away from viewing school readiness as solely reliant on "ready" children, toward recognizing that school readiness encompasses "ready" children, families, schools, and communities (Fontil, 2019). Within these evolving models, transition programs become opportunities to establish meaningful and responsive relationships, forming the basis for ongoing interactions among children, families, and schools (Dockett et al., 2011). In this regard, the bioecological model of development is considered particularly well-suited for research with diverse populations, making it a valuable framework for studying TTS, especially for exceptional populations (Starr et al., 2016).

Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition

The ecological and dynamic model of transition, proposed by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000), describes how links among child, home, school, peer, and neighborhood factors create a dynamic network of relationships that influence children's transition to school both directly and indirectly. The model's standout feature lies in its ability to highlight the evolving dynamics among these contexts as they unfold over time. These dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping children's adaptation to kindergarten and serve as reliable predictors of their future relationships within the school environment (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The ecological and dynamic model frames the transition to school as an ongoing and interactive process that encompasses various contexts and individuals within a child's life, over time. As such, the framework conceptualizes transitions as relying on effective systems and supports, rather than success residing solely within the child. This underscores the importance of collaboration between people across settings (Jellinek et al., 2022). The model highlights that the nature of

relationships between contexts, such as home and school, are continually evolving. Considering their profound influence on children's development, these relationships should be viewed as significant outcomes in their own regard (Fontil, 2019). Moreover, successful transitions are contingent upon collaborative, continuous, and seamless relationships between home and school (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

The quality of relationships within the transition ecology plays a cardinal role in providing essential support to the child during this challenging period. Consequently, when these relationships involve regular communication, shared goals, and a focus on nurturing the child's skill development, they significantly contribute to positive transition outcomes (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Despite the critical role that partnerships and collaborative practices play in achieving successful school integration, the literature denotes their scarcity during the TTS process (Chen et al., 2020; Fontil, 2019; Fontil et al., 2019; Gooden & Rous, 2018; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Schischka et al., 2012; Villeneuve et al., 2013; Yamauchi, 2020). Therefore, the model emphasizes the importance of tailoring transition practices to align with the unique needs of each child and their family, with a particular focus on harnessing the family's strengths (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015).

Much like Bronfenbrenner's framework, the ecological and dynamic model of transition underscores the importance of considering various interconnected systems and environments when examining child development. Both models highlight the dynamic nature of development and transitions, recognizing that they evolve over time and are influenced by changes within and between systems. Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) assert that "the primary advantage of research based on the ecological and dynamic model of transition is that it presents a more comprehensive explanation of the factors that contribute to children's transition experience and

subsequent schooling” (p. 505). Research guided by the current model not only emphasizes the interconnections among contexts but also explores how these connections create patterns that ultimately shape transition outcomes (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Strengths-Based Approach (SBA)

A strengths-based educational approach represents a profound philosophical stance and daily practice that significantly influences how individuals engage in the teaching and learning process (Lopez & Louis, 2009). This approach focuses on harnessing a child’s unique skills, abilities, and strengths, with the primary goal of promoting learning, rather than solely fixating on deficits or limitations (Chen et al., 2020). As such, it plays a crucial role in nurturing growth mindsets, challenging stigmatization, and elevating expectations, particularly for students with disabilities (Yeager & Deardorff, 2022).

At its core, the strengths-based philosophy is rooted in the belief that empowering individuals to flourish, rather than to simply survive, forms a solid foundation for success. The approach operates on the premise that “capitalizing on one’s best qualities is likely to lead to greater success than would be possible by making a comparable investment of effort into overcoming personal weaknesses or deficiencies” (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 2). According to Dockett et al. (2014), the foundation of a strengths-based approach lies in the belief that individuals and groups can achieve positive change when provided with the right support and guidance. Moreover, effective implementation of strengths-based approaches necessitates tailored strategies, especially as children transition to school, and relies heavily on strong communication among stakeholders (Chen et al., 2020). This collaborative effort extends beyond educators to encompass other members of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team, including special education teachers, general education teachers, parents, and administrators.

Thus, it is essential that stakeholders embrace the collective mission of empowering students to recognize and cultivate their strengths (Yeager & Deardorff, 2022). Strengths-based education is grounded in the idea that the potential for growth and development exists within every student. Therefore, educators play a key role in creating tailored learning experiences that help students actualize their unique potential (Lopez & Louis, 2009). This philosophy emphasizes the importance of individualization, where educational professionals actively consider each child's strengths, interests, and needs while systematically adapting the learning experience to their unique requirements (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

The discourse on TTS is increasingly anchored in strengths-based perspectives rather than deficit-oriented narratives. For instance, findings from a study by Chen et al. (2020) highlight the importance of adopting a holistic, interactionist approach to transition planning, wherein a strengths-based perspective guides collaborative and ongoing communication between parents, teachers, and early intervention staff. By positioning strengths at the core of transition plans, students with learning disabilities and their families are more likely to have positive experiences, opening the door to increased collaboration and enhanced programming (Yeager & Deardorff, 2022). Furthermore, strengths-based perspectives acknowledge that all individuals involved in the TTS bring their own unique expertise and experiences to the table. This approach underscores the importance of respect and collaboration, recognizing children and families as experts in their own lives, fully capable of exercising agency and contributing to positive change. The adoption of a “strengths-based” rather than “deficit-based” perspective when addressing TTS fosters more equitable relationships and practices, tapping into the personal and cultural resources that children and families bring to the educational landscape (Dockett et al., 2014).

Transition to School (TTS)

In recent years, the focus has shifted from merely assessing children's perceived school readiness for kindergarten to understanding the transition process within the interplay of family, classroom, and community contexts (Dockett et al., 2014). The "readiness" concept falls short in considering the contextual factors that significantly influence children's successful transition to and performance in kindergarten (Schulting et al., 2015). Consequently, the notion of child readiness as the primary determinant of kindergarten success has gradually given way to more socially and ecologically informed approaches over time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). As such, using strengths-based inclusive language like "transition to school" instead of "readiness for school" redirects our attention towards educational processes rather than fixating on the individual characteristics of children (Dockett et al., 2014).

In the educational context, transition is defined as the "continuity of experiences that children have between periods and between spheres of their lives" (Kagan & Neuman, 1998, as cited in Connolly & Gersch, 2016, p. 247). More specifically, the transition to school is an ongoing process that commences prior to a child's school entry, as families initiate decision-making and seek information about school. It extends beyond the actual start of school until both children and their families have attained a sense of comfort within the school (Dockett et al., 2011). Moreover, the transition to school signifies a process wherein both the child and their family adjust to new service delivery models through a series of coordinated steps (Chen et al., 2020). In this light, transition to school is viewed within contexts that foster collaborative connections between preschools, elementary schools, and the broader community, thereby ensuring consistency and cohesion across educational programs (Rous et al., 2007). There are two distinct transition periods that have been identified as particularly significant for young children with disabilities and their families: one at the age of 3 and another at the age of 5. At

age 3, children with special needs and their families typically transition from home-based services to preschool, from an early intervention system to preschool, or from childcare to preschool. At age 5, typical transitions involve movement from preschool to kindergarten, from home to kindergarten, or from childcare to kindergarten (Rous et al., 2007).

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by deficits in social communication and the presence of restricted interests and repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). While autism is considered a lifelong disorder, the degree of impairment in functioning can vary significantly among individuals diagnosed with ASD. The early signs of autism may be detected by parents, caregivers, or pediatricians before a child's first birthday, although symptoms typically become more noticeable around the ages of 2 or 3. In some instances, the functional impairments associated with autism may not be immediately apparent and might become more noticeable once the child starts school, especially when interacting with peers (APA, 2021). In preschoolers, forewarning signs may include limited engagement in pretend play, odd or intensely focused interests, and rigidity. School-aged children may demonstrate concrete or literal thinking, difficulty understanding emotions, and may show a lack of conversational skills or appropriate social interactions (Hodges et al., 2020).

According to data from the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network, the prevalence of ASD in 2020 was approximately 1 in 36 children. Notably, among 8-year-olds, boys were nearly four times more likely to be diagnosed with ASD than girls (CDC, 2023). This estimate is based on data from 8-year-old children living in 11 specific communities in the United States that participated in the ADDM Network. While these sites may not represent

the entire nation, their data is valuable for monitoring trends and assessing whether screening and autism services are reaching various demographic groups.

In the Canadian context, the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth (CHSCY) reported the highest prevalence of ASD among those ages 5 to 11 years, with approximately 1 in 40 children (2.5%) identified as having ASD (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022). Over the past two decades, there has been a substantial surge in ASD prevalence estimates for 8-year-old children within the ADDM Network; increasing from 1 in 150 (0.67%) in 2000 to approximately 1 in 44 (~2.3%) in 2018. This rising prevalence suggests that more children with ASD are presently entering the education system, requiring intensive supports and effective interventions to aid their integration. To illustrate, the 2019 CHSCY reported that more than 75% of school-aged children and youth with ASD had special education needs (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022). Consequently, this presents a challenge for current teachers and educational systems (Beamish et al., 2014; Fontil et al., 2019). Considering the growing rates of ASD observed in North America and its consequential impact on the transition to school, these statistics hold great significance.

The Impact of ASD Symptomology

Current literature suggests that the transition into formal schooling can be a complex and demanding experience, presenting challenges for all children and their families (Chen et al., 2020; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Fontil et al., 2019; Kim, 2022). However, children with disabilities, including those with ASD, are especially vulnerable and face particular difficulties during the transition process (Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Marsh et al., 2017). The transition from home or preschool to a regular classroom can be exceptionally challenging for young children with special needs; this highlights the invaluable benefits they

can gain from the implementation of effective transition practices (Curby et al., 2018; Janus et al., 2008).

During the transition to kindergarten (TTK), students with developmental disabilities like ASD may face unique challenges, particularly when their support needs differ from their neurotypical peers (Kim, 2022). For instance, teachers frequently report that students with disabilities encounter more difficulties during kindergarten entry (e.g., externalizing behaviours, self-regulation difficulties, and poorer overall student-teacher relationships), in contrast to children without disabilities (Marsh et al., 2017; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). Children with ASD are particularly vulnerable during transitions due to their core deficits, which include challenges in social interaction, communication, and generalizing skills learned from one setting to another (APA, 2013; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Fontil et al., 2019). The complex nature of ASD can lead to significant difficulties during the transition process, placing autistic children at a higher risk for emotional and behavioural problems, bullying, school exclusion, and peer rejection (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, many autistic children display behavioural or emotional difficulties when adjusting to the unpredictability associated with changes in routines and new settings, making the transition to new environments challenging (APA, 2013; Chen et al., 2020; Jellinek et al., 2022). Furthermore, Nuske et al. (2018) noted that difficulties related to social communication, peer relationships, resistance to change, and intolerance to uncertainty can cause concern for parents during the TTS process.

Specific Challenges

The barriers faced by children with special needs during the TTS stem from insufficient support, specifically concerning the availability of adequate personnel and resources (Dockett et al., 2011). For instance, the lack of connections between various service providers has frequently

been cited as a reason for inadequate transition experiences for both children with ASD and their typically developing counterparts (Janus et al., 2008). Furthermore, Janus et al. (2007) identified four major issues concerning the TTK for children with special needs, namely (a) family issues, (b) administrative issues, (c) intervention and training, and (d) teacher practices. Children with ASD often struggle with the unpredictable nature of transitions, leading to difficulties in managing anxiety, effectively communicating with peers and teachers, and adjusting to new routines (Fontil et al., 2019; Nuske et al., 2018).

Types of Transitions: Vertical vs. Horizontal

Considering the scope of the current study, it is important to recognize that young children with ASD experience two major types of transitions, notably, vertical transitions and horizontal transitions (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010). Vertical transitions refer to the movement of a child from one educational program to another, such as from a preschool program to kindergarten. These transitions are predictable, developmental in scope, affect all students, and necessitate cooperative efforts among various professionals and parents to ensure a smooth transition (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Stoner et al., 2007). In contrast, horizontal transitions pertain to the short-term movement of a child from one setting to another. These transitions occur more frequently (i.e., on a daily or weekly basis) and are tailored to meet the individual needs of students. Unlike vertical transitions, horizontal transitions lack the same predictability. They encompass various scenarios, such as moving from home to school, transitioning between activities or classes, and shifting from the playground to the classroom (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Stoner et al., 2007). For children with DDs such as those with ASD, horizontal transitions can pose challenges and induce stress, potentially leading to stereotypical or aggressive

behaviours. Therefore, meticulous planning and devising effective strategies for managing these transitions are of utmost importance (Stoner et al., 2007).

General Challenges

The transition to primary school represents a major event that introduces new demands and challenges for both children and their families, along with teachers (Chen et al., 2020; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010). According to Kim (2022), the transition to kindergarten can be a stressful milestone, not only for the child but also for the entire family, as it requires collaborative efforts between parents and educators to ensure a successful transition. An initial study examining general education teachers' perceptions of children's TTK difficulties revealed that 48% of their students experienced moderate to poor levels of success during the transition to school (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000, as cited in Fontil et al., 2019). The challenges most frequently cited in relation to the TTS for children include difficulties following directions, gaps in academic content knowledge, and problems with social skills (Fontil et al., 2019). The transition to school poses considerable challenges for children and their families, primarily due to the significant shift in expectations as children make the transition from preschool or home to elementary school. This shift comprises a more intricate social environment, heightened academic demands, altered rules and routines, reduced family support, shifts in identity and social status, decreased one-on-one time with teachers due to larger class sizes, and a greater number of transitions throughout the day (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Sensitive Period

Starting primary school marks the first significant educational milestone in a child's early life. It represents a critical phase during which appropriate supports can exert a profound influence on academic, social, and mental health outcomes over both the short and long term

(Chen et al., 2020). In fact, the transition to kindergarten has been labeled a “sensitive period” necessary for later school success (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Prior research has demonstrated a strong connection between a child’s early experiences and their later academic outcomes, such as middle school placement in advanced courses and achieving higher grade-point averages in high school (Entwisle & Alexander, 1999, as cited in Yamauchi, 2020). Furthermore, there is compelling evidence suggesting that children may face an elevated risk of school failure and social adjustment difficulties when they encounter an ineffective transition from preschool to kindergarten (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008).

The immediate and enduring consequences of successful school beginnings have received international recognition (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Dockett et al., 2014). A growing body of evidence substantiates the idea that children who embark on their school journey positively are more likely to thrive academically and socially (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Marsh et al., 2017). Short-term benefits of a seamless transition to school include improved social and emotional adjustment as well as enhanced academic performance; while long-term benefits include economic advantages stemming from increased taxable income due to heightened future employability among these children (Fontil et al., 2019; Schulting et al., 2015). Taken together, a successful transition emerges as a vital element of early intervention practices, with the potential to exert a substantial impact on children’s adaptation to the school environment and their later integration into society (Bruder, 2010).

Transition Planning

Acknowledging the transition to school as a critical period underscores the imperative need for meticulous planning to optimize a child’s educational journey. Transition planning refers to a deliberately organized and coordinated process designed to facilitate a child’s

transition from one program to another, which can include moving from a home- or family-based program to an inclusive school program (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010). According to Kim and Morningstar (2020), individual transition planning serves to help students learn about themselves, establish desired outcomes that align with their personal goals and those of their parents, and pinpoint the necessary services and supports required to attain these objectives. A recurring theme in the literature on TTS highlights the importance of families, teachers, and administrators recognizing transition planning as a gradual, ongoing process (Rous et al., 2007). For instance, the Quebec Ministry of Education (2010) reports that an effective transition is planned and carried out over a period of at least 12 months. Furthermore, early childhood educators attribute a high degree of importance to continuous transition planning practices, such as establishing a transition team, providing parent information, planning visits, fostering teacher collaboration, facilitating reciprocal teacher visits, and preparing the learning environment (Beamish et al., 2014).

Transition planning guidelines from provincial ministries of education in Canada, such as the Quebec Ministry of Education (2010) and the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005), place a strong emphasis on parent involvement and interprofessional collaboration to facilitate the transition of preschoolers into the education system. In line with these standards, research indicates that parents who actively engage in the transition planning process report greater satisfaction with the outcomes for their children (Wehman et al., 2015). According to Dockett et al. (2014), transition planning should extend beyond a limited emphasis on individual readiness; instead, it should adopt a holistic approach that incorporates multifaceted practices to assist school entrants with varying abilities and backgrounds. In addition, transition planning should cultivate collaborative partnerships among ECE programs, schools, families, and communities.

Overall, effective vertical transition planning is critical for a child's future development, as it can significantly impact their social and academic growth (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010).

Facilitators of Successful TTS

The transition to school may be deemed successful when children are eager to attend school, feel secure and comfortable, develop academic and social skills, attain higher levels of independence, participate actively with peers and teachers, and experience a sense of well-being, belonging, and inclusion (Chen et al., 2020). The definition of successful TTS can be expanded by emphasizing that the educational transition continues until both the child and their family feel comfortable within the school environment (Dockett et al., 2011). Furthermore, Dockett and Perry (2004) argue that context and individual circumstances make it difficult to define a single set of universal predictors for successful transition to school for children with ASD. However, other studies (i.e., Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; Schischka et al., 2012; Villeneuve et al., 2013) suggest that the smoothness of a child's transition from preschool to kindergarten and beyond is influenced, in part, by the strategies employed by educators when working with the child and their family. For example, Lillvist and Wilder (2017) found that implementing developmentally appropriate school activities and fostering equal partnerships with parents enhanced the overall transition experience for children. Research consistently highlights the crucial role of parental involvement in the TTS for children with disabilities, emphasizing the importance of effective communication and information sharing with families (Fontil et al., 2019; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Marsh et al., 2017; Schischka et al., 2012; Schulting et al., 2005; Starr et al., 2016; Villeneuve et al., 2013). These aspects serve as pillars for ensuring high quality transition and inclusion. Moreover, collaboration among professionals,

families, and teachers is particularly important for children in need of special support due to physical or learning disabilities (Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; Walker et al., 2012).

Seamless transitions rely on building strong connections between different systems, including those between schools and families, as well as between preschool and kindergarten teachers (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Additionally, maintaining continuity between the services children are leaving and those they are entering is vital for successful adaptation to the new environment. Unfortunately, previous investigations found little evidence of liaison between early childhood and school settings, significantly impacting the success of children's TTS (Schischka et al., 2012). According to Villeneuve et al. (2013), successful transitions require collaboration not only among professionals and the child's family, but also among the many professionals working with the child. In Yamauchi's (2020) study, early childhood educators listed a set of activities designed to promote meaningful collaboration among professionals, including classroom visits, intergroup discussions, and joint participation in professional development opportunities.

Transition Practices

Transition practices encompass a set of intentional activities designed to facilitate the transition to school for children and their families (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). These practices are strategic efforts aimed at establishing a sense of support and familiarity, bridging the gap between pre-kindergarten and kindergarten (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). In general, transition practices are initiatives undertaken by teachers and schools to engage with children and families before, during, and shortly after the transition to kindergarten. These practices not only ease the entry into formal schooling but also equip children with essential skills, preparing them for the novel demands they will encounter (Curby et al., 2018). Rooted in the ecological and dynamic

framework, transition practices are those that “facilitate an ongoing relationship process among all partners” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003, p. 9). It is important to note that transition practices display considerable variability across educational institutions and classrooms. They include a range of approaches (Curby et al., 2018; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), such as:

- Organizing transition meetings involving key stakeholders in the child’s life,
- Facilitating home visits by the kindergarten teacher,
- Arranging for the child to visit the elementary school environment prior to their formal transition,
- Facilitating meetings between elementary school teachers and preschool teachers,
- Accessing school records,
- Hosting open houses to familiarize families with the school, and
- Sending out informative letters to the families of incoming students.

Types of Transition Practices: High Intensity vs. Low Intensity

In addition to their variability across schools and classrooms, evidence-based transition strategies can be categorized in terms of their intensity: high-intensity vs. low-intensity practices. High-intensity practices involve a more substantial investment of time and effort to address individual needs (Gooden & Rous, 2018). These practices may entail arranging visits for the child to the upcoming program, having staff from the receiving program visit and observe the child, sharing relevant information about the child with the receiving program, conducting meetings with receiving program staff, organizing transition meetings with the child and their family, including the future kindergarten teacher in the transition meeting, and visiting the child’s home (Fontil et al., 2019). According to Curby et al. (2018), high-intensity transition practices are applicable to children who are not only at risk for difficulties but also display signs

that they are preparing for a particularly demanding TTS. For instance, a child with ASD who has been identified as needing specialized educational services may benefit from more high-intensity transition practices. In contrast, low-intensity practices are more general and are applied to both children and adults, as described by Gooden and Rous (2018). These low-intensity practices include actions such as sending caregivers a preparatory letter concerning the transition, distributing informational flyers to families before the transition, and hosting open house events for incoming children and families (Fontil et al., 2019).

