



Transitioning from Special Education to Higher Education: Students' and Educators' Experiences

Ali. Farhadian*¹, Ebrahim. Esabat Tabari²

¹ Department of Psychology and Counseling, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran

² Department of Educational Sciences, Farhangian University, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: farhadianabrak@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore the experiences of students and educators during the transition from special education to higher education. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 23 participants, including 15 students who had transitioned from special education to higher education and 8 educators, comprising special education teachers, higher education faculty members, and disability support staff. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts, with themes and subthemes identified through coding and categorization. The analysis revealed three primary themes: Transition Challenges, Support Systems and Resources, and Personal Growth and Development. Transition Challenges included academic difficulties, social integration issues, navigating support services, emotional and mental health challenges, and financial barriers. Support Systems and Resources encompassed institutional support, peer support, parental involvement, community resources, and technological aids, with a notable emphasis on the importance of faculty and staff training. Personal Growth and Development highlighted the development of self-advocacy skills, independence and responsibility, academic and career aspirations, and building confidence and resilience. The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of the transition from special education to higher education, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities for students with disabilities. Effective support systems and comprehensive planning are crucial for facilitating successful transitions. The study's insights can inform the development of targeted interventions and support strategies to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments, ultimately empowering students with disabilities to succeed in higher education.

Keywords: *Special education, higher education transition, students with disabilities, support systems, academic difficulties.*

1. Introduction

The importance of effective transition planning and support for students with disabilities has been well-documented. Transition services, as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), aim to prepare students for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. However, the implementation and effectiveness of these services vary significantly, impacting the readiness of students for higher education (Morningstar & Benitez, 2013). Studies have shown that well-prepared educators play a crucial role in the successful transition of students with disabilities (Benitez et al., 2008; Blanchett, 2001).

Educators' perceptions of their competencies and preparedness for facilitating transitions are pivotal. Wolfe, Boone, and Blanchett (1998) emphasized that both regular and special educators must be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to support students effectively. The integration of transition-related competencies into teacher education programs has been advocated as a strategy to enhance educators' readiness (Kohler & Greene, 2004). Morningstar and Clark (2003) highlighted the critical content areas that should be included in personnel preparation for transition education, stressing the importance of comprehensive training programs (Morningstar & Clark, 2003).

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Greene and Landmark (2019) discussed the legal implications and potential conflicts arising from inadequate transition planning, underscoring the need for thorough preparation and clear communication among all stakeholders (Greene & Landmark, 2019). Moreover, McKenna, Newton, and Brigham (2023) noted the impact of co-teaching on general educators' knowledge and use of inclusive practices, indicating that collaborative approaches can enhance the support provided to students with disabilities (McKenna et al., 2023).

The role of parental involvement in the transition process is another critical factor. Abdullah and Ibrahim (2021) explored the perspectives of teachers in Malaysia, highlighting the importance of parental advocacy and support in career transition planning (Abdullah & Ibrahim, 2021). This aligns with the broader literature that recognizes parents as key partners in the transition process (Arellano, 2024).

Technological advancements and assistive technologies have also emerged as vital tools in supporting students with

disabilities. Lingo et al. (2018) demonstrated the effectiveness of teaching self-determination skills using innovative methods, which can empower students to navigate their transition more effectively. However, the accessibility and utilization of these technologies can vary, impacting their overall effectiveness (Lingo et al., 2018).

In higher education, the support systems and resources available to students with disabilities play a crucial role in their academic and social integration. Andrewartha and Harvey (2019) discussed the support provided to military veterans in Australian higher education, drawing parallels to the support needed by students with disabilities. The need for comprehensive support systems that include academic advising, mentorship programs, and disability services offices is evident (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2019).

Research by Lessky, Nairz-Wirth, and Feldmann (2021) on first-in-family students in Austrian higher education highlighted the significance of informational capital in navigating the transition to university (Lessky et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant for students with disabilities, who often require additional support and guidance. Monteiro, Santos, and Gonçalves (2019) further emphasized the meanings and perceptions of higher education and work, stressing the importance of aligning students' aspirations with the support provided (Monteiro et al., 2019).

Despite the availability of resources, students with disabilities often face unique challenges. Shrestha, Neupane, and Han (2020) examined post-school transition challenges in Nepal, offering insights into the barriers faced by students with disabilities in different cultural contexts (Shrestha et al., 2020). Similarly, Andriana and Evans (2021) explored the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive schools in Indonesia, highlighting the importance of inclusive practices and support mechanisms (Andriana & Evans, 2021).

