

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY: APPLIED BUSINESS AND EDUCATION RESEARCH

2026, Vol. 7, No. 9, 3996 – 4004

<http://dx.doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.07.09.16>

Research Article

Exploring Challenges and Opportunities in Preparing Special Education Students for Independent Living: A Basis for a Transition Program

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Article history:

Submission 30 August 2026

Revised 13 September 2026

Accepted 23 September 2026

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the challenges and opportunities influencing the transition of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from school-based support to independent living as a basis for a structured transition program in Philippine public elementary schools. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study examined the lived experiences of five (5) students with ASD aged 14 years and above enrolled in public elementary schools in the Schools Division of Science City of Muñoz. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis. Findings revealed significant challenges in executive functioning, including planning, organization, time management, task prioritization, and attention control, as well as difficulties in social communication, sensory regulation, personal hygiene routines, and independent transportation. Despite these challenges, students identified supportive opportunities such as teacher-led life skills training, school-based practical activities, assistive technology use, positive teacher attitudes, and strong family involvement. The study concludes that effective transition to independent living requires structured, collaborative, and context-sensitive support systems tailored to the needs of learners with ASD.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder, Executive Functioning, Independent Living, Life Skills, Special Education, Transition Planning*

Introduction

The transition of special education learners, particularly those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), to independent living has become a

central concern in inclusive education. Effective transition programs emphasize life skills training, vocational readiness, and community participation as essential components for pro-

How to cite:

Caluza, J. R. (2026). Exploring Challenges and Opportunities in Preparing Special Education Students for Independent Living: A Basis for a Transition Program. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*. 7(9), 3996 – 4004. doi: 10.11594/ijmaber.07.09.16

moting autonomy and meaningful societal engagement (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Wehman et al., 2023). However, despite the presence of supportive policies and evolving practices, barriers such as limited resources, insufficient teacher preparation, and persistent stigma continue to hinder successful outcomes. These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive and individualized transition planning that addresses academic, social, and functional domains to better support learners with disabilities.

Psychosocial factors further complicate the transition process, as many students with disabilities experience anxiety, self-doubt, and limited access to mental health support during this critical period (American Psychological Association, 2021). In the Philippine context, policies such as DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021 and Republic Act No. 11650 demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusive education; however, their implementation remains inconsistent at the school level. Gaps in funding, lack of trained personnel, and insufficient transition-specific resources limit the effectiveness of these initiatives, revealing a disconnect between policy intent and actual practice. Addressing these systemic issues is crucial in ensuring that learners with ASD are adequately prepared for adult life.

Family and community involvement play a vital role in successful transition outcomes. Studies show that students with strong parental engagement are more likely to achieve independence and integrate into society (Test et al., 2023). Despite this, many Philippine schools struggle with weak coordination between families and educators, resulting in limited participation in individualized transition planning. Additionally, collaboration with key agencies such as Local Government Units (LGUs), Persons with Disability Affairs Offices (PDAOs), and TESDA is often fragmented, restricting access to work immersion, skills training, and community-based experiences. These gaps highlight the importance of establishing stronger partnerships and structured support systems to facilitate smoother transitions.

International frameworks for transition planning emphasize that preparing learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) for independent living should involve individualized life skills training, vocational readiness, self-determination, and meaningful community participation. Wehman et al. (2023) highlight the importance of coordinated transition supports that extend beyond the classroom to prepare

learners for employment, independent living, and active participation in society. In the Philippine context, however, the implementation of these global principles is influenced by the availability and coordination of local institutional support. Although schools may provide foundational life skills instruction, effective transition requires collaboration with Local Government Units (LGUs), Persons with Disability Affairs Offices (PDAOs), and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), which can contribute community-based services, disability-related support, skills training, and vocational opportunities. Learners may have fewer opportunities to apply school-based skills to real-world community and work-related experiences when there is little or no coordination between these organizations, schools, and families. Therefore, local institutional constraints determine how well these principles can be translated into meaningful and sustainable transition opportunities for Filipino learners with ASD, even though global frameworks offer evidence-based guidance on what effective transition preparation should include.