Role of Transition Practices

The role of transition practices in shaping a child's trajectory cannot be overstated. Policymakers highly value the use of transition practices as a means of facilitating early school transitions, supported by research indicating their effectiveness in ensuring success (Fontil, 2019). Specifically, implementing transition practices has been found to positively influence children's academic achievement and socio-emotional functioning (Fontil, 2019; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Schulting et al., 2005). To illustrate, LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) found that communication between preschool and elementary school teachers was the strongest predictor of adaptive socio-emotional functioning and reduced behaviour problems in children. Moreover, Schulting et al. (2005) found that children who received transition services prior to kindergarten entry demonstrated higher achievement scores at the end of kindergarten. Cook and Coley (2017) noted that specific transition practices like parent orientations were associated with increased achievement in reading and math, reinforcing the importance of these strategies. In essence, pre-kindergarten transition practices are designed to enhance a child's ability to thrive in the classroom, setting the stage for later academic skills development (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Transition practices can address a spectrum of objectives that span informational,

instructional, and relational dimensions. Informational goals are designed to facilitate one-way information flow from the school or classroom to parents; instructional approaches aim to promote kindergarten readiness skills; and relational goals prioritize the development of positive relationships throughout the transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Ultimately, kindergarten transition programs yield numerous benefits, including higher on-time enrollment, increased parent engagement, and improved community and school relationships (Yamauchi, 2020).

Effective Transition Practices

Transition to school practices should aim to strengthen the supportive connections among children, families, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, and the classroom environment (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Effective teacher-initiated transition practices are defined as those which actively engage families and educators with a high level of intensity well before the physical shift to a new classroom occurs (Gooden & Rous, 2018; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). A study by Schischka et al. (2012) found that effective transition practices involved building a dedicated team of professionals to plan the transition and including these professionals in collaborative meetings with the child and their family. Similarly, Nuske et al. (2018) found that teacher strategies with the most robust evidence included holding a team transition planning meeting prior to the end of the school year and maintaining frequent communication with parents.

As such, best practice recommendations for kindergarten transition programming are characterized by strategies to increase communication and alignment between home, preschool, and kindergarten contexts (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). Research indicates that both parents and teachers not only benefit from but also express a desire for

transition practices that prioritize the interconnection between systems, as opposed to more traditional transition efforts (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Stakeholders engaged in the TTS process consistently endorse effective strategies such as establishing interagency partnerships, fostering collaboration between professionals and families, and adopting a family-centered approach (Rous et al., 2007). For instance, in a study by Starr et al. (2016), front-line stakeholders (i.e., parents, service providers, and kindergarten teachers) revealed that positive TTK experiences were facilitated when teachers invested time in building relationships, either by meeting with the child before school began or visiting the early intervention setting for an observation. Likewise, Gooden and Rous (2018) recommend that teachers pursue individualized efforts, such as making phone calls and home visits to families and children, meeting with staff across programs, and visiting community pre-kindergarten settings.

Considering the diverse symptom presentation in ASD and the unique needs of children across the spectrum, individualization of supports is key (Nuske et al., 2018). According to the recommendations proposed by Gooden and Rous (2018), teachers should meet with staff and family to assess children's strengths and needs; teach developmentally appropriate skills to each child entering kindergarten; collaborate with staff from sending and receiving programs to select developmentally appropriate curriculum; create individualized transition plans for each incoming child; and undergo training to acquire tailored approaches. In a study conducted by Stoner et al. (2007), parents found the "identify-observe-explore" strategy to be most effective in assisting with both horizontal and vertical transitions. This strategy involves identifying transitions before they occur, allowing children time to observe new situations, and providing opportunities for children to explore the new environment.

Transition to School: Parent Perceptions

Challenges and Concerns

When the transition to school involves children with special needs, anxiety can overwhelm the excitement as parents are faced with navigating critical decisions while confronting various obstacles linked to their children's educational futures (Dockett et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important to explore the perspectives of parents as their children embark on this crucial milestone in their academic journey (Kim, 2022). As noted by Stoner et al. (2007), "input from families, a key partner in the transition planning process, is essential for effective transition planning for young children with ASD" (p. 24). Recent findings indicate that parents of children with disabilities express a higher number of transition-related concerns compared to parents of typically developing children as they enter kindergarten (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015).

The current literature highlights that in contrast to parents of typically developing children, parents of children with special needs tend to exhibit greater discontent with the changes to and accessibility of services as their children transition to elementary school (Janus et al., 2007). In a study by Quintero and McIntyre (2011), parents of children with developmental disabilities noted that preschool teachers engaged in more transition preparation practices than elementary school staff. Similarly, Siddiqua and Janus (2017) found that parents of children with special needs held consistently more positive views of services prior to school entry than post-transition. Additionally, the findings revealed that disorganization of information within institutions was a consistent challenge for parents during the transition process. Moreover, the most pressing concerns amongst parents included long waitlists, lack of delivery of promised services, uncertainty about these services, and inadequacy once they were provided.

In a systematic review conducted by Marsh et al. (2017), a total of 12 best practices for TTS were identified; these included parental involvement in the planning process, effective parent-teacher communication, and information sharing. Unfortunately, a substantial body of literature indicates that these recommended practices are often overlooked, revealing the harsh realities of the TTS process. For example, in a study by Kim (2022), Korean American parents identified “building authentic relationships with teachers” as their foremost priority for achieving successful TTK for their children. However, they also rated it as one of the most challenging aspects of successful school transitions. Furthermore, Siddiqua and Janus (2017) found that there was a significant decline in parent-teacher communication during the kindergarten phase, with a greater emphasis on information sharing occurring between parents and pre-transition service providers. In a study by Stoner et al. (2007), parents of children with ASD identified several barriers to successful TTS, including a lack of communication between children and education professionals, lack of acknowledgement of effective transition strategies, and insufficient preparation for the transition process. In contrast, research by Walker et al. (2012) uncovered a prevailing sense of optimism among parents of children with DDs regarding the support they received from teachers. Overall, stakeholders involved in the TTK process for children with ASD tend to have favorable experiences when key elements are present, such as the early establishment of relationships with school personnel, effective communication, the availability of formal and informal supports, as well as parents’ grasp of the special education system (Starr et al., 2016).

Parental Involvement and Parenting Sense of Competence

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parental involvement (otherwise known as ‘parent participation,’ ‘family involvement,’ or ‘parent engagement’)

comprises various forms of activities such as communicating with school personnel, using advocacy to ensure that a child's rights are being sustained, participating in decision making, and developing home-school collaboration for learning and instruction (Strassfeld, 2019). While parental involvement is a robust predictor of a child's success at school, it can also help ensure that the child receives necessary supports and services (Dockett et al., 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2014). Although there is a scarcity of empirical studies investigating the issue of parenting efficacy and parental involvement, the prevailing consensus in research on the TTS for children with special needs underscores the importance of parents' active engagement to secure adequate support for their child (Janus et al., 2008). Moreover, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) introduced the concept of a "rhetoric-reality gap" in parental involvement. While there is a widespread belief in the significance of parent engagement in education for improving children's outcomes, research shows that there are many barriers to parental involvement.

Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC) refers to a parent's perceived ability to handle the challenges associated with parenting, which reflects their self-efficacy in this domain (Johnston & Mash, 1989). The concept of parenting competence is particularly significant in the context of families with children with special education needs. PSOC encapsulates a parent's perception of their parenting skills, problem-solving abilities, and overall capability in the parenting role (Yan & Hou, 2023). This sense of competence permeates various aspects of children's functioning, especially their academic abilities. For instance, research has shown a significant association between PSOC and children's school readiness as well as their later school performance (Bucea et al., 2023). Beyond the internal psychological factors of parenting, parental involvement emerges as a key factor influencing children's adaptive abilities, academic achievements, and emotional well-being (Sook & Lim, 2019). Previous studies have revealed

that PSOC can shape children's emotional and behavioural adjustment through the mediating effect of parental involvement (Li et al., 2021; Sook & Liam, 2019). For instance, Yan and Hou (2023) found that parenting stress and parental involvement sequentially bridged the link between PSOC and prosocial behaviour in children with special education needs. Furthermore, a sense of competence has been associated with parenting qualities such as warmth, responsiveness, and involvement (Slagt et al., 2012). Thus, it can be inferred that parents with higher levels of PSOC are more inclined to actively participate in their children's education (Yan & Hou, 2023).

Transition to School: Teacher Perceptions

The Teacher's Role

Teacher involvement, as seen through the implementation of effective transition practices, significantly shapes the overall TTS experience and, most importantly, the developmental outcomes of children. Research indicates that when kindergarten teachers employ transition practices for general education students, it leads to improved academic outcomes (Schulting et al., 2005). More specifically, the number of school-based transition practices used at the classroom level is associated with higher academic achievement scores at the end of kindergarten, even when controlling for demographic factors like socioeconomic status (SES). Furthermore, LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) found that pre-kindergarten teachers who incorporate more transition activities contribute to higher levels of social competencies and fewer behaviour problems among children. Additionally, Wildenger and McIntyre (2011) found that kindergarten transition preparation accounted for a unique variance in children's socio-behavioural outcomes in kindergarten. These findings collectively underscore the crucial role

that teachers play in implementing effective transition practices, which can significantly enhance the TTS process and promote positive developmental outcomes for students.

Teacher Perceptions

The existing literature reveals a unanimous agreement among teachers and educators on the critical significance of implementing effective transition practices, especially for children with ASD. In a systematic review conducted by Marsh et al. (2017), findings from 20 studies converged to show that parents, caregivers, preschool educators, and primary school teachers universally supported evidence-based transition practices. Notably, Quintero and McIntyre (2011) found that although there were no significant differences in overall teacher involvement between children with ASD and those with DDs, preschool teachers were more inclined to visit the assigned kindergarten classrooms specifically for children with ASD. Additionally, kindergarten teachers overwhelmingly favored certain transition practices, with monthly contact with parents and participation in transition meetings with preschool staff being the most frequently endorsed approaches (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). Research conducted by Walker et al. (2012) sought to explore teachers' perspectives on the suitability of inclusive placements for children with DDs, their satisfaction with support systems, and the overall effectiveness of the transition process. The findings unveiled that both parents and teachers perceived more benefits than challenges in integrating children with special needs, especially within inclusive kindergarten programs. Despite the consensus among teachers regarding the importance of effective transition practices for children with ASD, the challenges in implementation reveal stark realities.

The Reality: Use of Transition Practices

Studies examining teachers' use of transition practices consistently demonstrate that these practices are typically implemented after the school year has already begun. Schools tend to favor low-intensity, universally applied methods, such as sending newsletters and emails and hosting open houses. However, this inclination for generic transition practices may inadvertently limit the support that can be derived from more individualized approaches (Curby et al., 2018; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Daley et al. (2011, as cited in Gooden & Rous, 2008) investigated teachers' use of transition strategies for children with disabilities and found that the most common practices, like hosting parent orientations and providing parents with information, were of low intensity. Although non-traditional transition activities (i.e., home visits, joint parent meetings with the preschool) are acknowledged as highly valuable, research consistently shows that teachers opt for low-intensity, conventional, and group-oriented transition practices (Janus et al., 2007; Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Purtell et al., 2020). Moreover, the literature suggests that preschool teachers tend to individualize their transition intervention efforts to meet the needs of the child and family, whereas kindergarten teachers tend to implement a uniform set of transition activities across children and families (Schischka et al., 2012; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015).

Teacher Training and Liaison

A considerable gap has been recognized in teacher' readiness to support and coordinate successful school transitions, particularly for children with DDs and, more specifically, for those with ASD (Beamish et al., 2014). For example, a study by Jellinek et al. (2022) investigated the knowledge and attitudes of pre-service teachers regarding TTK practices for children with ASD. The findings revealed that while most pre-service teachers endorsed transition practices as important, a considerable number held misconceptions or lacked clarity regarding ASD

symptomology and the responsibilities associated with facilitating transition practices for these children. Similarly, in a study by Morrier et al. (2011), 20% of teachers indicated that their university-based teacher preparation programs equipped them with the necessary skills to implement effective transition practices for children with ASD. In theory, “university-based preparation programs should be well positioned to provide training to facilitate the development of skills in evidence-based practices” (Morrier et al., 2011, p. 129). In addition, there is a significant disparity in understanding between kindergarten teachers, elementary school administrators, and their students’ preschool experiences, thereby hindering the potential for “knowledge transfer” from preschools to elementary schools (Purtell et al., 2020). For instance, a qualitative study by Schischka et al. (2012) found limited evidence of liaison and continuity between early childhood and school environments.

Concerns and Challenges

Despite the positive impact of transition practices, their implementation varies, with some of this variability attributed to the challenges encountered by teachers and schools throughout the TTS process. In a study conducted by Curby et al. (2018), 95% of teachers acknowledged encountering at least one barrier when attempting to use transition practices. The current literature highlights four major hurdles: (a) resource constraints, (b) training and staffing difficulties, (c) organizational and support obstacles, and (d) complexities in collaboration and parental involvement dynamics.

According to Curby et al. (2018), resource constraints, encompassing both financial limitations and time restrictions, emerge as a substantial barrier to effective transition practice implementation. In a study by Quintero and McIntyre (2011), preschool teachers commonly reported lack of time as a primary barrier to engaging in kindergarten transition practices.

Similarly, Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) revealed that preschool teachers in both the US and Ghana identified timely planning and preparation as major issues within the TTK process. An additional resource constraint pertains to funding barriers, which include insufficient financial resources to support staff in preparing for children with disabilities during the summer (i.e., attending meetings or completing necessary paperwork) and compensating teachers for pre-school year transition work (Curby et al., 2018; Gooden & Rous, 2018). In a study by Janus et al. (2007), special education and kindergarten teachers identified a lack of seamless funding as a major barrier in the TTS process. For example, preschool funding typically expires upon school entry, leading to a hiatus in services for children lasting several months.

Each child diagnosed with ASD possesses a distinct set of educational requirements, rendering teacher training for this special population particularly complex and challenging (Morrier et al., 2011). As such, certain transition practices may necessitate proper training for implementation; an option that is rarely available to teachers (Curby et al., 2018). In a study by Beamish et al. (2014), many teachers expressed concerns about the transition process, with themes revolving around the need for teacher training. Similarly, Curby et al. (2018) found that approximately 24% of teachers had received training in transition practices. Therefore, effective teacher training and support should incorporate various approaches and prioritize evidence-based practices for students with ASD (Morrier et al., 2011). In addition to training-related concerns, teachers consistently report staffing challenges, including the absence of designated transition staff from sending and receiving programs, as well as shortages of specialized personnel. These issues can lead to inconsistent relationship building efforts and teachers who may be ill-prepared for effective collaboration (Gooden & Rous, 2018).

Teachers consistently identify several organizational challenges in the TTS process, such as class lists generated too late and large kindergarten classes (Curby et al., 2018; Gooden & Rous, 2018). Consequently, many professionals have voiced their concerns about the lack of case management for individual child records, which poses a significant barrier to effective TTS. In a study by Gooden and Rous (2018), teachers listed inadequate support services for children with disabilities and disruptions in the frequency and intensity of these services as further hindrances. Similarly, Janus et al. (2007) found that professionals frequently highlighted a lack of flexibility in transitioning from one set of supports to another as a significant obstacle. Moreover, in a study by Curby et al. (2018), teachers identified structural features of school administration as potential barriers to implementing transition practices. Comparably, Purtell et al. (2020) observed that the fragmented preschool system contributed to the underutilization of transition practices prior to school entry.

Lastly, a pervasive concern and barrier in the TTS process, as reported by teachers, involves the lack of communication between schools and parents (Beamish et al., 2014; Janus et al., 2007). In a study by Curby et al. (2018), most teachers identified parental beliefs and behaviours as barriers in the TTK. For instance, family beliefs about disability that differ from those of the educational system can impede effective transition practice implementation (Gooden & Rous, 2018). This suggests that teachers strongly implicate parents in their decisions not to employ certain practices. Furthermore, Denkyirah and Agbeke (2010) revealed that preschool teachers in both the US and Ghana faced challenges in effectively communicating information to families and conducting home visits, highlighting significant issues in the transition to kindergarten. Impediments to effective communication and relationship-building may stem from language barriers and cultural differences in communication styles (Starr et al., 2016).

The Present Study

Given the vital roles parents and teachers play as partners in the transition planning process, their insights are invaluable (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Schulting et al., 2015; Stoner et al., 2007). Emphasizing the significance of their input, it is important to consider a grounded theory approach. As such, the present study aimed to (1) explore the implementation of recommended transition practices for children with ASD by general education teachers, assessing their perceived importance and primary concerns; (2) explore the experiences and perceptions of parents caring for children with ASD during the transition to school process; (3) examine the interplay between teacher involvement in the transition process and parental concerns; and (4) investigate the impact of parental competence on active involvement during the transition to school for children with ASD. Four research questions guided the study's objectives:

- 1. To what extent do general education kindergarten teachers engage in recommended transition practices for children with ASD? How do they perceive the importance of these practices, and what are their primary concerns regarding transitions for children with ASD?*
- 2. How do parents of children with ASD experience and understand the transition to school process?*
- 3. How does teacher involvement in the transition to school relate to parental concerns of the transition process for children with ASD?*
- 4. What is the impact of parental competence on parent involvement in the transition to school process for children with ASD?*

Methodology

Sample and Recruitment

Teachers: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Training and Experience. Considering the crucial role regular teachers play in ensuring the effective and smooth operation of inclusive classrooms (Nwoko et al., 2022), this study aimed to recruit in-service kindergarten teachers. Specifically, general education kindergarten teachers who were actively teaching in the province of Quebec and possessed a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education were invited to participate. To align with the study's purpose of investigating the transition to primary school for children with ASD, participating kindergarten teachers were required to have at least 1 year of experience teaching students with a formal diagnosis or waiting for assessment of autism.

To ensure that the study effectively captured the perspectives and experiences of general education teachers, individuals employed as special education teachers or holding qualifications for such roles were excluded from participation. Additionally, individuals with specialized training in inclusive education (i.e., holding a certificate in inclusive education) were ineligible to participate in the study. The selection criteria were essential due to recent research highlighting the significant challenges faced by general education teachers during the transition to school, particularly for children with special needs (Chen et al., 2020; Curby et al., 2018; Gooden et al., 2018).

Parents/Guardians: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

ASD Diagnosis. In order to participate, parents had to be the legal guardians of a child formally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder by a qualified professional, such as a registered psychologist, psychiatrist, or pediatrician. This diagnosis is based on careful observation, criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – 5th Edition (DSM-5), and an assessment of the child's developmental and medical history

(American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Alternatively, parents could participate if they were the legal guardians of a child with suspected ASD. Suspected cases of ASD are often initially identified by pediatricians, family physicians, parents, or other caregivers, and can manifest with a wide range of symptoms and severity levels (Brian et al., 2019). By encompassing both formally diagnosed cases and those with suspected ASD, the study aimed to explore the broad spectrum of the disorder, acknowledging its diverse manifestations. It is important to note that regardless of the severity tier outlined in the DSM-5, parents of children with ASD, at any level, were eligible for recruitment, and the severity level may affect the findings of the study.

Age and Grade Level. Parents of children between the ages of 5 and 7, attending kindergarten, grade 1, or grade 2, were eligible to participate in this study. In Quebec, elementary school attendance becomes compulsory at the age of 6. Regardless of whether a child has attended kindergarten, which can begin as early as 4-years-old, all 6-year-olds are required to enroll in primary school. Given the study's objective to examine the transition process from home or preschool to a regular kindergarten classroom, parents of children attending a school with inclusive practices were recruited. The age range restriction is supported by research indicating that early signs of autism may be detectable before a child's first birthday, with symptoms typically becoming more noticeable around the ages of 2 or 3 (APA, 2021). In 2019, over half (53.7%) of Canadian children and youth were diagnosed with ASD before the age of 5, with a median diagnosis age of 3.7 years (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022). These figures highlight the urgent need to provide parents with substantial support as they navigate the challenges of integrating their children with ASD into inclusive educational environments.

Access to Technology. To facilitate the semi-structured interviews conducted remotely, participants were required to have access to the platform Zoom. For parents who could not access Zoom, phone interviews were available as an alternative participation method.

Recruitment Sites

Teachers

After obtaining ethical approval, teachers in the province of Quebec were recruited using a purposive sampling method through three main approaches. Firstly, a snowball sampling approach was used, primarily relying on word-of-mouth referrals from kindergarten teachers. Secondly, teachers were solicited from various elementary schools in the Montreal area. This entailed contacting principals and administrative assistants and advertising a call for participants. Lastly, recruitment efforts were extended to social media platforms, such as specific Facebook groups (e.g., ‘Quebec Teachers,’ ‘Quebec Community Teacher Network’), where a virtual flyer containing study details was circulated. A comprehensive list of recruitment sites and a copy of the virtual flyer (both English and French versions) are provided in Appendix A.

Parents/Guardians

Parents in the Quebec region were also recruited using a purposive sampling approach, employing three distinct methods. Firstly, parents were solicited through various centres, agencies, and community-based organizations dedicated to supporting caregivers of children with special needs. A breakdown of the study’s purpose, procedures, intended benefits, and overall significance was shared with the contacts of such organizations. These organizations were requested to share the study information, along with the virtual flyer, with their clients or members, either through newsletters or by posting on their websites. Secondly, disability-specific support groups for parents of children with special needs on Facebook (e.g., ‘MTL+ Parents of

Neurodiverse Kids,' 'DisABILITY Network of Montreal') were used to disseminate relevant study information through virtual flyers. Thirdly, parents were solicited from various elementary schools in the Montreal area, with outreach to principals and administrative assistants. A comprehensive list of recruitment sites and a copy of the virtual flyer is provided in Appendix A.