The need for culturally relevant practices in special education is also critical. Brown, Dennis, and Matute-Chavarria (2019) called for more culturally relevant approaches to special education, which can enhance the effectiveness of transition support. This is particularly important in diverse educational settings where students' cultural backgrounds can influence their transition experiences (Brown et al., 2019).

In terms of practical applications, Thoma et al. (2022) developed an online professional development module to support special educators in implementing the Universal Design for Transition framework. This innovative approach can provide educators with the tools and strategies needed to

support students with disabilities more effectively (Thoma et al., 2022).

The experiences of students themselves provide valuable insights into the transition process. Ochoa (2016) highlighted the importance of collaborative approaches in supporting juvenile offenders with disabilities, emphasizing the need for tailored support (Ochoa, 2016). Similarly, Mokhtar (2024) conducted a systematic literature review on career transition for special needs students, identifying key factors that contribute to successful transitions (Mokhtar, 2024).

Overall, the transition from special education to higher education involves a multifaceted interplay of academic, social, and emotional factors. Understanding the experiences of both students and educators can inform the development of targeted interventions and support systems that address the unique needs of students with disabilities. This study aims to contribute to this understanding by exploring the experiences of students and educators during this critical transition, highlighting the challenges faced, the support systems utilized, and the areas of personal growth and development.

In conclusion, the transition from special education to higher education is a complex and challenging process that requires comprehensive support and effective planning. The findings from this study will provide valuable insights into the experiences of students and educators, informing the development of policies and practices that can facilitate a smoother transition for students with disabilities. By understanding the key factors that influence this transition, stakeholders can work together to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments that empower students with disabilities to succeed in higher education and beyond.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study aims to explore the experiences of students and educators in the transition from special education to higher education. The research employs a phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of these experiences, emphasizing the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of individuals with relevant experiences. The sample included:

Students: 15 students who have transitioned from special education programs in high school to higher education

institutions. These students vary in terms of their disabilities, academic fields, and institutions.

Educators: 8 educators, including special education teachers from high schools, higher education faculty members, and disability support staff from higher education institutions.

All participants were over 18 years old, provided informed consent, and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Recruitment was conducted through educational institutions and support organizations.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility and in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. An interview guide was developed, focusing on key areas such as:

- Experiences during the transition from special education to higher education.
- Challenges faced and strategies used to overcome them.
- Support systems and resources accessed.
- Perceptions of preparedness and success in higher education.
- Recommendations for improving the transition process.

Interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and were conducted in a location convenient for the participants, either face-to-face or via video conferencing. Theoretical saturation was reached when no new themes emerged from the data, indicating that the sample size was sufficient to capture the range of experiences.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic approach, employing thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data. The process involved several steps:

Transcription: Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

Familiarization: Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts.

Coding: Initial codes were generated from the data, focusing on significant phrases and sentences related to the research questions.

Theme Development: Codes were grouped into themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences.

These themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data.

Validation: Themes were cross-checked by multiple researchers to enhance credibility and reliability. Participant validation was also conducted, where participants reviewed the findings to ensure their experiences were accurately represented.

The data analysis software NVivo was used to assist in managing and organizing the data.