Current research also reveals significant gaps, particularly in longitudinal data and locally grounded studies. Most existing literature focuses on short-term outcomes, with limited evidence on long-term success in employment, independent living, and social integration (Wehman et al., 2023; Nagtegaal et al., 2023). Moreover, there is a lack of research addressing Filipino-specific contexts, including cultural, economic, and institutional factors that influence transition effectiveness. To address these issues, there is a growing need for context-sensitive frameworks, such as structured transition programs that integrate life skills training, teacher capacity building, family involvement, and school-community partnerships. Such approaches can help bridge existing gaps and promote sustainable independence for learners with disabilities (Espeño et al., 2024; Travers et al., 2026).

Problem Statement

This study aimed to explore the challenges and opportunities that influenced the transition of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to independent living. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges did students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) encounter as they

transitioned from school-based support to independent living?

2. How did students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) perceive opportunities that supported their journey toward independent living?
3. How did families and teachers influence the transition of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to independent living?
4. What intervention could be proposed to support students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as they transitioned to independent living based on the findings of the study?

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study was limited to five (5) students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) aged 14 years and above, enrolled in public elementary schools, as this stage represents a critical period for beginning preparation for independent living. The small sample size reflected the actual population of eligible learners and was appropriate for the study's qualitative, phenomenological design, which emphasizes depth and richness of lived experiences rather than generalizability (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). Conducted during the School Year 2025–2026, the research focused on students transitioning from elementary to secondary education, capturing a key developmental phase. To support effective communication and ethical data collection, parents were present during interviews to assist with clarification and comprehension, ensuring that students could comfortably and accurately express their perspectives while maintaining the primacy of their voices.

The study concentrated on students' lived experiences, challenges, and perspectives in developing life skills, social and communication abilities, and coping strategies for independent living. It excluded non-verbal learners, as well as those from private schools and higher educational levels, to maintain consistency in verbal interview methods. Although parents or guardians were present to assist with communication when needed during the interviews, their opinions were not gathered or examined as separate sources of information. Teachers, school administrators, and other stakeholders were also excluded from the list of primary respondents. The purpose of this delimitation was to maintain a student-centered approach while emphasizing the learners' own experiences and perceptions of their

readiness for independent living. The investigation focused on areas such as daily living skills, self-management, decision-making, and access to support systems, while broader systemic and policy issues were not explored in depth. Overall, the study provided a focused, student-centered understanding of how learners with ASD perceive their transition toward independence within their immediate contexts.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of students with ASD as they transition toward independent living. The approach aimed to capture the essence of participants' experiences, focusing on how they perceive and make sense of their challenges and supports. This approach focused on understanding "what experiences are like" from the participants' perspectives (Williams, 2021). Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research enabled a deeper examination of personal narratives, emotions, and social contexts shaping the students' experiences. Through interview-based data collection, the study captured the challenges, opportunities, and support systems influencing their transition, emphasizing a holistic and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

Within this qualitative framework, close interaction between the researcher and participants was essential to uncover meaningful insights beyond surface-level observations. A small sample size allowed for detailed, context-rich inquiry in natural settings, strengthening the depth and validity of the findings (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Data analysis followed thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke approach framework, which involved familiarization with the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, analyzing and improving themes, defining and labeling themes, and creating the final report. Thematic analysis is well known for its adaptability and rigor in analyzing qualitative data, allowing researchers to identify meaningful patterns across participants' responses while maintaining a strong connection to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The study included five selected students with ASD, aged 14 and above, from four public elementary schools within the Schools Division of Science City of Muñoz. The mandated guidelines according to DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021 also known as Policy Guidelines on the Provision

of Educational Programs and Services for Learners with Disabilities in the K to 12 Basic Education Program, students enrolled in Special Education (SPED) classes between the ages of 5 and 14 are placed in an elementary school setting that includes self-contained SPED classes. However, due to the dearth of SPED classes offered in junior high schools, they occasionally surpass the age of 14. These participants were chosen because they were at a critical stage of developing life skills, social competencies, and coping strategies needed for independence. The use of purposive sampling in this study would ensure that all selected participants could provide meaningful and relevant insights into the transition toward independent living. Conducting the study in this local context allowed for a more grounded understanding of existing school, family, and community support systems, ultimately contributing to the development of responsive and context-specific transition programs for learners with ASD.