Sample Composition

Teachers

Nine participants ($n = 9$) expressed interest in the present study and participated in *Phase I*. These kindergarten teachers worked in inclusive elementary schools across Quebec, representing different school boards, both English and French. Firstly, teacher consent was obtained prior to data collection. A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix B. Secondly, teachers completed the *Teacher's Perceptions on Transitions (TPOT)* questionnaire (see Appendix D) using Qualtrics.

Parents/Guardians

Four participants ($n = 4$) expressed interest in the present study and participated in *Phase II*. Regarding their children, the average age was 6.25 years, and the average age of diagnosis was 4 years old. There were 3 boys and 1 girl. Firstly, parental consent was obtained prior to data collection. A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix B. Secondly, semi-structured interviews with parents were conducted remotely on Zoom. During these Zoom sessions, parents were asked various questions related to their children's transition to kindergarten. Following the interview, parents completed two questionnaires: the *Family Experience and Involvement in Transition (FEIT)* (see Appendix F) and the *Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC)* (see Appendix G).

Parent 1. Parent 1 was the mother of a 6-year-old male of White/Caucasian ethnicity diagnosed with ASD at the age of 3. At the time of the study, the child was enrolled in kindergarten at a public school. The family structure included divorced parents, an 8-year-old sister, and a shared custody arrangement where the child spent equal time with both parents. The mother was on a leave of absence from her employment, where she typically worked approximately 35 hours a week.

Parent 2. Parent 2 was the mother of a 6-year-old female of White/Caucasian ethnicity. The child was diagnosed with developmental delay, speech/language delay, and ASD since the age of 3. At the time of the study, she was attending kindergarten in a public school. The family structure consisted of the child and her single mother. The mother worked full-time, approximately 40 hours per week.

Parent 3. Parent 3 was the mother of a 6-year-old male of mixed race/ethnicity. He was diagnosed with ASD at the age of 4, the oldest in age of diagnosis of all the children. At the time of the study, he was enrolled in kindergarten at a public school and lived with both parents and his 9-year-old sister. The mother was self-employed and worked part-time, approximately 15 to 20 hours a week.

Parent 4. Parent 4 was the mother of a 7-year-old male, the oldest of the four children in the present study. The child was of White/Caucasian ethnicity and was diagnosed with developmental delay and ASD at the age of 2, the youngest in age of diagnosis of all the children. At the time of study, the child was attending grade 2 at a public school. The family comprised both parents and an older brother, aged 10. The mother worked approximately 30 hours a week.

Protocol for Phase I: Teacher Perceptions

Phase I of this study aimed to assess the extent to which general education kindergarten teachers use recommended transition practices for children with ASD, examining their perceptions of the importance of these practices, and exploring their primary concerns regarding the TTS. An adapted version of the *Teachers' Perceptions on Transitions (TPOT)* questionnaire (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011) was used to assess teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding the transition process for children with ASD (see Appendix D). The modified questionnaire ensured child confidentiality and prompted teachers to reflect on their general experiences teaching students with ASD in inclusive kindergarten classrooms. Specifically tailored to kindergarten teachers, the questionnaire addressed the nuances of their perceptions, distinguishing them from preschool educators.

Measure

Teachers' Perceptions on Transitions (TPOT). The TPOT questionnaire prompted teachers to indicate the transition practices they have employed with their students, specifying when they were used and rating their importance on a four-point Likert scale. These practices encompassed 13 commonly used transition preparation activities. Additionally, it included open-ended questions for teachers to highlight any additional forms of involvement they had or would like to have to facilitate the transition to kindergarten. Teachers were also encouraged to express perceived barriers in implementing transition practices.

Administration of the TPOT was facilitated through Qualtrics, an online survey tool, chosen for its convenience and ability to maintain anonymity by excluding personal identifiers from collected data. After returning their consent forms, participants received a survey password and link to access the questionnaire online. This setup allowed participants the flexibility to pause and resume the survey at their convenience. The administration of the measure took

approximately 10 minutes (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). While specific psychometric properties for this measure are currently unavailable, permission was obtained from the original developer, Dr. Laura McIntyre, for research purposes.

Moreover, to accommodate Francophone participants, the TPOT questionnaire was translated into French by the primary researcher, who is proficient in both English and French. To ensure translation accuracy, the questionnaire underwent back-translation to English, with discrepancies between the original and back-translated versions identified and resolved. A copy of the French version of the TPOT is provided in Appendix D.

Data Analysis

In addition to qualitative data, the TPOT questionnaire yielded two quantitative scores: the Total Teacher Involvement Score, which was determined by summing the transition practices teachers engaged in at any time (possible range = 0-13), and an Overall Concerns Score, derived from teachers' responses on a five-point Likert scale indicating their concerns (range from 0 = no concerns to 4 = VERY many concerns). Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequency distributions and measures of central tendency) were used to analyze teacher perceptions and concerns regarding the transition to school for children with ASD.

Protocol for Phase II: Parent Perceptions

Phase II of this study aimed to investigate (a) the experiences and perceptions of parents with children with ASD during the TTS process, (b) the interplay between teacher involvement and parental concerns, and (c) the impact of parental competence on active involvement during the TTS. As such, three measures were administered to parents, respectively: the *Kindergarten Transition Parent Interview – Kindergarten* (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003) (see Appendix E), the *Family Experience and Involvement in Transition (FEIT)* (McIntyre et al., 2007) (see Appendix

F), and the *Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC)* (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978) (see Appendix G).

Measures

Semi-Structured Interviews. During *Phase II* of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents to explore themes surrounding transition practices, perceptions regarding family and school collaboration, parenting and teaching roles, as well as values associated with education and learning. The interview questions and prompts were adapted from the *Kindergarten Transition Parent Interview – Kindergarten* (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). This qualitative approach was suitable for this inquiry as it produced a rich description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of their actions (Denzin, 1989, as cited in Rahman, 2017).

The purpose of the semi-structured qualitative interview is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena (Brinkmann, 2018). As such, the *Kindergarten Transition Parent Interview – Kindergarten* asked parents to respond to questions about (1) their child's experiences at school, (2) peer contact, (3) their child's activities at home, (4) reflections on the transition to kindergarten, (5) preparing for kindergarten, (6) their activities with the school, and (7) family information. The complete set of interview questions and prompts can be found in Appendix E.

The semi-structured interviews with the participants took approximately one hour and were conducted through Zoom. This method ensured the collection of rich data through detailed interview transcripts. Per Brinkmann (2018), semi-structured interviews are advantageous as they provide "much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee" (p. 1002). This data collection procedure was informed by the guidelines for

conducting grounded theory research outlined in Creswell and Poth (2017). The grounded theory approach uses interviews to understand how people experience a particular process, and to identify the key stages involved.

Family Experience and Involvement in Transition (FEIT). To investigate the perspectives and concerns of families regarding their children's transition to kindergarten, parents were administered the revised version of the *Family Experience and Involvement in Transition (FEIT)* survey (McIntyre et al., 2007). The adapted version of the survey was specifically tailored for families of school-aged children with disabilities. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix F. Parents were asked to respond to items distributed across four domains: (1) child educational history, (2) family concerns, (3) family needs, and (4) family involvement. Additionally, the FEIT survey was modified to ensure child confidentiality by excluding any questions that could reveal their identity, such as asking for the child's name or the school's name. The survey prompted parents to rate their concerns regarding various transition issues, with responses classified as "no concerns," "a few concerns," "some concerns," or "many concerns," each corresponding to a quantitative value ranging from one to four.

Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC) Scale. To investigate the impact of parental competence on active involvement during the transition to school, parents were asked to complete a revised version of the *Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC)* scale (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978). A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix G. This measure consists of 17 items specifically designed to assess parenting self-esteem. Participants rated each item on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). To enhance its relevance for parents of older children, the original wording referring to "infant" was replaced with "child." Throughout the evaluation, parents were instructed to focus solely on

the child with ASD in their family. The PSOC scale has demonstrated satisfactory 6-week test-retest correlations for the scale's total score, warranting its reliability (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978).

Data Coding and Analysis

Qualitative Measures. To generate a more nuanced analysis from the start, the interview data was fragmented using splitting coding (Saldana, 2021). Transcripts were coded using first cycle (In Vivo) and second cycle (Pattern) coding techniques. 'In Vivo' coding is well suited for this research as it prioritizes and captures the participant's unique vocabulary and voice (Saldana, 2021). This is particularly important as the study strives to explore the unique experiences and perceptions of parents with children with ASD. During second cycle coding, 'Pattern' coding was used to condense large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units (Saldana, 2021). Pattern codes allow us to "pull together a lot of material from first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis" (Saldana, 2021, p. 332).

Several strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the qualitative data. Firstly, participant check-ins were conducted to align the researcher's interpretations with the participants' lived experiences. Secondly, analytic memos were written to document reflections on the coding procedures, the rationale behind code selections, the evolution of the inquiry process, and the emerging patterns, categories, and themes within the data (Saldana, 2021). Analytic memos promote researcher reflexivity, encouraging critical reflection on one's actions, challenging assumptions, and acknowledging the impact of personal perspectives on data interpretation (Saldana, 2021). Lastly, peer debriefing was conducted to enhance the credibility of the research findings by subjecting them to critical review from external perspectives. A research colleague was provided with the transcripts and coding material,

ensuring anonymity. Discussions were held to receive feedback on whether the In Vivo codes accurately captured the participant's language and experiences, and to assess how well the identified patterns and themes aligned with the research objectives. Peer debriefing not only helps maintain an audit trail, but also provides the researcher with an opportunity to reflect on their own assumptions and biases (Saldana, 2021).

Quantitative Measures. The FEIT generates two quantitative scores. Firstly, the Total Family Transition Concerns Score is computed by summing the scores assigned for each concern level (1 = no concerns; 2 = a few concerns; 3 = some concerns; 4 = many concerns; possible range = 11-44). Secondly, the Total Parent Involvement Score is calculated by summing the transition practice items in which parents participated (possible range = 0-14). Descriptive statistics (e.g., measures of central tendency and frequency distributions) were used to analyze parent perceptions and concerns regarding the transition to school for children with ASD. Given the study's small sample size, it was not feasible to address the third and fourth research questions using robust statistical analyses. The limited number of participants reduces statistical power, making it challenging to draw significant conclusions. Therefore, the analysis entailed using descriptive statistics and comparative methods. Comparative analysis is particularly valuable in social science research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of data, facilitating meaningful comparisons and a better understanding of trends and patterns within the sample (Della Porta & Keating, 2008).

Results

Research Aim I

The first objective of the present study was to explore the implementation of recommended transition practices for children with ASD by general education teachers,

assessing their perceived importance and primary concerns. An adapted version of the *Teachers' Perceptions on Transitions (TPOT)* questionnaire (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011) was used to assess teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding the transition process for children with ASD.

Teacher Concerns

The TPOT questionnaire evaluated kindergarten teachers' overall concerns regarding the transition to school process for children with ASD, providing an Overall Concerns Score ranging from 0 (no concerns) to 4 (very many concerns). Given that descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations have unclear meanings when applied to Likert scale responses, the results were analyzed using the mode and frequency (Joshi et al., 2015; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). The range of concern scores varied from 1 (minimal concerns) to 4 (very many concerns). The majority of teachers (66.6%) reported having either many concerns or very many concerns about the TTS, with equal proportions in each category. Only one teacher (11.1%) reported having minimal concerns, while no teachers reported having no concerns at all.

Teachers were asked about their specific concerns regarding the transition process for students with ASD. The analysis revealed three main concerns: (1) classroom environment, support, and resources; (2) effective communication and collaboration; and (3) transition preparation and support.

Classroom Environment, Support, and Resources. Teachers expressed various concerns regarding the diversity of students in the classroom, emphasizing the uniqueness of each student. Teacher 3 articulated “every child is very different, and this is true with ASD students as well.” Teacher 1 echoed this, stating “my main concern for the transition process for students with ASD is that it can be too much too soon for some.” This concern was compounded

by overcrowded kindergarten classes, which teachers felt limited their ability to provide adequate support to children with ASD. One teacher raised concerns about the suitability of the kindergarten environment for certain types of care, stating “kindergarten is not a place to toilet [train] students, nor is it a place to provide individualized care for students with ASD.”

Challenges related to social integration, the length of the school day, and the participation of children with ASD in classroom activities were also significant. Teacher 2 emphasized the need for adequate support, stating “I am concerned about them getting the support they need to be successful.” Another issue was children displaying signs of autism when starting elementary school but lacking an official diagnosis. One teacher noted that without a ‘code’ or formal ASD diagnosis at kindergarten entry, these children are unable to receive the necessary support.

Behaviour management and resource availability were critical issues, particularly given the overwhelming presence of special needs students in public schools. Teacher 2 expressed worries about knowing how to help children with ASD self-regulate when necessary. Similarly, Teacher 3 stressed the importance of receiving extensive information about a child's behavior, including strategies for self-regulation, before starting school. Teacher 3 also raised concerns about students who exhibit behaviours such as running away or being violent towards other students. Teacher 5 highlighted the strain on the education system, stating "public schools are overwhelmed with special needs students and there are not enough resources for the students with severe ASD." Teacher 7 echoed this, mentioning the need for resource time, even if a child does not have a formal diagnosis yet.

Effective Communication and Collaboration. Effective communication and collaboration between teachers, parents, and schools emerged as crucial factors during the transition process. Concerns were raised about the potential obstacles of parental involvement

during the TTS. For instance, teachers highlighted the challenge of relying solely on parent observations to accommodate these students' needs. Teacher 5 noted "the concerns I have with students with ASD transitioning to kindergarten (K5) is the lack of transparency from parents and daycare facilities." Similarly, Teacher 4 emphasized "honest and thorough communication with the daycare or preschool they [children] are coming from is incredibly important." Additionally, teachers expressed concerns about not receiving adequate background information regarding the child's preschool and home situation prior to the transition.

Transition Preparation and Staff Support. Teachers raised several concerns regarding the preparation for the TTS and support from staff. As described earlier, they expressed apprehensions about the timing and intensity of transition practices, noting that introducing "too much too soon" could overwhelm children with ASD. Additionally, teachers emphasized the importance of having one-on-one time with these students before the start of the school year and ensuring their familiarity with the school environment. Concerns were also raised about "having enough support from the school team during the transition process." Specifically, teachers expressed worries about the inconsistent procedures across the school board for mandatory meetings before children with special needs transition to school. Moreover, teachers expressed the need for a clear profile of the child's diagnosis, including severity level, capabilities, and challenges.

Perceived Importance of TTS Practices

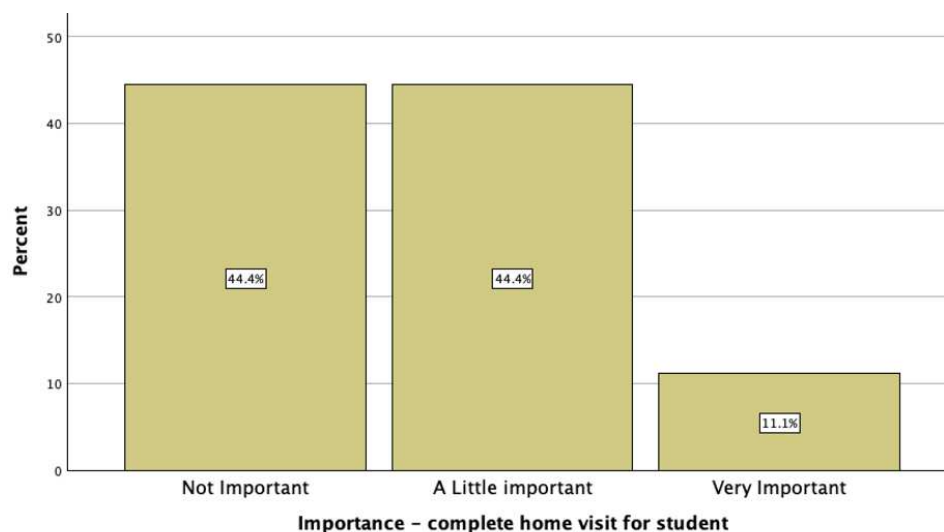
Teachers rated the importance of various transition to school practices on a four-point Likert scale (1 = not important; 2 = a little important; 3 = somewhat important; 4 = very important). The most crucial practices rated as very important by the majority of teachers included: attending meetings with the school team (77.8%), giving orientation about

kindergarten for parents (77.8%), monthly contact with students' parents (66.7%), providing written communication regarding the transition to the family (66.7%), giving orientation about kindergarten to students (66.7%), holding transition planning meetings with the preschool team (55.6%), and accompanying children to their own kindergarten classroom (55.6%).

Accompanying children on visits to a kindergarten classroom in general received mixed ratings, with 44.4% of teachers rating it as very important and another 44.4% rating it as a little important. Similarly, participating as a member of the transition planning team was rated as somewhat important by 44.4% of teachers, while 33.3% rated it as very important. Moreover, receiving a phone call from the preschool teacher was considered somewhat important by the majority of teachers (55.6%), while 33.3% rated it as very important.

The least important practices, rated as not important by the majority of teachers, included having a preschool teacher visit the kindergarten classroom (44.4%), working with preschool teachers to coordinate curriculum (44.4%), and completing home visits for students (44.4%). It is worth noting that only one teacher rated completing home visits for students as very important (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Teachers' Perceived Importance of Completing a Home Visit for Students



Teacher Involvement in TTS Practices

The TPOT questionnaire asked kindergarten teachers to indicate the transition practices they employed with their students with ASD, specifying when they were used (i.e., fall, spring, summer, continual, do not practice). The findings revealed that the most frequently practiced TTS activities were monthly contact with students' parents and meetings with the elementary school team. The majority of teachers (55.6%) engaged in these practices continually. A considerable proportion of teachers (44.4%) provided continual written communication to families regarding the transition, while 33.3% engaged in this practice only during the spring.

The study indicated that transition planning meetings with the preschool team and participation as a member of the transition planning team were less commonly practiced. For instance, the majority of teachers (55.6%) did not engage in these two practices. Additionally, receiving a phone call from the preschool teacher and completing a home visit for the student were rarely practiced, with 88.9% of teachers reporting no involvement in these activities (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2. Teacher Involvement in Receiving Phone Calls from Preschool Teachers

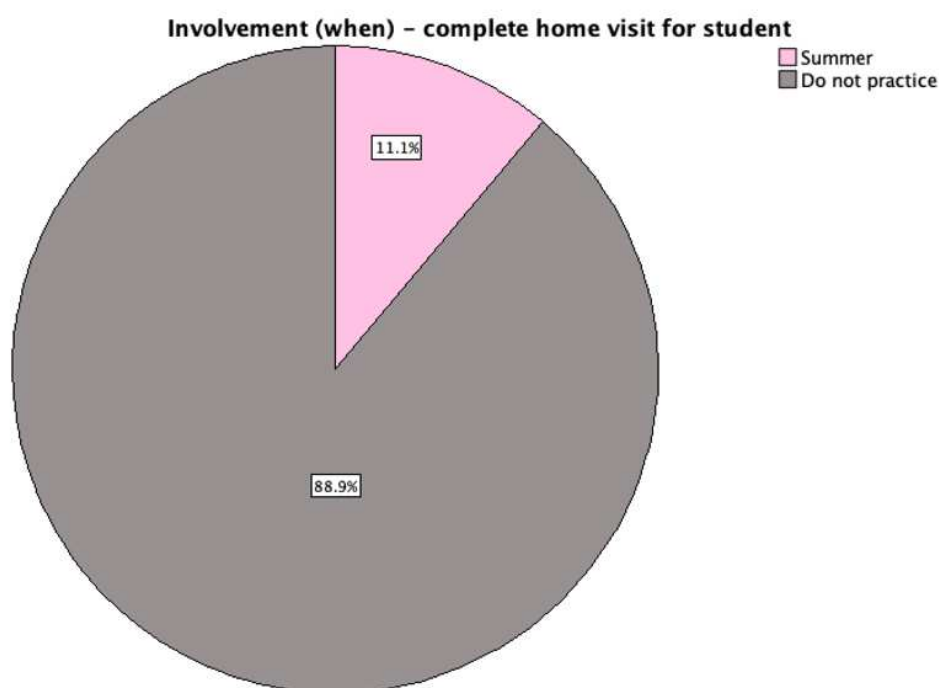
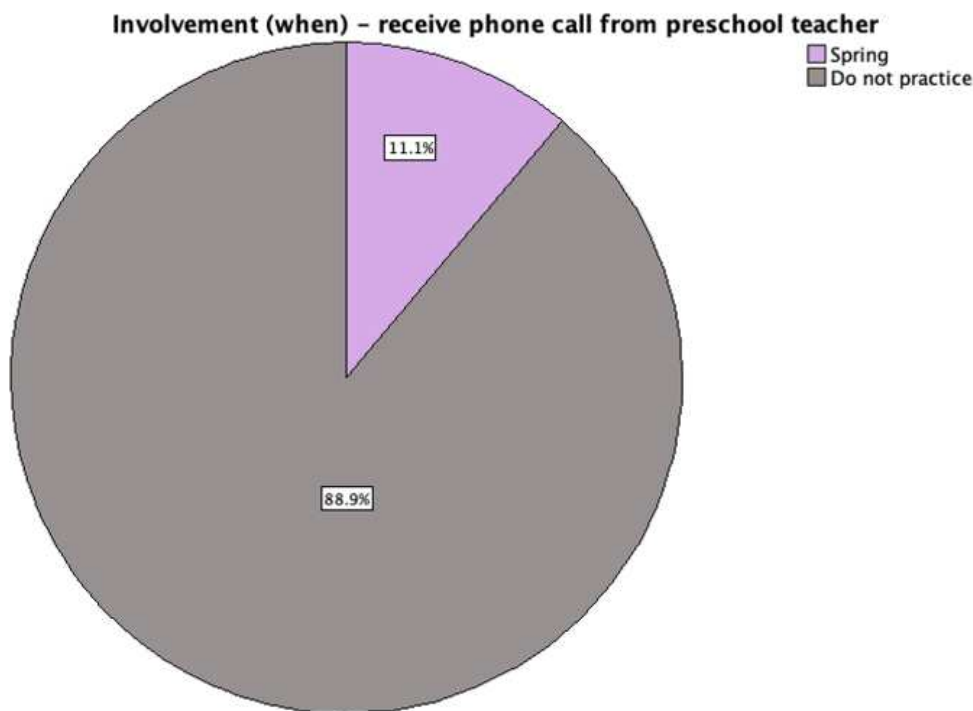


Figure 3. Teacher Involvement in Completing Home Visits for Students



Interestingly, none of the participating teachers reported collaborating with preschool teachers to coordinate the curriculum, highlighting a gap in the transition process. The practice of having a preschool teacher visit the kindergarten classroom was also rare, with only one respondent (11.1%) engaging in this activity during the spring. Additionally, teacher involvement in accompanying children on visits to kindergarten classrooms varied widely. While 33.3% of teachers did not engage in this practice, an equal percentage (33.3%) did so only during the spring (see Table 1). Regarding accompanying children to their own kindergarten classroom, the majority of teachers (44.4%) did so during the spring, whereas 22.2% engaged in this practice only during the fall.