3. Findings and Results

The study included a total of 23 participants, comprising 15 students and 8 educators. Among the students, 7 were male and 8 were female. The age range of the student participants was 18 to 25 years, with a mean age of 21 years. The students represented a diverse array of disabilities, including learning disabilities (n=6), physical disabilities (n=4), autism spectrum disorders (n=3), and sensory impairments (n=2). The educators consisted of 3 special education teachers, 3 higher education faculty members, and 2 disability support staff members. Among the educators, 2 were male and 6 were female, with an age range of 30 to 55 years and a mean age of 42 years.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
1. Transition Challenges	a. Academic Difficulties	Adjusting to coursework, Understanding new expectations, Time management, Study skills, Academic support
	b. Social Integration	Making friends, Joining clubs, Feeling isolated, Participating in campus events, Social skills training
	c. Navigating Support Services	Finding resources, Accessibility issues, Communication with support staff, Knowledge of services, Utilizing accommodations
	d. Emotional and Mental Health	Stress management, Anxiety, Coping strategies, Accessing counseling, Emotional support
	e. Financial Barriers	Tuition costs, Financial aid, Budgeting, Employment, Scholarships
2. Support Systems and Resources	a. Institutional Support	Disability services office, Academic advisors, Mentorship programs, Orientation sessions, Campus accessibility
	b. Peer Support	Peer mentoring, Study groups, Social networks, Peer advocacy, Group activities
	c. Parental Involvement	Communication with parents, Parental advocacy, Emotional support from family, Financial support, Guidance and advice
	d. Community Resources	External organizations, Online resources, Workshops, Community centers, Support groups
	e. Technological Aids	Assistive technologies, Online learning platforms, Note-taking apps, Communication tools, Adaptive equipment
	f. Faculty and Staff Training	Disability awareness training, Inclusive teaching practices, Understanding individual needs, Continuous professional development, Collaborative planning
3. Personal Growth and Development	a. Self-Advocacy Skills	Self-awareness, Communication skills, Seeking help, Assertiveness, Knowing one's rights
	b. Independence and Responsibility	Time management, Decision-making, Personal organization, Financial management, Daily living skills
	c. Academic and Career Aspirations	Goal setting, Career planning, Internships, Academic achievements, Professional networking
	d. Building Confidence and Resilience	Overcoming setbacks, Self-esteem, Positive mindset, Emotional resilience, Celebrating successes

3.1. Transition Challenges

Academic Difficulties: Participants frequently mentioned the struggle to adjust to the increased academic demands of higher education. Concepts such as adjusting to coursework, understanding new expectations, time management, and developing effective study skills were highlighted. One student noted, "I wasn't prepared for the workload. The expectations were so different from high school." Academic support, although available, was often underutilized due to a lack of awareness or confidence.

Social Integration: Many students found it challenging to integrate socially within the higher education environment. Making friends, joining clubs, feeling isolated, participating in campus events, and developing social skills were recurring themes. "I felt so alone at first. It was hard to find people who understood me," shared one participant. Social skills training and peer support were suggested as crucial interventions.

Navigating Support Services: Finding and utilizing support services posed a significant challenge. Concepts such as finding resources, dealing with accessibility issues,

communicating with support staff, knowing about available services, and utilizing accommodations were frequently mentioned. An educator observed, "Students often don't know where to go for help, and when they do, navigating the system can be overwhelming."

Emotional and Mental Health: Managing emotional and mental health was a critical issue. Participants discussed stress management, anxiety, coping strategies, accessing counseling, and emotional support. One student remarked, "The stress was immense, and I didn't know how to handle it. Counseling services were a lifesaver."

Financial Barriers: Financial difficulties were a significant hurdle for many students. Tuition costs, financial aid, budgeting, employment, and scholarships were common concerns. "Balancing a job with studies was tough. Financial aid helped, but it wasn't enough," said one student.

3.2. *Support Systems and Resources*

Institutional Support: The role of institutional support in facilitating successful transitions was emphasized. Disability services offices, academic advisors, mentorship programs, orientation sessions, and campus accessibility were identified as key components. One educator mentioned, "Our disability services office is a vital resource, but students need to be encouraged to use it."

Peer Support: The importance of peer support through peer mentoring, study groups, social networks, peer advocacy, and group activities was highlighted. "Having a peer mentor made all the difference. It was someone who had been through it and could guide me," shared a participant.

Parental Involvement: Parental involvement remained crucial even in higher education. Communication with parents, parental advocacy, emotional support from family, financial support, and guidance and advice were common themes. "My parents were my rock. They helped me navigate the complexities of college life," said one student.

Community Resources: External community resources also played a significant role. Participants mentioned external organizations, online resources, workshops, community centers, and support groups. An educator noted, "Community resources provide additional support that complements what we offer on campus."

Technological Aids: Technological aids such as assistive technologies, online learning platforms, note-taking apps, communication tools, and adaptive equipment were essential for many students. "Assistive technology was a game-

changer for me. It leveled the playing field," remarked one student.

Faculty and Staff Training: The need for faculty and staff training in disability awareness, inclusive teaching practices, understanding individual needs, continuous professional development, and collaborative planning was underscored. "Training faculty to understand and support students with disabilities is crucial," said an educator.