Instrument

The study utilized a researcher-developed interview guide as its primary instrument to collect in-depth data from five (5) students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) regarding their experiences in transitioning to independent living. The instrument consisted of open-ended questions, allowing participants to freely express their personal insights, emotions, and lived experiences. This format was particularly appropriate for qualitative research because it encouraged flexibility, depth, and responsiveness during the interview process, while still maintaining alignment with the study's objectives. To ensure consistency, the guide provided a structured framework that enabled the researcher to explore key themes across all participants while giving them the opportunity to articulate their thoughts in their own words. To establish validity, the interview guide underwent expert review by specialists in Special Education, qualitative research, and educational leadership. Their feedback led to refinements in clarity, relevance, and organization, ensuring that the questions were appropriate and understandable for the target participants.

The interview guide was composed of nine core questions, each addressing critical aspects of the students' transition experiences. The first two questions focused on the challenges students encountered in managing daily tasks and performing basic life skills, including time

management, communication, personal hygiene, transportation, and sensory sensitivities. The third and fourth questions examined opportunities and support systems, particularly the roles of schools, skill-training programs, and assistive technologies in preparing students for independence. The fifth question explored barriers to accessing these services, while the sixth highlighted the importance of family involvement in supporting the transition process. The seventh and eighth questions considered the impact of teacher attitudes and collaboration among stakeholders, including families and support providers, on students' readiness for adulthood. Finally, the ninth question invited participants to recommend interventions and programs that could improve their transition outcomes. Together, these questions provided a comprehensive view of the students' lived experiences, encompassing both challenges and opportunities.

Data Gathering Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The data gathering procedure followed a systematic and ethical process. Permission was first obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent of the City of Muñoz, followed by the issuance of endorsement letters to school principals. Coordination with SPED teachers enabled the identification of eligible participants. Parents or guardians were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical safeguards, and written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Additionally, student assent was secured using simplified and developmentally appropriate language to ensure that participants fully understood their involvement and rights. Interviews were then conducted using the validated guide, with parents present when needed to support communication and comprehension. Throughout the process, the researcher ensured that data collection was conducted in a respectful, ethical, and confidential manner, prioritizing the comfort and well-being of the students.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis using the Braun and Clarke approach framework. The process involved several phases, including familiarization with the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, analyzing and improving themes, defining and labeling themes, and creating final report. Thematic analysis is well known for its adaptability and rigor in analyzing qualitative

data, allowing researchers to identify meaningful patterns across participants' responses while maintaining a strong connection to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Through this method, meaningful patterns were organized into coherent theme clusters that captured the core experiences of the participants. The study's use Braun and Clarke's theme analysis allowed for flexibility in interpreting intricate qualitative insights while ensuring that the conclusion were supported by the data and appropriately reflected the respondents' lived experiences.

Strict adherence to ethical standards guided the entire research process, particularly because the participants were minors with ASD. Ethical clearance was obtained from the National University–Baliwag Research Ethics Committee, ensuring compliance with institutional and national guidelines. A dual consent process was implemented, requiring both parental consent and student assent. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage in password-protected files, in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. All collected data were used solely for research purposes and properly disposed of after the study's completion.