Table 1

Frequency of Accompanying Children on Visits to Kindergarten Classrooms by Timing

<i>Practice Timing</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent (%)</i>
Fall	1	11.1
Spring	3	33.3
Summer	1	11.1
Continual	1	11.1
Do not practice	3	33.3
<i>Total</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Lastly, a significant proportion of teachers (55.6%) conducted kindergarten orientations for students in the spring, compared to 22.2% who did so in the fall (see Figure 4). Conversely, 44.4% of teachers held kindergarten orientation sessions for parents in the fall, whereas 33.3% did the same in the spring (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. Teacher Involvement in Holding Kindergarten Orientation Sessions for Students

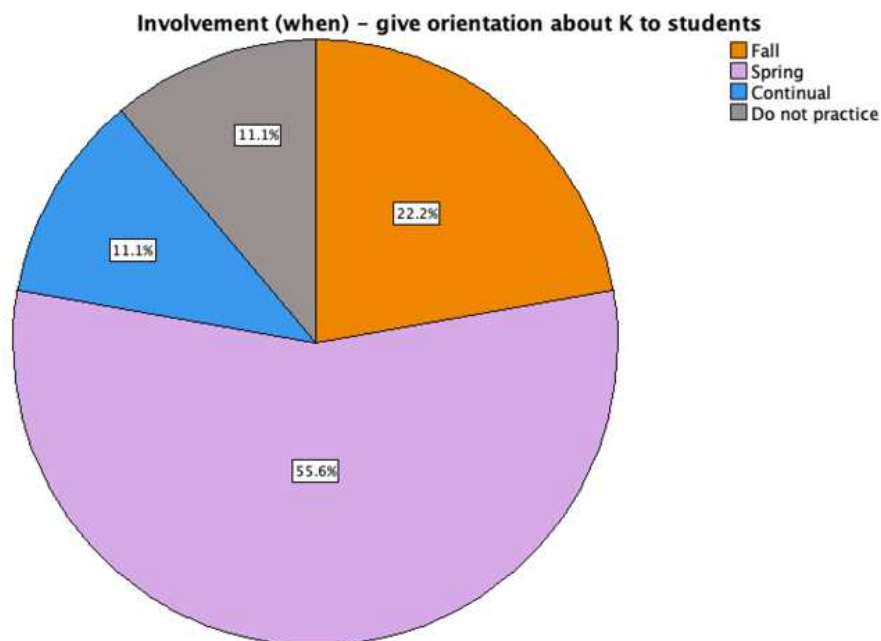
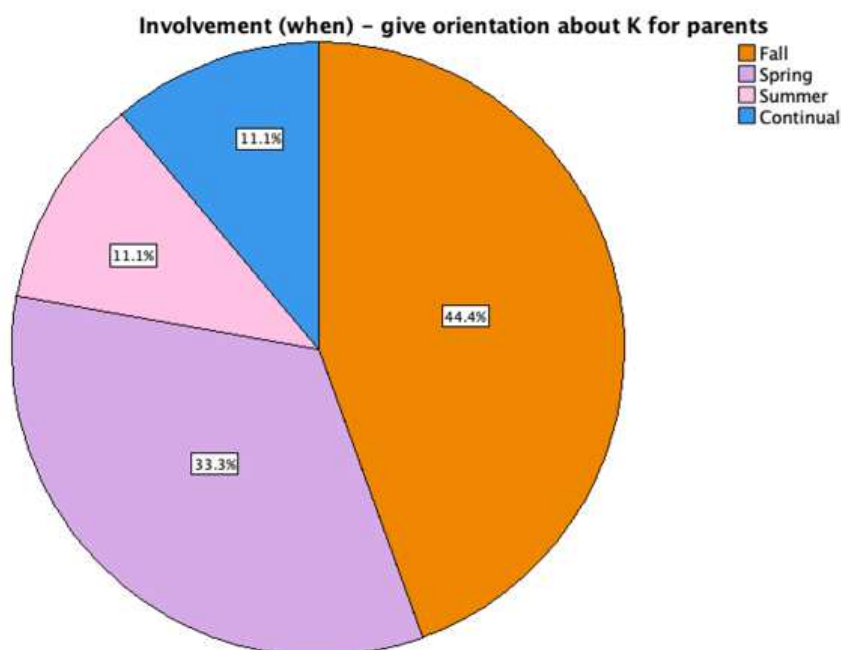


Figure 5. Teacher Involvement in Holding Kindergarten Orientation Sessions for Parents



Additional Involvement. In addition to the practices mentioned earlier, five teachers reported undertaking further involvement to support the transition process for children with ASD. These activities primarily involved indirect participation, often coordinated by other school staff members. Examples included accessing resources from the Special Needs Department for transition activities, implementing staggered school days to ease the adjustment period, administering student questionnaires to acquaint teachers with incoming students, liaising with school board consultants on specific needs, and occasional communication with professionals handling the child's case.

Additional Involvement Desired. Teachers expressed various suggestions for enhancing the TTS process for students with ASD. Teacher 1 emphasized the need for increased resource allocation within the public school system to better integrate these students into classroom settings. However, this challenge stemmed from government-imposed budgetary constraints.

Teacher 3 recommended incorporating “visits from occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, and other specialists” to support students with ASD during their transition. Furthermore, Teacher 5 proposed introducing a simplified checklist for parents to assess kindergarten readiness, focusing on essential skills such as toileting independence. This checklist will prompt parents to reach out to the school if their child struggles with any of the listed tasks. Teacher 8 highlighted the importance of collaboration between preschool and elementary school staff to gather comprehensive background information on students before their transition. Additionally, the participants advocated for enhanced communication between parents and teachers to better understand the child’s home environment and effective support strategies. Notably, one teacher expressed satisfaction with their school’s current TTS process, describing it as clear and satisfactory thus far.

Total Teacher Involvement Score. The Total Teacher Involvement Score reflects the cumulative number of transition practices teachers engaged in at any point. Scores range from 0 to 13, with higher scores indicating greater involvement. As shown in Table 2, the sample’s Total Teacher Involvement Score ranged from 5 to 11, with a mean score of 7.56 ($SD = 1.94$).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Total Teacher Involvement Score

	<i>n</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Variance</i>
<i>Total Teacher Involvement Score</i>	9	5	11	7.56	1.944	3.778

Barriers to TTS Practices

Eight kindergarten teachers identified several barriers hindering the effective transition to school for students with special needs. Three main themes emerged: transparency and communication, practical barriers, and parental involvement. It is worth noting that one teacher did not identify any specific barriers to the transition process.

Transparency and Communication. Teachers identified transparency and honesty as significant barriers, noting parents' reluctance to fully disclose their child's difficulties. For example, Teacher 1 stated "a barrier could be parents not being fully transparent with their child's weaknesses, or perhaps, not being open to accepting their child's situation." Similarly, Teacher 4 listed the stigma associated with ASD as a hindrance to a smooth transition to school for these students. Echoing this sentiment, Teacher 5 expressed:

Parents are often reluctant to be fully open and honest with the school team. There is a fear of judgment or worries that their child will be rejected from our school if they are truly honest about their child's strengths and challenges. In the past, this has set students up for failure as we didn't have a clear picture of their needs and abilities.

Furthermore, teachers highlighted poor communication and collaboration between parents, elementary schools, and preschools as a significant barrier. This shortfall significantly hampers the exchange of essential information crucial for an effective TTS.

Practical Barriers. Teachers noted several practical barriers that disrupt the successful TTK for students with ASD. Firstly, the lack of full-time support for students with ASD was a major concern. Teacher 8 explained "in the public school system, integration aides are not given full school day hours, leaving the teacher to lose effectiveness in those moments." Additionally, the presence of other students with "uncoded needs" in the classroom was identified as a challenge as it "requires a teacher to be spread more thinly amongst the class." Practical

constraints such as time, funding constraints, and inadequate access to specialists were also highlighted. Moreover, teachers expressed concerns about not having the necessary training to support students during the transition process. For instance, one teacher remarked that “depending on the individual needs of the student with ASD (e.g., non-verbal), it can be difficult to understand the effectiveness of each transition practice.”

Parental Involvement. The absence of familial support for students with ASD and uninvolved parents were identified as significant challenges. According to Teacher 8, “when parents are not involved in their child's education, it takes much longer to learn about the child's needs, thus hindering the ease of transition into the classroom.” Another teacher stressed the importance of considering perspectives beyond those of the parents to fully understand a child's situation. They highlighted the value of engaging in discussions with preschool staff to gain insight into the child's previous experiences.

Research Aim II

The second aim of the study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of parents caring for children with ASD during the transition to school. To achieve this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, using a modified version of the *Kindergarten Transition Parent Interview – Kindergarten* (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Three main themes emerged from these interviews: navigating advocacy, support, and transition; family dynamics and involvement; and parent-school collaboration and communication.

Navigating Advocacy, Support, and Transition

Advocacy and Action. Throughout the interviews, parents exhibited a proactive stance in advocating for their children's needs, especially regarding support within daycare and primary school settings. Parent 1 recounted her struggles with a daycare that initially lacked adequate

support for her child. Despite facing resistance, she succeeded in her advocacy efforts, noting “after a while, we were able to push and push to get individual support for him [child].” She attributed this success partly to the empathy of the new daycare director, who had personal experience with autism. However, she acknowledged that such support was not inherently part of the daycare system. Additionally, parents discussed emotional challenges related to separation anxiety and the need to advocate for their children’s safety and well-being, especially during transitions to new educational environments. As one parent expressed, “I’ve always been his advocate for anything speaking-wise.”

Support. Despite encountering distinct challenges, all parents highlighted the importance of tailored support systems in facilitating a smooth transition to school for children with ASD. Parent 1 commended the individualized approach taken by her child’s school, noting “his needs are not ignored or belittled like in other places... They [staff] are so knowledgeable about what they do.” She emphasized the importance of routine, reliability, and empathetic support in ensuring a successful transition. In contrast, Parent 2 described the difficulty of balancing work and supporting her child, stating “the entire situation has been hard for me... It’s been very traumatic.” Despite feeling let down by other resources, she found continuous support from grandparents, expressing “they’ve been by my side for the whole thing.” She also received reliable help from the *Services de réadaptation du Sud-Ouest et du Renfort* (SRSOR) team, a rehabilitation service provider in Quebec. Parent 3 recounted how her child received substantial support at his *Centre de la Petite Enfance* (CPE), or early childhood center, noting “he’s had amazing support but it’s not at all the common way through.” Parent 4 expressed satisfaction with the support provided by her local community service center, known as the *Centre local de services communautaires* (CLSC), and rehabilitation center, known as the *Centre de*

readaptation de l'Ouest de Montréal (CROM). She particularly appreciated their efforts in preparing for the TTS, noting “they talked a lot about what kindergarten is all about and what to expect.”

Navigating the Transition to School. The transition period presented diverse challenges and experiences among parents. Parent 1 described a rocky transition, exacerbated by external disruptions such as strikes and school closures, which made it difficult for her child to get back into a routine and rebuild trust. She expressed frustration with the lack of organization, noting “we only found out the transport schedule two days before the start of school.” She described the transition to kindergarten as neutral and “a little intimidating at first.” Parent 2 recounted significant challenges, including reduced school hours and increased behavioural issues like physical tantrums, leading to ongoing dissatisfaction with her child’s progress. She highlighted the stark contrast between her positive experience in preschool and the struggles faced in kindergarten, stating “the transition has not been great... CPE was a thousand times better.” She emphasized the negative transition experience by adding, “I couldn’t tell you anything that’s gone well.” Parent 3 shared concerns about her child’s future social and academic abilities and verbal communication but expressed confidence in the school’s support. Although her child adjusted well overall, she noted “the initial couple of weeks in kindergarten was a challenge... There were definitely a few days of tears.” Although the TTK was a significant change for her child, she mentioned that he coped better than they had anticipated. Parent 4 highlighted her child’s difficulties with horizontal transitions, especially when moving around the school to different classrooms.

Despite encountering numerous challenges, all four participants highlighted some triumphs during the transition to school. The schools’ characteristics significantly contributed to

these positive outcomes. Across the narratives, similarities emerged regarding specialized support, positive attitudes from staff, and sensory-friendly environments. A prominent similarity was the appreciation for small class sizes and dedicated support staff, including integration aides, teachers, and specialists. Parent 1 underscored the benefits of the school's structured teaching method (TEACCH), praising the "good support from teachers" and the "really low student-teacher ratios." Similarly, Parent 3 described a school environment that was "really lovely" with "one teacher and one support person for the K [kindergarten] class."

Furthermore, parents consistently emphasized the importance of positive attitudes and understanding from school staff. They valued teachers and staff who showed genuine empathy, support, and enjoyment in working with their children. Parent 1 expressed "the staff's attitude has made a huge difference," while Parent 3 shared "it's just that feeling that the educators are very much on his [child's] side... They take enjoyment in how he thinks and how he progresses." Similarly, Parent 2 commended her daughter's aide at school, noting that they share a wonderful relationship.

Parents also appreciated efforts made to create calming and accommodating spaces for children with sensory sensitivities. For example, Parent 1 praised the school's specific adaptations, including the use of sound-absorbing materials, dampened lights, and carpeted floors. Similarly, Parent 3 discussed the sensory-friendly design of her child's school, noting "they have a lot of adaptations for the spectrum," such as quiet spaces and visual aids. These adaptations likely reduce anxiety and sensory overload, promoting a more positive transition to school. Consequently, several parents reported gains in their children's independence and level of engagement, fostered in part by the school's design.

Family Dynamics and Involvement

Family Interactions and Influence on TTS. Throughout the interviews, parents described various ways they interact with their children, emphasizing quality time and specific bonding activities. Parent 1 highlighted the importance of bedtime routines, stating “bedtime is the main interaction time we have,” and mentioned enjoying reading and singing together. However, she also admitted to struggles with connection, expressing “I don’t always know how to connect with him... Most of my time is focused on caring for him.” Parent 3 valued reading and playing educational games with her child, noting “the learning games are less about the learning and more about giving him a chance to be goofy and practice verbal skills with us.” In contrast, Parent 2 faced challenges with family interactions due to limited contact with other children, stating “there’s no siblings in our house... It’s just her and I.” This lack of interaction was further complicated by family dynamics, such as conflicts with stepsiblings.

Siblings played a crucial role in the children’s socialization and transition to school. Parent 4’s child benefited significantly from having an older brother at the same school, stating “he’s obsessed with his brother and was proud to go to his school.” She described the transition to school in a positive light, noting “it was a lot easier knowing that he was going to his brother’s school.” This sibling bond brought comfort and stability to both the child and his family. Similarly, Parent 3 highlighted the positive impact of a supportive older sister, describing her as “his strongest advocate.”

Some families faced a myriad of challenges navigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for routine adjustments. Parent 1 described the lockdown as “absolute hell,” emphasizing its traumatic effects: “We had to rearrange our entire family life to make it work.” She had to pause working since her child started kindergarten, primarily due to the demands of caring for a child with a disability. Similarly, Parent 2 depicted the transition to

school as stressful, especially while balancing a full-time job as a single mother. She heavily relied on her parents for support, noting “they jumped in right away to help... They have been picking her [child] up every day.” She echoed Parent 1’s sentiments, labeling the experience as traumatic. Conversely, Parent 3 portrayed the transition to school as considerably smoother for their family. She acknowledged the uniqueness of their circumstances and expressed gratitude for the relatively trouble-free journey.

Parent Involvement in Kindergarten Preparation. While examining parental strategies for preparing children for kindergarten, notable similarities emerged among the participants. All families prioritized familiarizing their children with the kindergarten environment. Parent 1 ensured familiarity by taking her child to play on the school playground, while Parent 2 outlined the transportation route by frequently driving by the school. Similarly, Parent 3 and Parent 4 arranged for their children to visit the school during the summer or attend orientation sessions before school started. Moreover, parents emphasized the importance of discussing the kindergarten process with others, whether through conversations with fellow parents at their child’s school, family members with school-age children, or friends with relevant experiences. They sought advice, exchanged information, and gathered insights to better prepare for their child’s TTK.

Social stories and discussions about kindergarten were commonplace among all families. Parents took an active role in discussing meeting new classmates and instilling proper behaviour for the kindergarten environment. Three parents recounted receiving a social story from professionals at CROM, the school board, or the CLSC to help their children understand what to expect in kindergarten. Furthermore, each family recognized the importance of routine and structure during the transition to school. Parent 1 practiced scheduled activities with her child

through a behavioural therapy program provided by *Miriam Home and Services*, a Montreal-based organization that provides services to individuals with intellectual disabilities and ASD. Similarly, Parent 3 and Parent 4 both described practicing morning routines with their children, which included tasks such as getting dressed and putting on shoes.

Parent-School Collaboration and Communication

Home-School Collaboration. The experiences of the four parents in working with their children's schools depict a spectrum of interactions, ranging from profoundly frustrating to exceptionally positive. Parent 1 experienced a mix of effective support and significant organizational shortcomings. She felt a sense of relief that the collaboration was less contentious than past experiences, stating "we didn't have to fight for it [support] every step of the way." However, she faced difficulties during the TTK due to poor coordination and last-minute communication, resulting in considerable family adjustments and initial apprehension.

Parent 2's experience was deeply frustrating, marked by insufficient communication and a reactive approach from the school. Despite proactive efforts such as joining the home-school association, she felt marginalized due to insufficient communication from the school, stating "I haven't been to a single meeting because my daughter is rarely in school...I have nothing to contribute if I don't know anything that's happening." She described a serious incident with her daughter that prompted an alarming response from the school, involving law enforcement and suggesting she keep her child at home. This parent's transparency about her child's behavioral challenges was met with assurances that later proved hollow: "They said not to worry... They said they have protocols to deal with it." The lack of consistent, constructive communication heightened her anxiety and instilled an ongoing fear of drastic measures, such as her child being expelled.

Parent 3's overwhelmingly positive experience with her child's school reflected a strong partnership and effective support. She described the school as a "secret resource right in the neighborhood" and praised its thorough preparation for the TTK. Similarly, Parent 4 reported a positive collaboration experience characterized by supportive measures and effective integration strategies. The school facilitated a smooth transition by organizing an orientation session and placing her child in the same kindergarten class as a peer from daycare. This parent maintained consistent communication with various school staff members, thereby strengthening the home-school partnership.

Parent Involvement in School Activities. The level of parental involvement in school activities varied significantly among the four parents, reflecting diverse approaches and opportunities for engagement. Parent 1's involvement appeared limited, with minimal participation in school activities beyond essential interactions such as attending parent-teacher conferences and sending food or materials for special events. Similarly, Parent 2 exhibited limited involvement, primarily due to her child's irregular attendance at school. Despite joining the home-school association, she was unable to attend meetings or contribute to school activities, feeling disconnected and uninformed. Parent 3 demonstrated slightly more involvement through occasional donations to fundraisers and attendance at parent-teacher conferences, albeit without engaging in volunteer or committee work. In contrast, Parent 4 emerged as the most actively involved parent, despite facing constraints on her ability to participate in social events due to childcare responsibilities. She maintained regular communication with teachers, attended scheduled meetings, and volunteered for school trips and events whenever possible. Her extensive involvement encompassed both academic support, such as assisting with homework, and participation in school-wide activities like music concerts and welcome parties.