3.3. *Personal Growth and Development*

Self-Advocacy Skills: Developing self-advocacy skills was a significant aspect of personal growth. Participants mentioned self-awareness, communication skills, seeking help, assertiveness, and knowing one's rights. One student noted, "Learning to advocate for myself was empowering. It gave me confidence."

Independence and Responsibility: Gaining independence and responsibility was another critical area. Time management, decision-making, personal organization, financial management, and daily living skills were frequently discussed. "College taught me to be independent and take responsibility for my actions," shared a participant.

Academic and Career Aspirations: Academic and career aspirations were central to many students' experiences. Goal setting, career planning, internships, academic achievements, and professional networking were highlighted. "Setting goals and working towards them kept me focused and motivated," said one student.

Building Confidence and Resilience: Building confidence and resilience was essential for overcoming setbacks. Participants spoke about overcoming setbacks, self-esteem, maintaining a positive mindset, emotional resilience, and celebrating successes. "Each challenge I overcame made me stronger and more confident," remarked one participant.

4. **Discussion and Conclusion**

The transition from special education to higher education presents numerous challenges and opportunities for personal growth for students with disabilities. This study identified three primary themes: Transition Challenges, Support Systems and Resources, and Personal Growth and Development. Each theme included several subcategories that provided a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

Transition Challenges encompassed academic difficulties, social integration issues, navigating support

services, emotional and mental health challenges, and financial barriers. Participants frequently struggled with adjusting to the increased academic demands, managing time effectively, and understanding new expectations. Social integration was another significant challenge, with many students feeling isolated and finding it difficult to make friends and participate in campus activities. Navigating support services was often overwhelming due to accessibility issues and a lack of awareness about available resources. Emotional and mental health challenges, including stress and anxiety, were common, and financial barriers such as tuition costs and inadequate financial aid added to the difficulties faced by these students.

Support Systems and Resources were vital in facilitating successful transitions. Institutional support, including disability services offices and academic advisors, played a crucial role. Peer support through mentoring, study groups, and social networks was also significant. Parental involvement remained crucial, providing emotional and financial support. Community resources and technological aids, such as assistive technologies, were essential tools for many students. Additionally, faculty and staff training in disability awareness and inclusive practices were highlighted as critical to providing effective support.

Personal Growth and Development included the development of self-advocacy skills, independence and responsibility, academic and career aspirations, and building confidence and resilience. Students learned to advocate for themselves, manage their time and responsibilities, set academic and career goals, and build confidence through overcoming setbacks and celebrating successes.

The findings of this study align with previous research on the transition experiences of students with disabilities. The academic difficulties faced by students in higher education have been consistently highlighted in the literature. For instance, Benitez, Morningstar, and Frey (2008) identified a lack of preparedness among students transitioning from special education to higher education, emphasizing the need for effective transition planning and support (Benitez et al., 2008).

Social integration challenges are also well-documented. Shrestha, Neupane, and Han (2020) noted that students with disabilities often feel isolated in post-secondary settings, struggling to form social connections and participate in campus life (Shrestha et al., 2020). This study's findings support these observations, highlighting the importance of social skills training and peer support in facilitating social integration.

The difficulty in navigating support services is another common issue. Abdullah and Ibrahim (2021) discussed the complexities of accessing support services and the need for better communication and coordination among service providers (Abdullah & Ibrahim, 2021). This study found that students often faced accessibility issues and were unaware of available resources, underscoring the need for improved information dissemination and support service accessibility.

Emotional and mental health challenges were prevalent among the participants, consistent with the findings of Andriana and Evans (2021), who reported high levels of stress and anxiety among students with disabilities (Andriana & Evans, 2021). This study further emphasizes the importance of providing comprehensive mental health support to help students manage stress and cope with the demands of higher education.

Financial barriers were also a significant challenge, aligning with the findings of Morningstar and Clark (2003), who highlighted the financial difficulties faced by students with disabilities (Morningstar & Clark, 2003). This study reinforces the need for adequate financial aid and support to ensure that students can focus on their studies without the added burden of financial stress.

Institutional support was identified as a crucial factor in successful transitions. This aligns with the findings of Kohler and Greene (2004), who emphasized the importance of disability services offices and academic advisors in supporting students with disabilities (Kohler & Greene, 2004). The role of peer support, as highlighted in this study, is also supported by Lingo et al. (2018), who demonstrated the effectiveness of peer mentoring and support networks in facilitating successful transitions (Lingo et al., 2018).