Special measures were also taken to ensure the safety, comfort, and dignity of the participants. Interviews were conducted in safe, familiar, and non-threatening environments, often within school premises and with the presence of a teacher or guardian when necessary. Accommodations such as flexible scheduling, simplified language, and sensitivity to sensory needs were provided to create a supportive environment. The study fully complied with DepEd Child Protection Policies, ensuring that participants were protected from harm, discomfort, or exploitation throughout the research process. The researcher maintained a child-centered, respectful, and non-intrusive approach at all times, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding the welfare of students while capturing their authentic voices.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated a rigorous and ethically grounded methodology, combining a well-designed research instrument, systematic data collection procedures,

and thorough qualitative analysis. By focusing on the lived experiences of students with ASD and ensuring ethical integrity at every stage, the research provided meaningful insights into the transition to independent living. These insights not only highlighted the existing challenges and support systems but also contributed to the development of practical, context-specific interventions aimed at improving outcomes for learners with ASD in the Philippine educational setting.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2021), ensuring full methodological consistency across the study. The analysis involved the following steps:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

This method ensured that the findings remained grounded in the participants' authentic voices and preserved the depth of their lived experiences.

Result and Discussion

Theme 1: Struggles in Executive Functioning Limit Independent Task Management

While Table 1 summarizes executive functioning challenges, participants' narratives reveal the depth of these struggles. Students expressed confusion when managing multiple tasks, often stating that they "forget what to do next" or "need someone to remind them." One participant shared that even simple routines become overwhelming without step-by-step guidance, indicating a reliance on external structure.

Time management emerged as a persistent concern. Students reported losing track of time during tasks, resulting in incomplete responsibilities. This reflects not just a skill deficit but a lived experience of disorientation and frustration. The inability to prioritize tasks further compounds this challenge, with learners depending heavily on parents or teachers for decision-making.

These narratives demonstrate that executive functioning difficulties are not isolated cognitive deficits, but lived barriers that directly impact autonomy and confidence.

Table 1. Executive Functioning Challenges in Daily Task Management

Area	Key Findings	Student Experience
Planning & Organizing	Difficulty starting tasks, sequencing activities, and managing multiple responsibilities	Students feel confused, forget tasks, and rely on reminders or lists
Time Management	Poor time awareness, inability to follow schedules, difficulty adapting to changes	Students lose track of time and spend too long on tasks
Prioritization	Difficulty deciding what task to do first	Students depend on family members for guidance

This table 1 shows that students with ASD experience core executive functioning difficulties, particularly in planning, organizing, and regulating behavior. These limitations affect their ability to independently manage daily responsibilities. Their strong reliance on external supports such as family guidance, reminders, and structured tools highlights the need for scaffolding strategies. These findings are supported by studies indicating that executive functioning deficits significantly impact task initiation, organization, and decision-making among individuals with ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Demetriou et al., 2021).

These experiences may be influenced by the Philippine public school setting, where teachers frequently handle a variety of student needs with little time, staff, and specialized resources, may have an impact on these experiences. As a result, in order to complete everyday tasks, students with ASD may depend on teachers and family members for guidance, task sequencing, and reminders. Close parental involvement in Filipino households may also result in adults offering help rather than letting students practice on their own. As a result, the challenges seen could be a reflection of the students' executive functioning requirements as well as the degree of support in their surroundings. Students' independence may be strengthened

through regular school-family collaboration, visual aids, and a gradual withdrawal of support.

Theme 2: Social, Adaptive, and Sensory Barriers Restrict Community Participation

As shown in Table 2, students experience significant challenges in social interaction and adaptive functioning. Narratively, participants described feeling “shy,” “afraid,” or “uncomfortable” when interacting with unfamiliar individuals. This social hesitation limits their ability to form relationships and engage in community settings.

In daily living activities, students showed partial independence but required frequent prompts. For example, participants noted that they “can do hygiene routines but forget sometimes,” reflecting inconsistency rather than inability.

Transportation emerged as a major barrier. Students expressed fear and confusion about commuting independently, often relying entirely on family members for mobility. Sensory sensitivities, particularly to noise and crowded spaces, further discouraged participation in public environments.

These lived experiences illustrate how environmental and emotional factors intersect to limit functional independence.