Parent-Teacher Relationship. The parent-teacher relationships explored among all participants showcased a variety of engagement levels, communication frequencies, and satisfaction levels. Parent 1 underscored the consistent communication from her child's kindergarten teacher, stating "they send home a note every day about how the day went." While acknowledging this effort, she noted that the content was often brief, providing only basic information. Conversely, Parent 2 mentioned having minimal contact with school staff, stating "I don't have a relationship with her kindergarten teachers." She had sparse interactions with her child's teachers, receiving only brief updates through notes in the child's agenda, which left her feeling disconnected from her child's educational journey.

In contrast, Parent 3 depended on the kindergarten teacher due to her child's limited communication abilities, stating "our son can't really tell us how the day has gone... We lean heavily on the teacher." Initially hesitant to trust the teacher, she gradually developed a close bond, noting "it was more about letting go and putting our trust in this very experienced educator." She appreciated the teacher's efforts in facilitating communication and teaching the family how to implement coping mechanisms at home. Similarly, Parent 4 maintained a highly involved and communicative relationship with her child's kindergarten teacher, stating "we would write back and forth on ClassDojo [a classroom app]."

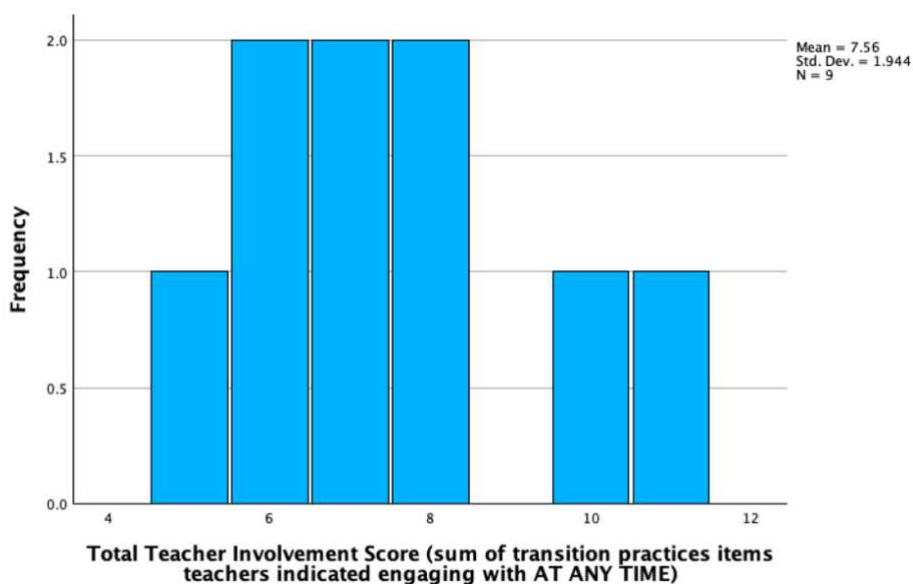
Research Aim III

The third objective of the present study was to examine the interplay between teacher involvement and parental concerns regarding the transition process for children with ASD. Through comparative analysis, the study aimed to identify trends and patterns within the sample. Specifically, the Teacher Involvement Score (TPOT) was compared with the Total Family Transition Concerns Score (FEIT).

Teacher Involvement

Total Teacher Involvement Score. The sample's Total Teacher Involvement scores ranged from 5 to 11, with a mean score of 7.56 ($SD = 1.94$). As shown in Figure 6, the most common scores (6, 7, and 8) each had an equal distribution of 22.2%, suggesting that teachers were moderately involved in the transition process. The possible score range for this measure is 0 to 13, with a median of 6.5. The sample's mean score of 7.56 exceeds this median, further indicating that teachers were generally more involved than the midpoint of the scale.

Figure 6. Frequency Distribution of Total Teacher Involvement Scores



Parental Concerns

Total Family Transition Concerns Score. The sample's Total Family Transition Concerns scores ranged from 24 to 33, with a mean score of 27.75 ($SD = 4.50$). Based on the measure's possible score range of 11 to 44 ($Mdn = 22.5$), the observed scores show that families reported moderate to high levels of concern. The average score was notably higher than the median of the possible range. This indicates a consistent level of transition concerns among

families, without significant outliers. The relatively narrow range of observed scores, in contrast to the full possible range, suggests that specific factors may have influenced these concerns across families.

Primary Concerns. The analysis uncovered common concerns among parents regarding their children's transition to kindergarten. Across multiple responses, a recurring theme was the apprehension surrounding the significant changes associated with the transition. As Parent 1 stated, "the transition itself was a concern. Leaving daycare and starting at a new place was a lot of change, which was a concern." Parents also voiced worries about adjusting to the new environment, managing increased transitions, and adapting to a new routine. Moreover, parents expressed concerns about their child's behaviour, including physical tantrums and emotional dysregulation. For instance, Parent 2 was apprehensive about her child potentially being expelled due to aggressive outbursts. Parent 3 highlighted worries about her child's communication difficulties, particularly during periods of emotional instability. Lastly, parents expressed concerns about being separated from their children during the transition period.

Concern Level. The FEIT questionnaire used a 4-point Likert scale to gauge parental concerns across 11 different domains (i.e., academics, behaviour issues, teacher relationships, separation anxiety, etc.) during the transition to kindergarten. The responses were classified as "no concerns," "a few concerns," "some concerns," or "many concerns." The highest level of concern was observed in domains related to following directions and the ability to communicate, with 75% of parents reporting many concerns in these areas. Additionally, a substantial proportion of parents (50%) expressed many concerns about behaviour problems and getting used to a new school.

Conversely, 50% of parents expressed no concern regarding their child's ability to separate from the family, though this domain exhibited the largest range of responses (see Table 3). Furthermore, the majority of parents (75%) had a few concerns about their child's ability to get along with other children and interact with the teacher. Half of the parents (50%) had a few concerns about their child's readiness for kindergarten, toilet training, and academic performance. Only one parent identified physical safety as an additional concern.

Table 3

Frequency of Parental Concerns about Child's Ability to Separate from Family

<i>Concern Level</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>No concerns</i>	2	50.0%
<i>A few</i>	1	25.0%
<i>Many concerns</i>	1	25.0%

Teacher Involvement vs. Parental Concerns

In order to establish any potential links between the independent variable (teacher involvement) and dependent variable (parental concerns), comparative methods were used (Cocq & Szekely, 2021). Firstly, the mean Total Teacher Involvement Score was 7.56, suggesting a moderate level of involvement from teachers in the transition to school process for children with ASD. Secondly, parents expressed moderate to high levels of concern, with the mean Total Family Transition Concerns Score reaching 27.75. This suggests that parents had significant apprehensions about their children's transition to school.

Comparing the median scores of the sample (7 for teacher involvement and 27 for parental concerns) to the median scores of the possible range (6.5 and 22.5, respectively)

provided further insight. It revealed that, on average, both teachers and parents reported scores above the midpoint of the possible range. This suggests that the study sample generally experienced higher levels of teacher involvement and parental concerns than typically observed in similar contexts.

Research Aim IV

The fourth aim of the study was to examine the impact of parental competence on parent involvement in the TTS process for children with ASD. Data from the PSOC and FEIT questionnaires were used for comparative analysis.

Parenting Sense of Competence Score

The Parenting Sense of Competence scores in the sample showed a relatively wide range, from 50 to 74, with a mean score of 66.25 ($SD = 11.03$). The median score was 70.5, which is significantly higher than the median of the possible range for this measure (range = 17-102, $Mdn = 59.5$; Zhu et al., 2022). The skew towards higher scores suggests that parents in this sample generally felt more competent than the average reported in the literature, where mean total scores typically range between 58 and 66 (Johnston & Mash, 1989; Ohan et al., 2000).

Total Parent Involvement Score

The Total Parent Involvement scores ranged from 6 to 9, with a mean of 7.25 ($SD = 1.26$). The sample median of 7 matched the median of the measure's possible range (0-14), demonstrating the sample's representativeness. It is worth noting that the sample mean (7.25) was slightly higher than the median (7), suggesting a slight skew towards higher parent involvement scores.

Parent Involvement in Transition Activities

During the transition to kindergarten, parents engaged in various activities to facilitate their child's smooth adjustment to the new educational environment. All four parents (100%) maintained monthly contact with their child's preschool teacher, underscoring the importance of ongoing communication between home and school. Similarly, attending kindergarten orientation sessions and registrations were universal practices (see Table 4). Furthermore, 75% of parents attended a kindergarten open house, demonstrating their commitment to engaging with their child's new school environment.

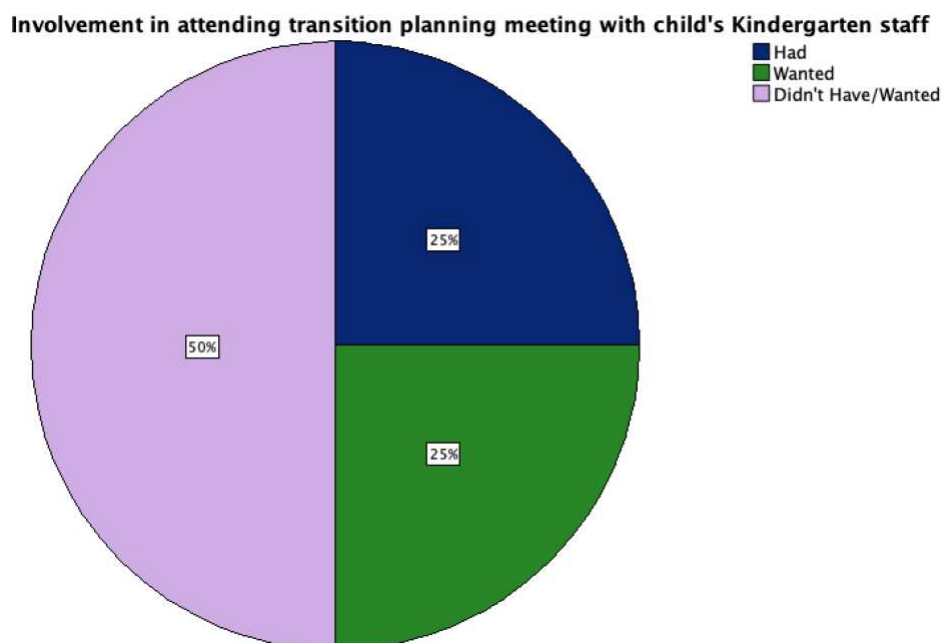
Table 4

Frequency of Parent Involvement in Transition Activities

<i>Transition Activity</i>	<i>Had</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Attending a kindergarten orientation session	4	100.0%
Attending a kindergarten registration session	4	100.0%

Annual meetings with preschool staff were attended by all parents, while 50% of parents participated in transition planning meetings with the preschool staff. Notably, involvement in transition planning with kindergarten staff was less prevalent, with only 25% of parents attending such meetings, despite 50% expressing a desire to be involved (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Parent Involvement in Transition Planning Meetings with Kindergarten Staff



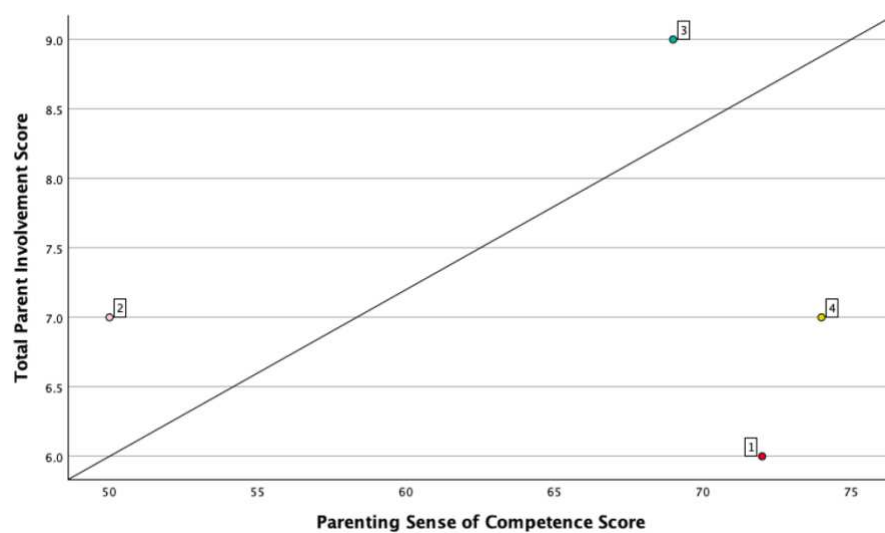
Parents also desired more comprehensive information sharing and transparency regarding the transition process, expressing interest in attending transition information meetings at both preschool and kindergarten levels. Furthermore, there was a clear desire for increased communication from kindergarten teachers, as all parents (100%) wanted to receive phone calls and home visits during the summer.

Parental Competence vs. Parent Involvement

Based on descriptive statistics, parents in the sample generally exhibited high levels of competence. Both the mean (66.25) and median (70.5) of the sample's PSOC scores surpassed the measure's typical average range (55-66), indicating a prevalent sense of parental efficacy among participants. Moreover, the distribution of Total Parent Involvement scores skewed slightly towards higher levels of involvement, suggesting an active engagement of parents during the TTS.

To explore the relationship between parental competence and involvement in greater depth, bivariate comparison methods such as scatter plots (x-y diagrams) were used. This visualization technique allows us to discern patterns, clusters of points, and outliers within the data (Keim et al., 2010). Specifically, the scatter plot illustrates the association between PSOC scores and Total Parent Involvement scores. As demonstrated in Figure 8, the data points on the scatter plot are somewhat dispersed, without a discernable pattern. This lack of clustering indicates that variations in PSOC scores did not reliably predict changes in Total Parent Involvement scores within the dataset. For instance, Parent 1 achieved a higher PSOC Score (72) despite reporting lower Total Parent Involvement (6), whereas Parent 2 obtained a lower PSOC Score (50) despite reporting higher Total Parent Involvement (7). Further investigation with a larger sample size is warranted to validate and elucidate the strength of this association.

Figure 8. Scatter Plot of PSOC and Total Parent Involvement Scores



Discussion

The present study had four aims. Firstly, to explore the implementation of recommended transition practices for children with ASD by general education teachers, assessing their

perceived importance and primary concerns. Secondly, to explore the experiences and perceptions of parents caring for children with ASD during the transition to school process. Thirdly, to examine the interplay between teacher involvement in the transition process and parental concerns. Lastly, to investigate the impact of parental competence on active involvement during the transition to school for children with ASD.

Research Aim I

The TPOT questionnaire yielded valuable insights into the concerns, perceived importance of transition practices, involvement, and barriers faced by kindergarten teachers regarding the transition to school for children with ASD.

Teacher Concerns

Classroom Environment, Support, and Resources. Teachers expressed primary concerns regarding the diversity of students, particularly those with ASD. They emphasized the uniqueness of each student and the potential overwhelming nature of the transition process for some children. This concern is rooted in the strengths-based philosophy of education, which underscores the importance of individualization. Per Lopez and Louis (2009), educational professionals are encouraged to systematically adapt the learning experience to meet the unique requirements of each child, especially those with special needs.

Another significant concern raised by teachers was related to the adequacy of the classroom environment, support, and resources available for children with ASD. Teachers cited overcrowded kindergarten classes as a major issue, limiting their ability to provide adequate support. Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003) note that the transition to school poses considerable challenges for children, largely due to the significant decrease in one-on-one time with teachers, among other factors. Teachers also highlighted challenges related to social integration, the length

of the school day, and the participation of children with ASD in classroom activities. This is particularly concerning given that autistic children are at a higher risk of emotional and behavioural problems, bullying, school exclusion, and peer rejection (Chen et al., 2020).

Teachers frequently report that students with disabilities encounter more difficulties during kindergarten entry, such as externalizing behaviours and self-regulation difficulties, in contrast to children without disabilities (Marsh et al., 2017; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). Therefore, it is understandable that teachers in this study expressed concerns about behaviour management and their ability to help children self-regulate when necessary. Furthermore, teachers voiced concerns about the lack of resources, which aligns with research indicating that the barriers faced by children with special needs during the TTS stem from insufficient support, particularly regarding the availability of adequate personnel and resources (Dockett et al., 2011).

Effective Communication and Collaboration. Transition planning should foster collaborative partnerships among ECE programs, schools, families, and communities (Dockett et al., 2014). However, many teachers expressed concerns about the level of parental involvement during the TTS for children with ASD. This is concerning, as successful transitions are contingent upon collaborative, continuous, and seamless relationships between home and school (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

Additionally, teachers reported concerns about the lack of transparency and communication from daycare facilities. Effective vertical transition planning, which involves the smooth movement of a child from one educational program to another, is essential for a child's future development, as it significantly impacts their social and academic growth (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010). As such, the successful implementation of strengths-based approaches relies on strong communication among stakeholders throughout the transition process (Chen et al., 2020).

Transition Preparation and Support. Teachers expressed concerns about getting to know students before the start of the school year and ensuring their familiarity with the school before they enter. This concern is significant as the literature on TTS highlights the importance of recognizing transition planning as a gradual, ongoing process (Rous et al., 2007). Moreover, teachers emphasized the need for a clear understanding of the child's diagnosis, capabilities, and challenges, as well as a consistent procedure for transition planning meetings. This corroborates existing literature indicating that many professionals have voiced concerns about the lack of case management for individual child records, which poses a significant barrier to effective TTS (Curby et al., 2018; Gooden & Rous, 2018). Adopting a holistic, interactionist approach to transition planning is crucial, as it ensures collaborative and ongoing communication between parents, teachers, and early intervention staff (Chen et al., 2020).

Perceived Importance of TTS Practices

There were several key practices that participating teachers considered essential for facilitating a smooth transition. These practices included attending meetings with the school team, providing kindergarten orientation sessions for parents and students, maintaining monthly contact with students' parents, offering written communication to the family regarding the transition, holding transition planning meetings with the preschool team, and accompanying children to their own kindergarten classroom. These findings confirm those of a systematic review showing that primary school teachers universally support evidence-based transition practices (Marsh et al., 2017). Although teachers attributed great importance to several effective transition practices, it is essential to consider whether these are high- or low-intensity transition practices. High-intensity practices require a significant investment of time and effort to address individual needs, whereas low-intensity practices are more general and are applied to both

children and adults (Gooden & Rous, 2018). In the present study, teachers assigned high importance to one low-intensity transition practice in particular: providing kindergarten orientations for parents and students. Nevertheless, they valued several high-intensity practices, such as maintaining monthly contact with students' parents, providing written communication to the family regarding the transition, holding transition planning meetings with the preschool team, and accompanying children to their own kindergarten classroom. However, it is concerning that many teachers rated some high-intensity transition practices as not important (e.g., having a preschool teacher visit the kindergarten classroom, working with preschool teachers to coordinate curriculum, and completing home visits for students).

Teacher Involvement in TTS Practices

Research indicates that the smoothness of a child's transition from preschool to kindergarten is influenced in part by the strategies employed by teachers when working with the child and their family (Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; Schischka et al., 2012; Villeneuve et al., 2013). While some teachers were highly involved, others demonstrated lower levels of involvement, suggesting variability in the implementation of transition practices across the sample. In this study, teachers engaged most frequently in monthly contact with students' parents and meetings with the elementary school team. The teachers' involvement in the former practice is significant, as research consistently highlights the importance of effective communication and information sharing with families (Fontil et al., 2019; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Marsh et al., 2017; Schischka et al., 2012; Schulting et al., 2005; Starr et al., 2016; Villeneuve et al., 2013). This finding also confirms research showing that kindergarten teachers frequently endorse the approach of monthly contact with parents (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011). The latter practice corroborates recommendations that teachers should meet with staff and family

to assess children's strengths and needs (Gooden & Rous, 2018). However, this finding is surprising given previous concerns raised by teachers about "having enough support from the school team during the transition process." While the frequency of meetings may give the appearance of support, the effectiveness of that support in addressing the specific needs and concerns of teachers during the transition process might be lacking. Moreover, almost 50% of teachers reported providing continual written communication to the family regarding the transition, which substantiates research highlighting the importance of connecting with families before and after kindergarten starts (Denkyriah & Agbeke, 2010; Gooden & Rous, 2018, Quintero & McIntyre, 2011).

Seamless transitions rely on building strong connections between different systems, including those between preschool and kindergarten teachers (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Unfortunately, most teachers in this study did not engage in transition planning meetings with the preschool team, confirming previous research that found little evidence of liaison between early childhood and school settings (Schischka et al., 2012). This poses a significant problem as communication between preschool and elementary school teachers has been identified as the strongest predictor of adaptive socio-emotional functioning and reduced behavior problems in children (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). Additionally, it is concerning that more than half of the teachers in this study did not participate in the transition planning team, especially considering research indicating that holding such meetings is the most effective teacher strategy (Nuske et al., 2018). Despite the critical role that collaborative practices play in achieving successful school integration, the findings of this study underscore its scarcity during the TTS process.