Parental involvement was another significant factor, consistent with the findings of Abdullah and Ibrahim (2021), who highlighted the crucial role of parents in the transition process. This study underscores the need for continued parental support, both emotional and financial, throughout the higher education journey (Abdullah & Ibrahim, 2021).

Community resources and technological aids were identified as essential tools for supporting students with disabilities. This finding is supported by Arellano (2024), who emphasized the importance of assistive technologies in enhancing students' academic performance and independence (Arellano, 2024). Additionally, faculty and staff training in disability awareness and inclusive practices were highlighted as critical, aligning with the findings of Morningstar and Benitez (2013), who stressed the

importance of comprehensive training programs for educators (Morningstar & Benitez, 2013).

The development of self-advocacy skills, independence, and responsibility were significant aspects of personal growth for the participants. This finding aligns with the research of Thoma et al. (2022), who developed an online professional development module to support special educators in teaching self-advocacy and independence skills (Thoma et al., 2022). This study highlights the importance of empowering students with disabilities to advocate for themselves and manage their responsibilities effectively.

Building confidence and resilience through overcoming setbacks and celebrating successes was another key finding. This aligns with the findings of Mokhtar (2024), who identified the development of resilience as a crucial factor in successful transitions (Mokhtar, 2024). This study emphasizes the importance of providing opportunities for students to build confidence and resilience through positive experiences and support.

Overall, the findings of this study align with and support the existing literature on the transition experiences of students with disabilities. The challenges identified, including academic difficulties, social integration issues, and navigating support services, are consistent with previous research. The importance of support systems and resources, including institutional support, peer support, parental involvement, community resources, and technological aids, is also well-documented. Additionally, the personal growth and development experienced by students, including the development of self-advocacy skills, independence, and resilience, are supported by the literature.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample size of 23 participants, while sufficient for qualitative research, may not be representative of the broader population of students with disabilities transitioning to higher education. The study's reliance on self-reported data from interviews may also introduce bias, as participants may present their experiences in a socially desirable manner. Additionally, the study focused on a specific geographic region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

Another limitation is the potential for researcher bias in the data analysis process. Although measures were taken to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, including cross-checking themes and participant validation, the subjective nature of qualitative research means that some bias is inevitable. Furthermore, the study did not account for the variability in disability types and the unique challenges

associated with each, which could influence the transition experiences of students.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies tracking students over time would provide valuable insights into the long-term outcomes of transition programs and the sustained impact of support services. Additionally, quantitative research methods could complement qualitative findings, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing successful transitions.

Exploring the specific needs and experiences of students with different types of disabilities would also be beneficial. This could include examining the unique challenges faced by students with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and sensory impairments, among others. Furthermore, investigating the role of cultural and socioeconomic factors in the transition process would provide a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences of students with disabilities.

Another area for future research is the effectiveness of various support interventions, such as peer mentoring, assistive technologies, and faculty training programs. Evaluating the impact of these interventions on student outcomes would help to identify best practices and inform the development of more targeted and effective support strategies.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made to improve the transition experiences of students with disabilities. First, educational institutions should enhance the visibility and accessibility of support services, ensuring that students are aware of and can easily access the resources available to them. This includes providing clear information about disability services, academic advising, and mental health support.

Second, institutions should invest in comprehensive training programs for faculty and staff to raise awareness of disability issues and inclusive practices. This training should cover the specific needs of students with various types of disabilities and provide practical strategies for supporting their academic and social integration.

Third, peer support programs, such as peer mentoring and study groups, should be expanded to provide students with disabilities with a supportive network of peers who can offer guidance and encouragement. These programs can help to alleviate feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging within the higher education community.

Fourth, institutions should work closely with parents to ensure their continued involvement and support throughout the transition process. Providing parents with information and resources to help them support their children can enhance the overall effectiveness of transition programs.

Finally, the use of assistive technologies and adaptive equipment should be promoted and supported. Institutions should ensure that students have access to the necessary technologies and provide training on how to use them effectively. This can significantly enhance students' academic performance and independence.

In conclusion, the transition from special education to higher education is a complex process that requires comprehensive support and effective planning. By addressing the challenges identified in this study and implementing the recommended practices, educational institutions can create more inclusive and supportive environments that empower students with disabilities to succeed in higher education and beyond.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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