A significant number of teachers in this study did not complete home visits for students with ASD, which contradicts recommendations for teachers to pursue individualized efforts

(Gooden & Rous, 2018). Positive transitions to kindergarten are facilitated when teachers invest time in building relationships, such as meeting with the child before school begins, making this finding particularly alarming. Furthermore, the majority of teachers reported no involvement in making phone calls to preschool teachers or collaborating with them to coordinate the curriculum, both of which are identified as high-intensity transition strategies (Gooden & Rous, 2018).

Although a substantial proportion of teachers provided kindergarten orientation sessions for students and parents at some point during the year, this practice is of low intensity (Fontil et al., 2019). This finding aligns with research indicating that the most common transition practices among teachers include hosting parent orientations and providing parents with information (Daley et al., 2011, as cited in Gooden & Rous, 2008). Unfortunately, these low-intensity transition practices may not adequately support children and families in preparing for the changes and challenges associated with starting school (Curby et al., 2018; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). In line with previous research, the present study shows that teachers often opt for low-intensity, conventional, and group-oriented transition practices (Janus et al., 2007; Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Purtell et al., 2020).

Additional Involvement. Beyond the evidence-based transition practices described above, teachers engaged in various additional forms of involvement during the TTS process. For some, access to resources like transition activities played a significant role in providing extra support for students with ASD. The literature suggests that structured transition activities such as social stories and visual activity schedules can help reduce anxiety and problem behavior in children with ASD (McDougal et al., 2020; Saad, 2016; Thomas & Karuppali, 2022). Teachers also reported implementing progressive school days for children with ASD, a step that allows

them to gradually adjust to the new school environment (Quebec Ministry of Education, 2010). Distributing questionnaires to familiarize teachers with incoming students was identified as another beneficial practice, aligning with the individualization aspect of the strengths-based education approach. Moreover, teachers listed communication with school board consultants and professionals as another form of involvement, which has been proven to be effective in supporting the transition process (Schischka et al., 2012).

Teachers expressed several suggestions for additional forms of involvement they would like to see included in the TTS process for children with ASD. These suggestions ranged from allocating more resource time to autistic students within the public school system to enhancing collaboration between preschools and elementary schools. This confirms previous research indicating that both parents and teachers not only benefit from but also express a desire for transition practices that prioritize the interconnection between systems, as opposed to more traditional transition efforts (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Barriers to TTS Practices

Despite the consensus among teachers regarding the importance of effective transition practices for children with ASD, the challenges in implementation reveal stark realities. In the present study, teachers reported facing three main barriers: transparency and communication, practical barriers, and parental involvement.

Transparency and Communication

Teachers highlighted parents' reluctance to fully disclose their child's difficulties as a major challenge in the TTS process for children with ASD. This lack of openness may stem from a stigma surrounding ASD or concerns about their child being rejected by the school. This finding is consistent with a study by Curby et al. (2018), where most teachers identified parental

beliefs and behaviors as barriers in the transition to kindergarten. It is possible that family beliefs about disability may differ from those of the educational system, which can impede effective transition practice implementation (Gooden & Rous, 2018). Moreover, limited communication and collaboration between stakeholders, including parents, elementary schools, and preschools, emerged as a significant barrier. This substantiates research showing a significant disparity in understanding between kindergarten teachers, elementary school administrators, and their students' preschool experiences (Purtell et al., 2020). This lack of communication hinders the potential for “knowledge transfer” from preschools to elementary schools.

Practical Barriers

One of the main practical barriers listed by teachers was the lack of full-time support for students with ASD. This finding aligns with research indicating that teachers often cite inadequate support services for children with disabilities, along with disruptions in the frequency and intensity of these services, as significant hindrances (Gooden & Rous, 2018). The limited hours allocated to integration aides within the public school system partially contributes to this lack of support services. These findings reinforce previous research showing that teachers consistently report staffing challenges, as well as shortages of specialized personnel, as barriers to the implementation of effective TTS practices (Gooden & Rous, 2018). Resource and funding constraints within the public school system could be one possible explanation for the lack of support for students with ASD.

Moreover, teachers listed time and financial limitations as substantial barriers to effective transition practice implementation. Funding barriers may include insufficient financial resources to support staff in preparing for children with disabilities during the summer and compensating teachers for pre-school year transition work (Curby et al., 2018; Gooden & Rous, 2018). The

presence of students with “uncoded needs” in the classroom, referring to those who have not yet been identified as having special needs, was also identified as a challenge. This situation requires the teacher’s attention and resources to be stretched thinner due to the increased demands on their time and energy. Additionally, the lack of necessary training to effectively support students with ASD was listed as a significant barrier in the TTS process. A considerable gap has been recognized in teacher readiness to support and coordinate successful school transitions, particularly for children with ASD (Beamish et al., 2014; Curby et al., 2018).

Parental Involvement

Teachers expressed concerns about the impact of uninvolved parents on their ability to understand the child’s needs, hindering the transition into the classroom. This finding aligns with previous research showing that teachers report the lack of communication between schools and parents as a pervasive concern and barrier in the TTS process (Beamish et al., 2014; Janus et al., 2007). It is important to consider potential explanations for parents labeled as “uninvolved.” For instance, challenges surrounding effective communication and relationship-building may be exacerbated by language barriers and cultural differences in communication styles (Starr et al., 2016). This issue is particularly relevant in Montreal, a diverse city with numerous languages and cultural backgrounds among its communities.

It is also worth noting the discrepancy between the identified challenge of parental involvement and the most frequent transition practice of monthly contact with parents. Despite concerns about uninvolved parents, teachers actively engaged in regular communication with them, indicating a proactive effort to involve parents in the transition process. This suggests that while teachers are making efforts to engage parents, they may still face challenges in overcoming the barriers to effective parental involvement.

Research Aim II

The semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of parents of children with ASD during the transition to school. Specifically, three main themes emerged: navigating advocacy, support, and transition; family dynamics and involvement; and parent-school collaboration and communication.

Navigating Advocacy, Support, and Transition

Advocacy and Action. The findings highlight the determined advocacy efforts of parents in addressing their child's needs within educational settings. For example, Parent 1's experience illustrates her persistence in securing individualized support despite facing initial resistance. Such efforts resonate with existing literature that underscores parental advocacy as critical for children's academic success and access to necessary supports and services (Dockett et al., 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2014). Boshoff et al. (2016) characterize parental advocacy as encompassing actions such as seeking support, advocating for welfare and rights, and articulating their child's needs. One parent emphasized their role as their child's voice, highlighting the multifaceted nature of parental advocacy. Ultimately, these endeavours reflect parents' commitment to shaping their child's future by providing opportunities and considering possibilities (Boshoff et al., 2016).

Support. The results from this study emphasize the essential role of tailored support systems in ensuring a seamless transition to school for children with ASD. This aligns with existing literature highlighting the transition to school as a sensitive period where adapted supports can profoundly impact academic, social, and mental health outcomes both in the short and long term (Chen et al., 2020). The experiences of the parents in the study echo the strengths-based philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of individualized approaches to education. For

instance, Parent 1's appreciation for the personalized attention her child received at school reflects the necessity of catering to each child's unique needs, strengths, and interests (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

The ecological and dynamic model proposed by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) conceptualizes the TTS as an ongoing, interactive process involving various contexts and individuals in a child's life. Despite the traumatic experience of balancing work and supporting her child, Parent 2 found consistent support from her parents and the SRSOR team. This highlights the importance of collaborative efforts among professionals, families, and community services in shaping positive transition outcomes for children with special needs (Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; Walker et al., 2012). Similarly, Parent 4's satisfaction with the guidance received from the CLSC and CROM further illustrates this point. These organizations provided crucial information about what to expect in kindergarten, helping to prepare both the child and the family for the upcoming changes. This proactive approach is essential in mitigating anxiety and fostering a sense of preparedness, which is a critical component of successful transitions (Villeneuve et al., 2013).

Navigating the Transition to School. The findings underscore the complex challenges and varied experiences that parents faced during their children's transition to school. Parent 1 highlighted that external disruptions and inadequate information dissemination exacerbated transition difficulties. This corresponds with research identifying administrative issues and institutional disorganization as major challenges for parents during the transition to school (Janus et al., 2007; Siddiqua & Janus, 2017). Moreover, the complexity of ASD can lead to significant difficulties during the transition process, placing autistic children at risk for emotional and behavioural problems as well as school exclusion (Chen et al., 2020). This was reflected in

Parent 2's dissatisfaction with her child's increased externalizing behaviours and overall progress.

Significant challenges arose from the stark contrast between the supportive preschool environment and the struggles faced in kindergarten. Siddiqua and Janus (2017) found that parents of children with special needs often hold more favorable perceptions of services prior to school entry than post-transition. Parent 2 experienced this firsthand, feeling that her child's experience at the CPE was notably better. Moreover, Parent 3 expressed concerns about her child's future social and academic abilities, which are often affected during transitions (Fontil et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, parents outlined several positive outcomes, such as supportive school environments and individualized support systems. Parent 1 praised the school's use of the TEACCH method (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication-Handicapped Children), which promotes independence, communication, social skills, and overall quality of life for individuals with ASD (Autisme Montreal, 2014). This method's strengths-based approach provides the right support and guidance to empower individuals to achieve positive change (Dockett et al., 2014). Additionally, parents emphasized the positive impact of empathetic and supportive teachers and staff on their children's educational experience and overall well-being. They valued teachers who demonstrated genuine empathy and enjoyed working with their children. These teachers embodied the strengths-based philosophy by focusing on the potential for growth and development inherent in every student, regardless of their challenges. Moreover, parents appreciated the schools' efforts to accommodate their children's sensory needs, such as using sound-absorbing materials, dimming lights, and installing carpet floors. This resonates with literature emphasizing the importance of creating inclusive and

supportive environments for individuals with ASD, which can improve both their well-being and academic performance (Ashburner et al., 2008).

Family Dynamics and Involvement

Family Interactions and Influence on TTS. The study highlights the pivotal role of family interactions in influencing children's transition to school. One parent, despite being divorced and lacking ample family support, described her child's transition as neutral. Another single mother, with minimal support and whose child had limited interactions with stepsiblings, reported a negative transition experience. Conversely, parents with strong family support and engaged siblings reported positive transitions for their children. These diverse experiences emphasize how family dynamics and support structures can impact the transition process, aligning with Bronfenbrenner's model, which emphasizes the collective responsibility of all parties involved (Docket et al., 2011).

Sibling relationships played a crucial role in providing emotional support and stability during the transition to school, especially when older siblings attended the same school. This finding corresponds with existing research indicating siblings' positive impact on socialization and school adjustment (Vogler et al., 2008). However, challenges such as limited interactions or conflicts with stepsiblings complicated the transition for some families. This echoes previous studies highlighting family issues as significant barriers to the transition to kindergarten for children with special needs (Janus et al., 2007). The findings underscore the importance of robust support systems, including extended family assistance, to facilitate a smoother transition process.

Parental Involvement in Kindergarten Preparation. Parents prioritized familiarizing children with the school environment, highlighting the importance of pre-kindergarten visits and exposure to school settings (Dockett et al., 2014). Previous studies found that reviewing the route

to a new school can spark transportation related conversation while alleviating a child's underlying fears about the unknown (Harper, 2016). Additionally, parents' use of social stories and discussions about kindergarten reflects the significance of socio-emotional preparation for the transition to school. Social stories are personalized narratives that help children transition by addressing concerns and fostering positive outcomes (Briody & McGarry, 2005). A growing body of research in special education supports their effectiveness, particularly for children with autism, as they promote memory development and self-regulation. The collaborative effort among families, community organizations, and schools is evident in the provision of resources by professionals from the CLSC, CROM, and school boards. By working together to provide resources and support for children, these entities bridge the gaps between different aspects of the mesosystem, promoting smoother transitions to school.

Parent-School Collaboration and Communication

Home-School Collaboration. The findings of this study underscore the importance of effective home-school collaboration for successful transitions into new educational environments. Research consistently shows that transitions rely heavily on strong relationships between schools and families (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Cohesive efforts lead to smoother adjustments for children, reducing stress for both them and their families. This collaborative approach is essential for addressing each child's individual needs, especially during critical transition periods.

The parents who reported positive transition experiences indicated that proactive support, clear communication, and effective integration strategies were key factors in their satisfaction. These elements facilitated a sense of preparedness and comfort for both children and families. For instance, familiarization opportunities and consistent interactions with school staff helped

create a welcoming and supportive environment. This corroborates research showing that the educational transition continues until the family feels comfortable within the school setting (Dockett et al., 2011). Conversely, parents who faced challenges cited issues such as poor communication, lack of timely coordination, and reactive rather than proactive support from the school. These factors contributed to heightened anxiety, frustration, and a sense of marginalization. Such negative experiences highlight the consequences of inadequate collaboration and underscore the need for schools to establish reliable and effective communication channels with parents.

Parent Involvement in School Activities. Research indicates that home-based school involvement correlates with enhanced child academic achievement, standardized test scores, and social-emotional development (Blake Berryhill, 2016). The varying levels of involvement in school activities among the four parents highlight a broad spectrum of approaches and challenges in supporting their children's education. Two parents demonstrated limited involvement, influenced by factors such as irregular school attendance and logistical constraints, aligning with Hornby and Lafaele's (2011) concept of a "rhetoric-reality gap" in parental engagement. Despite the recognized benefits of active parental involvement, practical limitations often impede consistent participation.

One significant barrier to parental involvement is demanding work schedules that do not align with school hours or event timings, hindering attendance at meetings and involvement in school events. For example, Parent 2 struggled to balance a full-time career with childcare responsibilities, impacting her ability to participate fully in school activities. In contrast, Parent 4 benefited from a flexible work arrangement that allowed for early departure, granting greater participation in volunteering for school trips and events. Furthermore, family dynamics and

responsibilities, such as being a single mother or caring for multiple children, can also hinder parental involvement. Research suggests that single mothers often experience higher levels of parenting stress and lower engagement in home-based school activities compared to two-parent biological families (Blake Berryhill, 2016). Being part of a two-parent household, as seen with Parent 3 and Parent 4, facilitates higher levels of parental involvement in children's school activities. This may be attributed to shared responsibilities, a built-in support network, increased flexibility in managing time, access to financial resources, and emotional support (Blake Berryhill, 2016).

Parent-Teacher Relationship. The results revealed significant disparities in the quality and frequency of parent-teacher communication, illustrating how these differences can impact parental satisfaction and involvement. Parents who experienced frequent and detailed communication (i.e., Parent 4) felt more connected and satisfied with their child's educational experience. This suggests that consistent, substantive communication fosters a sense of partnership and trust between parents and teachers, which is crucial for supporting children through their educational journey. This finding is consistent with the literature, which emphasizes that effective parent-teacher communication and information sharing are best practices for facilitating successful transitions (Marsh et al., 2017).

Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) highlight that the quality of relationships within the transition ecology plays a critical role in providing essential support to children during challenging periods. Unfortunately, Parent 2 received minimal and inconsistent updates, resulting in her feeling disconnected from her child's education, which hindered her ability to engage effectively and support her child's learning. Parent 1's experience, characterized by

receiving daily notes regularly but with limited detail, indicates that while frequent communication is helpful, the content and depth of the information are equally important.

Parent 3's evolving relationship with her child's teacher underscores the importance of building trust and personalized communication. This parent's reliance on the teacher for updates due to her child's limited verbal abilities highlights the need for tailored approaches to meet individual family needs. In essence, relationships involving regular communication, shared goals, and a focus on nurturing children's skill development contribute to positive transition outcomes (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). By addressing the diverse needs of families and fostering a collaborative environment, schools can significantly improve children's educational experiences.

Research Aim III

Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data from the TPOT and FEIT questionnaires, the study revealed notable observations on teacher involvement, parental concerns, and the interplay between them.

Teacher Involvement

The Total Teacher Involvement Score represents the sum of transition practices that teachers engaged with at any time. The findings indicate that teachers reported moderate levels of involvement in the TTS for children with ASD. This is a positive outcome, as research shows that when kindergarten teachers implement transition practices, it leads to improved academic and socio-behavioural outcomes among children (Schulting et al., 2005; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). Involved teachers can provide the necessary support and continuity that children with ASD require during transitions.

While the involvement of kindergarten teachers is crucial in the transition to school process, Dockett and Perry (2004) remind us that the roles and involvement of stakeholders can vary significantly across communities and contexts. For instance, in Canada, it has become increasingly common for young children with special needs to attend inclusive schools, which places additional responsibility and pressure on teachers to accommodate these students (Villeneuve et al., 2013). Despite the concerns and challenges faced by teachers in this study, their moderate levels of involvement reflect their commitment and efforts to support children with ASD.

Parental Concerns

Total Family Transition Concerns Score. The transition to kindergarten represents a significant milestone that can induce stress for both children and their families (Chen et al., 2020; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Denkyirah & Agbeke, 2010; Kim, 2022). The higher average Total Family Transition Concerns Score in the sample supports existing research highlighting increased transition-related concerns among parents of children with disabilities compared to those of typically developing children (Quintero & McIntyre, 2011; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). These findings highlight the necessity for additional support services specifically tailored to meet the diverse needs of families during the transition to school.

Primary Concerns. The analysis of the FEIT questionnaire provided valuable insights into the concerns parents had regarding their children's transition to kindergarten. Many parents expressed unease about the significant changes associated with the transition, such as leaving familiar daycare settings and adapting to a new environment. This concern is supported by research from Nuske et al. (2018), which suggests that children's resistance to change and intolerance to uncertainty can cause apprehension for parents during the TTS process. Moreover,

parents voiced worries about adjusting to a new routine, given that many autistic children exhibit behavioral or emotional difficulties when faced with changes in routines and new settings (APA, 2013; Chen et al., 2020; Jellinek et al., 2022).

In addition to overarching concerns about the transition process, parents also expressed specific anxieties. A significant area of worry revolved around their children's behavior, with frequent mentions of physical tantrums and emotional dysregulation. This finding is reinforced by research indicating that teachers frequently observe greater challenges, such as externalizing behaviors and difficulties with self-regulation, among students with disabilities during kindergarten entry (Marsh et al., 2017; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). One parent expressed concern about her child's ability to verbalize, especially during moments of emotional distress. This concern is warranted, as children with ASD are particularly vulnerable due to their challenges in social interaction and communication (APA, 2013; Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Fontil et al., 2019).

Concern Level. The highest level of concern among parents pertained to their children's ability to follow directions and communicate effectively. This aligns with research indicating that following directions and social skills are amongst the most frequently cited challenges for children during the TTS (Fontil et al., 2019). Additionally, behavioral problems and acclimating to a new school environment were significant concerns, with half of parents reporting "many concerns" in these domains. These findings are consistent with the literature, which highlights that children with ASD often struggle with changes in routine or environment, typically seeking "sameness" and predictability to feel secure. This need for consistency can make transitions particularly stressful, potentially leading to behavioral issues such as tantrums and emotional dysregulation (APA, 2013).

Interestingly, 50% of parents expressed no concern about their child's ability to separate from the family. Several factors may contribute to this finding. Firstly, it is possible that these children have been gradually and consistently exposed to routines that include separation from their caregivers (e.g., attending daycare), which makes the parents feel less anxious about separating for kindergarten. Secondly, autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning there is significant variability in how it manifests in different children. Some children may have developed a level of comfort with being away from their primary caregivers. Thirdly, many children with autism participate in early intervention programs that focus on social skills and independence, such as ABA therapy. It is possible that the effectiveness of these interventions results in parents feeling more confident about their child's ability to handle the transition to kindergarten.

Concerns about social interactions, including getting along with other children and interacting with the teacher, were also prevalent. This concern is valid, as children with ASD often struggle with the unpredictable nature of transitions, leading to difficulties in effectively communicating with peers and teachers (Fontil et al., 2019; Nuske et al., 2018). The transition to school involves navigating a more complex social environment compared to preschool or home, which can be challenging for many children (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Furthermore, several parents expressed some concerns about their child's readiness for kindergarten. This finding corroborates research showing that parents of children with ASD perceive inadequate preparation for the transition process as a barrier to successful school entry (Stoner et al., 2007). Many parents had apprehensions about their child's ability to manage self-care tasks in kindergarten, such as toilet training. Interestingly, a kindergarten teacher participating in the study echoed these concerns, emphasizing the challenges of meeting such individual needs within the kindergarten environment, especially for students with ASD.

Teacher Involvement vs. Parental Concerns

The analysis of teacher involvement and parental concerns reveals that while teachers showed a moderate level of engagement in facilitating the transition to school for children with ASD, parents harbored significant concerns about the process. The disparity in perceptions between teachers and parents highlights the need for improved collaboration and communication to better support the transition experience for children with special needs. These findings resonate with existing literature indicating a lack of partnerships and collaborative practices during the TTS process (Chen et al., 2020; Fontil, 2019; Fontil et al., 2019; Gooden & Rous, 2019; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Schischka et al., 2012; Villeneuve et al., 2013; Yamauchi, 2020). They underscore the importance of adopting a holistic approach that considers the perspectives and experiences of both educators and parents when designing and implementing effective interventions to support successful transitions for children with ASD.

According to the literature, best practices for kindergarten transition programming include strategies to increase communication and alignment between home, preschool, and kindergarten settings (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Welchons & McIntyre, 2015). This concurs with the ecological and dynamic model of transition, which views successful transitions as relying on effective systems and supports, rather than on the child alone (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In fact, both parents and teachers benefit from and desire transition practices that prioritize the interconnection between systems (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model, which acknowledges that numerous contributors influence transition experiences, with each contributor's perspectives and expectations shaping these experiences (Dockett et al., 2011). A child's parents and kindergarten teacher operate within the microsystem, with the mesosystem

representing the interactions between different components of this microsystem (e.g., family and school), collectively impacting the child's development (Hayes et al., 2017). The observed disparity between teacher involvement and parental concerns highlights potential gaps in the mesosystem, indicating a need for stronger connections and communication channels between home and school.

Research Aim IV

Findings from the PSOC and FEIT questionnaires provided insights into the impact of parental competence on parent involvement in the transition to school process for children with ASD.

Parenting Sense of Competence Score

The findings of this study highlight a prevailing inclination towards higher levels of perceived parenting competence within the sample. On average, participants expressed satisfaction and efficacy in fulfilling their parental roles. Despite variations in parenting satisfaction among participants, the majority felt confident about their knowledge, skills, and abilities as parents. This is noteworthy considering previous research has emphasized a substantial link between PSOC and children's school readiness, as well as their subsequent academic performance (Bucsea et al., 2023). In light of these findings, the parenting sense of competence emerges as a pivotal focal point in both research and interventions aimed at mitigating problematic behaviours in children (Jandric & Kurtovic, 2021). This emphasis is particularly relevant when a child faces increased risks or has special needs, intensifying the demands and pressures experienced by parents.

The average PSOC score in this study exceeded previously reported averages, suggesting a unique characteristic of the sample population or potential variations in the measure used.

Several factors may contribute to the observed skew towards higher PSOC scores in this sample. It is possible that participants in this study possessed specific demographic characteristics, such as SES, education level, or cultural background, which influenced their perceptions of parenting competence. Previous research indicates that socioeconomic factors play a significant role in parental adjustment to a child's disability and their sense of competence as parents (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005; Jones & Prinz, 2005). Additionally, education plays a crucial part in parental adjustment as it provides enhanced knowledge, a better understanding of the disability, and fosters more proactive attitudes and self-advocacy (Landry et al., 2006).

Apart from demographic characteristics, the number of children in the family may also impact parenting sense of competence differently. While experience in raising children can positively influence parenting and family adjustment, having more children can impose additional strains on parents, both financially and emotionally (Jandric & Kurtovic, 2021). In this study, three out of the four parents had more than one child, with the child diagnosed with ASD being the youngest. Interestingly, all three of these parents reported higher PSOC scores compared to the parent with only one child. Lower parenting self-esteem has also been associated with single parenthood (Bromley et al., 2004). This is reflected in the study by Parent 2, a single mother, who exhibited the lowest PSOC score among all participants. Furthermore, the literature presents mixed findings regarding the impact of cultural background on parenting sense of competence. For instance, a study by Arellano et al. (2017) found that mothers from non-white ethnic backgrounds reported increased parenting satisfaction, whereas research by Bornstein and Cote (2004) revealed that Argentine mothers expressed little confidence in their parenting compared to European-American mothers.

Total Parent Involvement Score

Parent involvement is a robust predictor of a child's success at school and is crucial in ensuring that the child receives necessary supports and services (Dockett et al., 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2014). The slight skew towards higher involvement scores in this sample may reflect a trend where parents are actively engaged in their child's educational and support needs. This is particularly important as research highlights that parental involvement is a key factor influencing children's adaptive abilities, academic achievements, and emotional well-being (Sook & Lim, 2019).

Parent Involvement in Transition Activities

All parents in the study attended kindergarten orientation and registration sessions, which may be considered high-intensity transition strategies when children visit kindergarten individually with family or providers (Gooden & Rous, 2018). However, many parents also attended a kindergarten open house, which is regarded as a low-intensity strategy (Gooden & Rous, 2018). The reliance on low-intensity strategies such as open houses may be insufficient in providing the necessary support for children during the transition to kindergarten. This is particularly important for children with ASD, as they may benefit significantly from more high-intensity transition practices to better support their unique needs.

All four parents reported attending annual meetings with preschool staff, with half participating in specific transition planning meetings. Unfortunately, this level of involvement did not extend to transition planning with kindergarten staff. This is particularly concerning given that current recommendations emphasize the importance of families actively engaging with their child's school team to gather essential information for individualized transition planning, including assessments and IEP development (Gooden & Rous, 2018). A study by Nuske et al. (2018) supports this recommendation, showing that effective teacher strategies

include holding a team transition planning meeting before the school year ends and maintaining frequent communication with parents.

The study's findings corroborate previous research indicating a significant decline in parent-teacher communication during the kindergarten phase, with greater emphasis on information sharing between parents and pre-transition service providers (Siddiqua & Janus, 2007). Notably, the parents in this study expressed a desire for increased communication from kindergarten teachers. This aligns with research suggesting that parents benefit from and desire transition practices that foster interconnection between systems (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Furthermore, all four parents indicated they would have liked to receive phone calls and home visits from the kindergarten teacher before the start of school. These practices are considered high-intensity strategies that address the individual needs of children (Gooden & Rous, 2018). This finding highlights a perceived gap in communication and support during the transition period.

Parental Competence vs. Parent Involvement

The literature indicates that a sense of competence is linked to positive parenting qualities such as warmth, responsiveness, and involvement (Slagt et al., 2012). Consequently, it has been inferred that parents with higher levels of PSOC are more inclined to actively participate in their children's education (Yan & Hou, 2023). However, the current study revealed a dispersed pattern with no clear trends, indicating that variations in parental competence, as measured by PSOC scores, do not reliably predict levels of parental involvement. This suggests that higher competence does not necessarily translate to greater involvement, and vice versa. The findings of this study highlight the complexity of the relationship between these variables and imply that other factors not captured by the PSOC may mediate the relationship between parental

competence and parent involvement. Example of these factors include external circumstances (e.g., SES, work demands, family structure), child characteristics, parental stress, and the availability of support systems. Overall, the lack of a discernable pattern underscores the need for further research with a larger sample size to better understand the dynamics between parental competence and involvement.

Limitations

The findings of this study must be interpreted within the context of several limitations. Firstly, the use of a purposive sampling method limits the external validity of the findings (Andrade, 2021). By exclusively recruiting parents and teachers from the Quebec region, the study's findings are applicable only to this specific subpopulation and cannot be generalized to the broader Canadian population. Additionally, the small sample size limits the ability to draw statistically significant conclusions. Despite efforts to ensure participants were well-suited for addressing the research objectives, the small sample size necessitates caution when interpreting and applying the results to broader contexts.

The study faced further limitations that may impact the reliability and validity of its findings. The majority of participants were recruited from Facebook support groups, potentially introducing selection bias and limiting the representativeness of the population of interest, namely parents of children with ASD and general education kindergarten teachers. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data from teachers and parents may have introduced biases such as recall bias and social desirability bias. For example, a parent of a child in grade 2 at the time of the study might have had less accurate recollections of the kindergarten transition process, potentially affecting the completeness and reliability of the data collected.

Considerations related to data collection methods also warrant attention. While efforts were made to accommodate participants through online and phone interviews, technology requirements may have excluded individuals lacking adequate resources or technological proficiency. Furthermore, the adaptation of the TPOT questionnaire for this study also presents limitations. The adapted version lacked established psychometric properties, raising concerns about the reliability and validity of the instrument in this specific context. Despite attempts to translate the TPOT questionnaire into French for francophone participants, language barriers may have influenced response accuracy. In addition, the French version of the TPOT questionnaire involved sending a PDF version rather than using Qualtrics, which compromised anonymity. This could potentially impact responses due to concerns about confidentiality and social desirability. It should be noted, however, that only one teacher used the French version of the questionnaire, limiting the scope of this particular concern.

Future Directions

To enhance our understanding of the transition to school process and address existing gaps in the literature, several key recommendations for future research are proposed. Firstly, future studies should consider using a larger sample size to enable the use of inferential statistics, which can determine effect sizes and statistical power. This approach is particularly relevant for addressing research questions three and four, which explore the association between teacher involvement and parental concerns, as well as parental competence and parent involvement. A more extensive sample will provide deeper insights and enhance the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, it is recommended to recruit participants from both urban and rural settings to capture a comprehensive range of experiences and challenges across different geographical

locations. The current study's participants were mainly from Montreal, a major metropolitan city, leaving much to learn about the perspectives of parents and teachers in rural communities.

Thirdly, regarding *Phase II*, interviews with parents should include questions about the impact of COVID-19 on the transition to school experience. This addition will help account for the pandemic's influence on the challenges faced during the transition process, which was not addressed in previous interviews. Given the paucity of research examining the experiences of parents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds and how family-level factors influence their transition to kindergarten, a fourth recommendation would be to focus on these populations. Investigating the specific challenges and support needs of CLD families will contribute valuable insights into creating more inclusive transition practices.

Moreover, it is essential to consider the effects of transition practices for children from lower financial means, particularly how these practices act as a moderator between poverty status and child outcomes. Research should explore the transition practices used by teachers in schools situated in communities with higher concentrations of racial/ethnic minorities and poverty. Gaining insight into these dynamics will inform more effective and equitable transition strategies to support all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Lastly, future studies should aim to recruit fathers, as their experiences might differ from those of mothers. Understanding fathers' perspectives can provide a more comprehensive view of parental involvement and competence during the transition to school.

Implications

The findings of this study provide important insights into the transition to school for children with ASD, offering implications that guide recommendations for future practice among teachers, parents, schools, and policymakers. For teachers, future practices should prioritize

tailoring transition strategies to meet the unique needs of each child and their family, focusing on leveraging the family's strengths. Adopting a strengths-based approach, educational professionals should carefully consider each child's strengths, interests, and needs, adjusting the learning experience accordingly. Maintaining continuity and effective communication between the services children leave and those they enter is essential for successful adaptation to new environments. Therefore, joint participation in professional development opportunities and intergroup discussions with early childhood educators is strongly recommended. Recognizing the pivotal role teachers play in implementing effective transition practices, it is advised that they engage in high-intensity transition activities such as home visits, organizing meetings with the child and their family, and collaborating with preschool program staff. These proactive measures can significantly enhance the transition to school process and promote positive developmental outcomes for students.

Schools can utilize transition programs to establish meaningful and responsive relationships among children, families, and educators. By positioning strengths at the core of transition plans, students with learning disabilities and their families are better positioned to benefit from positive experiences, promoting greater collaboration and enriched programming. Schools should also ensure ongoing support and resources for teachers, including access to specialists and materials. Professional development programs should be designed to equip kindergarten teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to implement effective transition practices for children with ASD. Additionally, it is recommended to develop programs and workshops that provide parents with information, coping strategies, and advocacy tips to support them during the transition process.

Parents play an important role in supporting their child's transition to school by establishing early collaborations with professionals and teachers even before the school year begins. It is crucial for parents to maintain open communication with teachers, sharing insights into their child's strengths, interests, and needs to effectively tailor their learning experience. Building a strong support network that includes family members, teachers, specialists, and fellow parents is essential for navigating challenges and ensuring a successful transition. To fulfill the Quebec Ministry of Education's (2010) recommendation of enhancing parent involvement and interprofessional collaboration during the TTS, parents should stay informed about available resources, services, and support networks both within the school and in the broader community. Establishing and maintaining open lines of communication with stakeholders involved in the TTS process further facilitates a supportive environment for their child's educational journey.

From a policy perspective, developing clear guidelines and standards for transition practices for children with ASD is vital to ensure consistency across schools. Despite recommendations from the Quebec Ministry of Education (2010) for effective transition planning spanning at least 12 months, these practices are often not fully implemented. To address this gap, policies should mandate schools to form dedicated teams of professionals, conduct transition planning meetings before each school year ends, and maintain regular communication with parents. Increased government funding is essential to support these efforts, including compensating staff for pre-school work and preparing for children with disabilities during the summer. Inclusive education policies should prioritize supporting the diverse needs of all students, providing schools with necessary resources and personnel to implement individualized transition plans. Given the rising number of children with special needs in inclusive education, university-based teacher preparation programs should equip pre-service teachers with the skills

needed to ensure effective transitions for children with ASD. A hope is that the findings from this study will, at the very least, generate a discourse on the importance of investing in special education and policies that foster inclusivity in educational settings.

Conclusion

The present study has addressed four primary objectives: first, to examine the implementation of recommended transition practices for children with ASD by general education teachers, assessing their perceived importance and primary concerns; second, to explore the experiences and perceptions of parents caring for children with ASD during the transition to school process; third, to investigate the interplay between teacher involvement in the transition process and parental concerns; and fourth, to identify the impact of parental competence on active involvement during the transition to school for children with ASD.

In *Phase I*, teachers identified key concerns about the TTS process, such as creating supportive classroom environments, managing behavioural challenges, and improving communication and collaboration among parents, early childhood educators, and school staff. Although teachers recognized the importance of evidence-based transition practices, their implementation varied significantly across the study sample, especially in high-intensity strategies like transition planning meetings and home visits. These findings highlight the need for a more consistent and comprehensive adoption of individualized approaches to support children with ASD during the transition to kindergarten. Various barriers hindered the effective implementation of transition practices, including transparency and communication issues, inadequate support services, funding constraints, and concerns about parental involvement. Addressing these barriers is essential to improving the effectiveness of transition efforts and promoting positive outcomes for children with special needs in inclusive educational settings.

Phase II findings reveal significant challenges faced by parents during the transition to school process. Positive influences on the transition experience include family dynamics, strong home-school collaboration, and proactive familiarization with the school environment. However, inconsistencies in support and communication between preschool and kindergarten settings, along with practical and administrative challenges, often complicate the process. The disparity between teacher involvement and parental concerns regarding the TTS highlights the need for improved partnership and communication to better support children with ASD during this critical period. All four parents demonstrated high levels of competence in their parenting roles, which aligns with improved child school readiness and academic performance. Despite this, there was no consistent link between parental competence and involvement in the TTS process. While parents engaged in several transition activities, their preference for low-intensity strategies may not adequately support children with ASD.

To conclude, the present study illuminates the complexities of the transition to school process for children with ASD, revealing consistent themes with existing literature. By employing a grounded theory approach, the study provided a nuanced understanding of the TTS process, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data. This method not only deepened insights into the experiences of both teachers and parents but also offered a robust theoretical framework that can guide future research and interventions. Taken together, this study lays a foundation for ongoing efforts to enhance educational outcomes and well-being for children with ASD through improved practices and stronger collaborative efforts among all stakeholders involved.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Recruitment Sites & Virtual Flyers

Recruitment Sites

Organizations

West Island Association for the Intellectually Handicapped	https://www.wiaih.qc.ca/
LBPSB Special Needs Advisory Committee	https://sites.google.com/lbpearson.ca/snac-lbpsb/home
Giant Steps School	https://www.giantstepsmontreal.com/
Miriam Foundation	https://miriamfoundation.ca/
The Family Resource Center	https://www.centrefamille.com/
AMCAL Family Services	https://www.amcal.ca/en/
Friendship Circle of Montreal	https://www.friendshipcircle.ca/
Big Brothers Big Sisters – West Island	https://bigbrothersbigsisters.ca/about-us/
The Angelman Respite Center	https://angelman.ca/

Elementary Schools

St. Anthony Elementary School	https://stanthony.lbpsb.qc.ca/
Margaret Manson Elementary School	http://margaretmanson.lbpsb.qc.ca/
Dorset Elementary School	http://dorset.lbpsb.qc.ca/
St. Patrick Elementary School	https://stpatrick.lbpsb.qc.ca/
St. Charles Elementary School	https://stcharles.lbpsb.qc.ca/
LaSalle Elementary School	https://lasalle.lbpsb.qc.ca/
Soulanges Elementary School	https://soulanges.lbpsb.qc.ca/
Verdun Elementary School	https://verdun.lbpsb.qc.ca/

Virtual Flyers

English Version

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

I am looking for parents and in-service kindergarten teachers to participate in a remote study exploring their perceptions and experiences regarding the transition to school process for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Are you eligible?

TEACHERS

- In-service general education kindergarten teachers.
- Actively teaching in the province of Quebec.
- Hold a minimum of a bachelor's degree in education.
- At least 1 year of experience teaching students with ASD (either formally diagnosed or suspected).

PARENTS

- Legal guardians of a child with a formal diagnosis or waiting for assessment of ASD.
- Parents of children between the ages of 5 and 7.
- Child currently attends kindergarten or grade 1.
- Have access to Zoom.

What will you be doing?



TEACHER PERCEPTIONS

You will be asked to share your thoughts about transition to school practices by completing an online questionnaire.

Total participation time: ~10 minutes



PARENT PERCEPTIONS

We want to hear from you! You will be asked to share your experiences during the transition to school process by completing 2 questionnaires and an online interview.

Total participation time: ~1.5 hours

INTERESTED?

Please contact me!



transitiontoschoolconcordia@gmail.com

APPEL AUX PARTICIPANTS

Je suis à la recherche de parents et d'enseignant(e)s de maternelle pour participer à une étude explorant leurs perceptions et leurs expériences concernant le processus de transition à l'école pour les enfants atteints de troubles du spectre autistique (TSA).

Êtes-vous éligible?

ENSEIGNANTS

- Enseignant(e)s de maternelle en formation générale et en cours d'emploi.
- Enseigner activement dans la province de Québec.
- Détenir au minimum un baccalauréat en éducation.
- Avoir au moins une année d'expérience dans l'enseignement à des élèves atteints de TSA (diagnostiqués ou suspectés).

PARENTS

- Les tuteurs légaux d'un enfant ayant un diagnostic officiel de TSA ou en attente d'une évaluation.
- Parents d'enfants âgés de 5 à 7 ans.
- L'enfant est actuellement en maternelle ou en première année.
- Avoir accès à Zoom.

Que ferez-vous ?



PERCEPTIONS DES ENSEIGNANTS

Vous serez invité à partager vos expériences sur les pratiques de transition vers l'école en remplissant un questionnaire en ligne.

Durée totale de la participation : ~10 minutes



PERCEPTIONS DES PARENTS

Votre témoignage nous intéresse! Vous serez invité à partager vos expériences au sujet du processus de transition vers l'école en remplissant deux questionnaires et en participant à une entrevue en ligne.

Durée totale de la participation : ~1.5h

INTÉRESSÉ?

Contactez-moi!



transitiontoschoolconcordia@gmail.com

Appendix B – Consent Forms

Teacher Consent Form



INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM - TEACHERS

Study Title: Transition to School for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Exploration of Teachers' Practices and Parental Experiences

Researcher: Jessica Tobia

Researcher's Contact Information: transitiontoschoolconcordia@gmail.com

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Miranda D'Amico

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: miranda.damico@concordia.ca

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to explore the perceptions and experiences of kindergarten teachers and parents regarding the transition to school process for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Specifically, we aim to:

- (1) Explore the implementation of recommended transition practices for children with ASD by general education teachers, and to assess their perceived importance and primary concerns.
- (2) Explore the experiences and perceptions of parents during the transition to school process for children with ASD.
- (3) Examine the association between teacher involvement in the transition process and parental concerns.
- (4) Investigate the impact of parental competence on active involvement during the transition to school for children with ASD.

B. PROCEDURES

If you participate, you will be asked to complete the Teachers' Perceptions on Transitions (TPOT) questionnaire, via Qualtrics, an online survey tool. The questionnaire is used to assess teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions regarding the transition process for children with ASD. You will be asked to indicate the practices you have employed with your students, specifying when they were used, and rating their importance on a four-point Likert scale. The questionnaire also includes open-ended questions regarding the barriers you face in implementing transition practices as a general education teacher.

In total, participating in this study will take approximately 10 minutes.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

You might face certain risks by participating in this research. These risks include feeling uncomfortable or becoming upset when reflecting on your experiences and filling out the questionnaire. In the event that you experience distress or unease during the study, we are committed to engaging in private discussion to address any concerns. We can also provide recommendations for additional resources of assistance, such as L'Accolade Santé Mentale.

To ensure your safety and comfort throughout this study, we have implemented crucial measures:

- You are under no obligation to respond to any questions that you find uncomfortable.
- If you encounter challenging questions or wish to halt a session, you have the option to take a break or conclude the session.
- Before and after each session, you are encouraged to openly discuss any worries or seek clarifications on any matters.
- You retain the right to discontinue your participation in the study at any time, and this decision will not result in any negative consequences.

This study offers a safe space for you to reflect on and share your personal experience with the transition to school as a teacher, and it may provide a therapeutic opportunity.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research:

- a) Your concerns regarding the transition process for students with ASD.
- b) Details about when and how you engage in transition-related practices, and your perceived importance of each practice.
- c) Details about any additional forms of involvement in the transition process.
- d) Details about the perceived barriers preventing your engagement in transition practices.

We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research

described in this form. To ensure participants' privacy, the survey on Qualtrics is designed to be anonymous, with no personal identifiers linked to the data. Additionally, a rigorous screening process will promptly remove any personal or identifying information from the questionnaires.

The information gathered will be anonymous. That means that it will not be possible to make a link between you and the information you provide. All data collected from questionnaires will be stored on a password-protected computer. Data will be kept for five years following the presentation and publication of this research, at which time it will be promptly destroyed (i.e., all files will be securely deleted).

We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. Given the survey's anonymity, data cannot be withdrawn once the questionnaire has been submitted.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print)

SIGNATURE

DATE

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page I. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Parent Consent Form



INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM - PARENTS

Study Title: Transition to School for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Exploration of Teachers' Practices and Parental Experiences

Researcher: Jessica Tobia

Researcher's Contact Information: transitiontoschoolconcordia@gmail.com

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Miranda D'Amico

Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: miranda.damico@concordia.ca

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to explore the perceptions and experiences of kindergarten teachers and parents regarding the transition to school process for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Specifically, we aim to:

- (1) Explore the implementation of recommended transition practices for children with ASD by general education teachers, and to assess their perceived importance and primary concerns.
- (2) Explore the experiences and perceptions of parents during the transition to school process for children with ASD.
- (3) Examine the association between teacher involvement in the transition process and parental concerns.
- (4) Investigate the impact of parental competence on active involvement during the transition to school for children with ASD.

B. PROCEDURES

If you participate, you will be asked to attend a single interview session conducted on Zoom. The interview should take approximately one hour to complete and will be recorded for data

analysis purposes. During this interview, you will be asked questions about your perceptions and experiences regarding the transition to school process for your child. Specifically, you will be asked to respond to questions about your child's experiences at school, their peer contact, activities at home, your reflections on the transition to kindergarten, preparing for kindergarten, their activities with the school, and family information.

Following the interview session, you will be given two questionnaires to complete: (1) Family Experience and Involvement in Transition (FEIT) survey and (2) Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC) Scale. The FEIT will be used to assess your perspectives and concerns regarding your child's transition to kindergarten, and the PSOC scale will be used to assess parenting self-esteem. Each questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

In total, participating in this study will take approximately 1.5 hours.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

You might face certain risks by participating in this research. These risks include experiencing a heightened sense of stress and anxiety while discussing events that transpired during the transition to school process. As the transition to school is fraught with difficulties for parents of children with special needs, it may be difficult to talk about the challenges and obstacles you faced. In the event that you experience distress or unease during the study, we are committed to engaging in private discussions to address any concerns. We can also provide recommendations for additional sources of assistance, such as L'Accolade Santé Mentale.

To ensure your safety and comfort throughout this study, we have implemented crucial measures:

- You are under no obligation to respond to any questions that you find uncomfortable.
- If you encounter challenging questions or wish to halt a session, you have the option to take a break or conclude the session.
- Before and after each session, you are encouraged to openly discuss any worries or seek clarifications on any matters.
- You retain the right to discontinue your participation in the study at any time, and this decision will not result in any negative consequences.

While the interviews are not intended to be therapeutic, they offer a non-judgmental, safe space for you to discuss your subjective experiences.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will gather the following information as part of this research:

- a) Details about your child's educational history, school experiences, peer contact, and home activities.
- b) Your perspective on the transition to kindergarten (including concerns).
- c) Details about your involvement with the school.
- d) Details about your family situation and needs.
- e) Details about your perceptions, feelings, and experiences related to parenting.

We will not allow anyone to access the information, except people directly involved in conducting the research. We will only use the information for the purposes of the research described in this form. To ensure participants' privacy, all transcriptions from the interviews will be screened for personal and identifying information and removed immediately. All Zoom sessions will be password-protected, and only participants will have access to the meeting password. Additionally, the waiting room feature will be used to guarantee that only participants and the researcher may enter the session.

The information gathered will be coded. That means that the information will be identified by a code. The researcher will have a list that links the code to your name. All data (audio/video recordings, transcripts, field notes, completed questionnaires) will be stored on a password-protected computer. Upon the completion of the study, the video recording will be securely deleted. Data will be kept for five years following the presentation and publication for this research, at which time it will be promptly destroyed (i.e., all files will be securely deleted).

We intend to publish the results of the research. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher before March 31, 2024.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print)

SIGNATURE

DATE

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page I. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca.

Appendix C – TCPS 2 Core Certificate

PANEL ON RESEARCH ETHICS <small>Navigating the ethics of human research</small>	TCPS 2: CORE
<h1><i>Certificate of Completion</i></h1>	
<p><i>This document certifies that</i></p>	
<p>Jessica Tobia</p>	
<p><i>has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)</i></p>	
Certificate # 0000763696	Date of Issue: 3 November, 2021

Appendix D – Teachers’ Perceptions on Transitions (TPOT) – Adapted

(Quintero & McIntyre, 2011)

English Version

Teachers’ Perceptions on Transitions

Please answer the questions below regarding your current or previous students with ASD:

1. What concerns do you have regarding the transition process for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?

2. Overall, how concerned are you about the transition to kindergarten for students with ASD?

- 0) No Concerns
- 1) Minimal Concerns
- 2) Some Concerns
- 3) Many Concerns
- 4) VERY Many Concerns

3. Behavioral Involvement in Transition:

The following questions are regarding your behavioural involvement in the transition process for **students with ASD specifically**.

When and what kinds of involvement do you engage in during your student’s transition to kindergarten? Please check only one box (Fall, Spring, Summer, Continual, N/A = Do not practice) for each type of involvement.

Additionally, please rate how important each of the following activities are using the scale below:

1=Not important 2=A little important 3=Somewhat important 4=Very

	PLEASE CHECK ONLY ONE					Rate on 1-4 scale
	FALL	SPRING	SUMMER	CONTINUAL	N/A	IMPORTANCE
a) Monthly contact (e.g., phone, visit) with your student's parents.						
b) Meetings with student's school team.						
c) Transition planning meeting with your student's preschool team.						
d) Accompany student on a visit to a kindergarten classroom.						
e) Accompany student to visit their assigned kindergarten classroom.						
f) Participate as a member of a transition planning team.						
g) Receive a phone call from your student's preschool teacher.						
h) Complete a home visit for your student.						
i) Provide written communication regarding transition to your student's family.						
j) Work with preschool teacher to coordinate curriculum.						

k) Have a preschool teacher visit your classroom.						
l) Give orientation about kindergarten for your students						
m) Give orientation about kindergarten for parents.						

4. Are there any additional forms of involvement that you have had (other than the above list)? If so, please describe them below.

5. Are there any additional forms of involvement you would like to see included in the transition process? If so, please describe them below.

6. What are some barriers that you feel may prevent you from engaging in transition practices?

7. Other comments:

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP!

French Version**Perceptions des enseignants sur les transitions**

Veillez répondre aux questions ci-dessous concernant vos élèves actuels ou précédents atteint de troubles du spectre autistique (TSA) :

1. Quelles sont vos inquiétudes/préoccupations concernant le processus de transition vers la maternelle pour les élèves atteints de troubles du spectre autistique (TSA)?

2. En général, quelle est votre préoccupation concernant la transition vers la maternelle pour les élèves atteints de TSA?

- 0) Aucune préoccupation
- 1) Préoccupations minimales
- 2) Quelques préoccupations
- 3) Nombreuses préoccupations
- 4) TRÈS nombreuses préoccupations

3. Implication comportementale dans la transition :

Les questions suivantes concernent votre implication comportementale dans le processus de transition pour les élèves atteints de TSA spécifiquement.

Quand et quels types d'implication avez-vous dans la transition de votre élève vers la maternelle? Veuillez cocher une seule case (Automne, Printemps, Été, Continuuel, N/A = Ne pratique pas) pour chaque type d'implication.

De plus, veuillez évaluer l'importance de chacune des activités suivantes en utilisant l'échelle ci-dessous :

1=Pas important 2=Un peu important 3=Assez important 4=Très important

	VEUILLEZ COCHER UNE SEULE CASE					Évaluation sur une échelle de 1 à 4
	AUTOMNE	PRINTEMPS	ÉTÉ	CONTINUEL	N/A	IMPORTANCE
a) Contact mensuel (par exemple, téléphone, visite) avec les parents de votre élève.						
b) Réunions avec l'équipe scolaire de l'élève.						
c) Réunion de planification de la transition avec l'équipe de la CPE* de votre élève.						
d) Accompagner l'élève lors d'une visite dans une classe de maternelle.						
e) Accompagner l'élève lors de la visite de sa classe de maternelle assignée.						
f) Participer en tant que membre d'une équipe de planification de la transition.						
g) Recevoir un appel téléphonique de l'éducatrice du CPE de votre élève.						
h) Effectuer une visite à domicile pour votre élève.						

i) Fournir une communication écrite concernant la transition à la famille de votre élève.						
j) Travailler avec l'éducatrice du CPE pour coordonner le programme scolaire.						
k) Faire visiter votre classe à une éducatrice du CPE.						
l) Fournir une orientation sur la maternelle pour vos élèves.						
m) Fournir une orientation sur la maternelle pour les parents.						

**Note : CPE signifie centre de la petite enfance.*

4. Avez-vous eu d'autres formes d'implication (autres que celles de la liste ci-dessus)? Si oui, veuillez les décrire ci-dessous.

5. Y a-t-il d'autres formes d'implication que vous aimeriez voir incluses dans le processus de transition? Si oui, veuillez les décrire ci-dessous.

6. Quels sont certains obstacles qui pourraient vous empêcher de participer aux pratiques de transition?

7. Autres commentaires :

MERCI POUR VOTRE AIDE!

Appendix E – Semi-Structured Interview Script

(Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003)

Kindergarten Transition Parent Interview—Kindergarten

Interviewer: _____

Date: _____

Location of interview (e.g., family home): _____

Person interviewed (e.g., mother, grandparent): _____

Other family members present: _____

Directions: Use the following text as a guide to help families explore their experiences in the fall, winter, and spring of kindergarten. The intent is to engage the family member in a conversation about school, following up on themes that arise. These are some components of an interview. Other questions may be added. Ideally, responses should be recorded using an audiotape recorder so that the conversation flows more smoothly. If the family member feels uncomfortable being audiotaped, write his or her answers on separate pieces of paper. Further directions appear in brackets in italic print.

As you know from our previous interviews, we are interested in learning about children's and families' experiences in kindergarten. Today, I am interested in talking with you more generally about his or her experiences, both in preschool and in kindergarten this year. I would like to know how these experiences may be similar and how they are different. As before, all

your answers will be kept confidential. Do you have any questions before we begin? *[Pause for any questions.]*

YOUR CHILD'S EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL

1. First, I'd like to talk to you about your child's experiences in school.

Tell me how *[child's name]* is doing in school this year and how this compares with last year. *[Ask the family member to tell you more. Use the following prompts to encourage further discussion. you do not need to ask all of the questions.]*

- What types of things are he or she learning? How do these things compare with what he or she was doing last year? What seems to be the same about what he or she was doing last year? What seems different?
- What does he or she like to do in school? *[Suggest, if necessary, writing, reading, math, center time, playground time, and so forth.]* How does this compare with preschool?
- What activities does he or she not like to do?
Tell me about your child's progress this year. What are you particularly pleased with? What do you have concerns about?

2. What's your relationship with your child's teacher like?

PEER CONTACT

1. Now, I'd like to ask you about your child's contact with other children.

Outside of school, what kind of things does your child do with other

children? *[If necessary, suggest playing with other children in the neighborhood; attending after-school programs; playing with siblings, cousins, or other relatives; attending religious functions; and so forth.]*

2. Do any of the children involved in these activities with your child go to kindergarten with him or her? Which activities?

YOUR CHILD'S ACTIVITIES AT HOME

1. Now I'd like to ask you about your child's activities and behavior at home. What kinds of activities do you and your child enjoy together?
 - What things do you like to do with your child to help him or her learn? *[If necessary, suggest reading, talking about numbers or letters, singing songs, and so forth.]*
2. Tell me about your child's behavior at home this year. How does this compare with his or her behavior at school?
 - When your child is frustrated or upset, what does he or she do?
How do you handle this?

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSITION TO KINDERGARTEN

Now I'd like to ask you some questions about your child's experience with going to kindergarten. I'm interested in how he or she got to know kindergarten before it started and what this has been like for him or her and for you.

1. First, how has the experience of going into kindergarten been for your child? *[Allow time for a response and then follow up with the next question.]* In general, would you say it's been very good, fairly good, just okay, or neutral?
2. What has gone well for your child? *[Encourage elaboration and check all areas that apply.]*
 Learning
 Social
 Other:
 None
3. What has been hard for him or her? What has not gone well for your child? *[Encourage elaboration and check all areas that apply.]*
 Learning
 Social
 Other:
 None
4. What has gone well for you?
5. What has been hard for you?

PREPARING FOR KINDERGARTEN

In addition to activities at schools, families often do activities on their own to get their child ready for kindergarten. What kinds of activities did you do during the summer to get your child ready for school? *[Allow the family member to respond*

freely. After the family member responds, use the prompts if necessary for the remaining activities.] There are other things that parents sometimes do. It is not expected that parents do all of these things. The activities that a family does depend on a number of factors, such as whether a child has brothers or sisters who attend the same school. Knowing this, did you do any other following activities?

Activity (yes/no):

- a) Did you read parents' magazines or books about starting kindergarten?
- b) Did you read stories to your child about starting kindergarten?
- c) Did you take your child to play on the school playground?
- d) Did you talk with other parents of children from your child's school?
- e) Did you talk with family members or friends who have school-age children?
- f) Did you teach your child his or her address?
- g) Did you teach your child his or her telephone number?
- h) Did you teach your child to tie his or her shoes?
- i) Did you discuss what will happen on the first day of school with your child?
- j) Did you discuss meeting the new teacher with your child?
- k) Did you discuss meeting new classmates with your child?
- l) Did you discuss how to behave with your child?
- m) Did you discuss the kinds of kindergarten work with your child?

- n) Did you practice daily routines of getting ready for school (e.g., bedtime, morning schedule)?
- o) Other (Please specify):

YOUR ACTIVITIES WITH THE SCHOOL

Now I'd like to ask you about things you've been involved with at the school.

Parents help at school in different ways, depending on their situations. What kinds of activities have you been involved with at your child's school this year?

[First, allow the parent to answer freely, then prompt for those activities not mentioned. Follow up on the frequency for activities mentioned.]

Activity (never; 1-2 times; 3 or more times):

- a) Helped the child with homework
- b) Contacted the child's teacher through notes
- c) Talked with the child's teacher by telephone or in person 4. Talked with other parents from the child's school
- d) Talked with the school principal this year
- e) Attended parent-teacher conferences
- f) Prepared and sent in food or materials for special events or holidays (e.g., class activity, Valentine's Day)
- g) Attended special schoolwide events for children and families (e.g., family literacy activities, book fairs)
- h) Volunteered or helped out in the classroom

- i) Helped with field trips or other special events
- j) Attended a meeting of the parent–teacher organization 12. Visited with the teacher or other school staff in the home 13. Other (Please specify.)

FAMILY INFORMATION

1. I'd like to ask you a few questions to update the general information about your family.
Who lives at home with your child? Please tell me about their relationship with your child and their ages (e.g., 10-year-old sister). Is this a change from 6 months ago?
2. Are you currently employed? If so, what type of work do you do? On average, how many hours do you work per week? Is this a change from 6 months ago?
3. Are there adults living in the house? If so, do they work? What kind of work? What hours do they work?
4. Have you moved in the last 6 months?

Appendix F – Family Experiences & Involvement in Transition (FEIT) - Adapted

(McIntyre et al., 2007)

Date completed: _____

Family Experiences & Involvement in Transition

Please return by _____. Thank you for your time!

1. Child's date of birth: _____ Age: _____
2. Child's gender: Male Female Non-binary
3. What is your child's race/ethnic background?
 - White/Caucasian
 - Black/African Canadian
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - Asian
 - Indigenous
 - Pacific Islander
 - Mixed
 - Other: _____
4. Child's primary diagnosis:
 - Developmental Delay
 - Speech/Language Delay
 - Autism Spectrum Disorder (autism, PDD-NOS, Asperger's)
 - Other: _____
5. When was your child diagnosed with their primary diagnosis?
 - At birth or infancy (0-11 months)
 - One-year old (12-23 months)

- Two-years old (24-35 months)
- Three-years old (36-47 months)
- Four-years old (48-59 months)
- Five-years old (60-71 months)
- Unknown
6. Does your child currently receive related services (e.g., speech therapy, occupational therapy) in addition to special educational supports?
- No
- Yes (please specify): _____
- Don't Know
7. What type of educational program is your child currently enrolled in this year (September 2023-June 2024)?
- Kindergarten (public school)
- Kindergarten (private school)
- Grade 1 (public school)
- Grade 1 (private school)
8. What were the primary concerns for your child as they transitioned to kindergarten?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
9. Please tell us how much each of the following areas concerned you as your child transitioned to kindergarten. Circle or highlight the number that describes how concerned you were, using the scale below.

Question 9)	No Conc erns	A f e w	S o m e	Man y Conc erns
Academics (e.g., knowing the alphabet)	1	2	3	4
Behavior problems (e.g., tantrums)	1	2	3	4
Following directions	1	2	3	4
Getting along with other children	1	2	3	4
Getting along with the teacher	1	2	3	4
Getting used to a new school	1	2	3	4
Child being ready for kindergarten	1	2	3	4
Separating from family	1	2	3	4
Toilet training	1	2	3	4
Ability to communicate	1	2	3	4
Other: _____ _____	1	2	3	4

Help in Transition Planning:

Which of the following would have been helpful as you planned for your child's transition to kindergarten? **Please check yes or no.**

	YES	NO
More information from your child's preschool program.		
More information about your child's kindergarten program.		
More information about your child's skills (e.g., strengths and weaknesses).		
More information about your child's future /new teacher.		
More information about your child's future /new school.		
More information about kindergarten academic expectations.		
More information about kindergarten behavior expectations.		
More information about how your child's preschool is preparing for transition.		
More information on how the kindergarten program is preparing for transition.		
More information on what you should be doing to prepare for the transition.		
Increased emotional support and encouragement from preschool school staff.		
Increased emotional support and encouragement from your family.		
Other:		
I don't think I needed any help.		

Behavioral Involvement in Transition:

What kinds of involvement did you have (or would have liked to have) in your child's transition to kindergarten?

Please check only one box (had, wanted, didn't have/wanted) for each type of involvement. Additionally, please rate how important each of the following activities are using the scale below:

1=Not important 2=A little important 3=Somewhat important 4=Very important

	PLEASE CHECK ONLY ONE			Rate on 1-4 scale
	HAD	WANTED	DIDN'T HAVE/WANTED	IMPORTANCE
Monthly contact (e.g., phone, visit) with your child's preschool teacher.				
Annual meetings with your child's preschool teacher/school staff.				
Attend a transition planning meeting with your child's preschool staff.				

	PLEASE CHECK ONLY ONE			Rate on 1-4 scale
	HAD	WANTED	DIDN'T HAVE/WANTED	IMPORTANCE
Attend a transition planning meeting with your child's kindergarten staff.				
Visit your child's kindergarten classroom and/or elementary school with your child.				
Are a member of a transition planning team at your child's preschool				
Attend a transition information meeting at your child's preschool or kindergarten .				

Receive a phone call from your child's kindergarten teacher.				
Receive a home visit from your child's kindergarten teacher over the summer.				
Attend a kindergarten orientation session.				
Receive written communication regarding transition from your child's preschool (e.g., letter or flyer).				
Receive written communication regarding transition from your child's kindergarten or elementary school (e.g., letter or flyer).				
Attend kindergarten registration.				
Attend a kindergarten open house.				

10. Are there any additional forms of involvement that you have been involved in that was not listed above?

11. Are there any additional forms of involvement you would like to see included in the transition process?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!

Appendix G – Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC)

(Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978)

Parenting Sense of Competence Scale

Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements by circling or highlighting the number.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1) The problems of taking care of a child are easy to solve once you know how your actions affect your child, an understanding I have acquired.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2) Even though being a parent could be rewarding, I am frustrated now while my child is at his/her present age.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3) I go to bed the same way I wake up in the morning, feeling I have not accomplished a whole lot.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4) I do not know why it is, but sometimes when I'm supposed to be in control, I feel more like the one being manipulated.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5) My parents were better prepared to be a good parent than I am.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6) I would make a fine model for a new parent to follow in order to learn what they would need to know in order to be a good parent.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7) Being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8) A difficult problem in being a parent is not knowing whether you're doing a good job or a bad one.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9) Sometimes I feel like I'm not getting anything done.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10) I meet my own personal expectations for expertise in caring for my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11) If anyone can find the answer to what is troubling my child, I am the one.	1	2	3	4	5	6

12) My talents and interests are in other areas, not being a parent.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13) Considering how long I've been a parent, I feel thoroughly familiar with this role.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14) If being a mother/father of a child were only more interesting, I would be motivated to do a better job as a parent.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15) I honestly believe I have all the skills necessary to be a good parent to my child.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16) Being a parent makes me tense and anxious.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17) Being a good mother/father is a reward in itself.	1	2	3	4	5	6