Table 2. Adaptive and Social Functioning Challenges in Daily Living

Area	Key Findings	Student Experience
Social Interaction	Shyness, avoidance of unfamiliar people, preference for familiar individuals	Students feel uncomfortable communicating with others
Personal Hygiene	Able to perform tasks but inconsistent without reminders	Students rely on prompts to maintain routines
Transportation	Fear, confusion, and lack of independence in commuting	Students depend on family for mobility
Sensory Sensitivity	Discomfort in noisy, crowded environments	Students avoid overstimulating situations

This table 2 highlights challenges in adaptive behavior and social functioning, which are essential for independent living. While

students can perform some daily living skills, their inconsistency and reliance on support reduce independence. Social anxiety and sensory

sensitivities further limit participation in community and school activities. These findings align with research showing that individuals with ASD often experience difficulties in social communication, environmental adaptation, and independent functioning (Schiltz et al., 2021; Robertson & Simmons, 2021).

These difficulties may have an impact on students' involvement in class activities, school procedures, and relationships with teachers and peers. Large class sizes, busy school environments, and limited specialized support may make it difficult for students with ASD to manage social interactions, sensory demands, and daily routines independently. Their dependence on cues and family support may therefore be a reflection of both personal difficulties and the need for more organized and reliable support in the educational environment. Students may become more independent and engaged in school and daily life if visual routines, predictable activities, and opportunities for guided social participation are provided.

Theme 3: Structured Support Systems Enable Skill Development and Confidence

Table 3 presents support systems, but participants' narratives highlight their transformative impact. Students consistently expressed that teacher support plays a crucial role in their development. One participant shared that "teachers help me practice life skills," emphasizing the importance of guided instruction.

Hands-on activities such as cooking, cleaning, and gardening were identified as highly effective. These experiences allowed students to apply skills in real-life contexts, increasing both competence and confidence.

Assistive technologies were also valued, with students reporting that digital tools help them "learn faster" and "remember tasks." Similarly, family support was described as essential, providing both emotional reassurance and practical guidance.

Notably, participants emphasized the importance of repetition, visual aids, and structured routines. These strategies align closely with their preferred learning styles and enhance skill retention.

This table 3 emphasizes the positive role of support systems and structured interventions in preparing students with ASD for independent living. Teacher-led instruction, family involvement, and assistive technologies significantly enhance skill development and confidence. Students particularly benefit from practical, real-life activities and structured supports such as visual schedules and repeated practice. These findings are supported by research demonstrating that transition programs, collaborative support, and structured teaching strategies improve independence and life outcomes for individuals with ASD (Hume et al., 2021; Wehman et al., 2021; Shogren et al., 2021).

Table 3. Support Systems, Opportunities, and Effective Interventions

Area	Key Findings	Student Experience
Teacher Support	Teachers provide guidance, life skills training, and encouragement	Students feel motivated and supported
Skill Training	Hands-on activities (cleaning, cooking, gardening) build independence	Students gain practical life skills
Assistive Technology	Use of apps, tablets, and digital tools enhances learning	Students learn faster and more independently
Family Support	Families provide reminders, assistance, and emotional support	Students rely heavily on family guidance
Collaboration	Teachers and families work together for consistent support	Students receive aligned help at home and school
Interventions	Preference for real-life practice, repetition, visual aids, and structured tools	Students benefit from experiential learning

Teachers and families are crucial in helping students in Philippine public schools, especially when there is limited access to specialized resources and individualized services. Cooking, cleaning, gardening, and other everyday chores are examples of practical activities that help

students develop transferable skills. Similarly, learning can be made easier and more accessible with the help of visual materials, practice, and readily available digital tools. These results highlight how crucial it is for teachers and families to work together effectively in order to

give students with ASD regular opportunities to practice and develop independent living skills at home and at school.

Conclusion

The study concludes that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) face significant challenges in transitioning from school-based support to independent living, primarily due to difficulties in executive functioning, social communication, sensory sensitivities, and adaptive skills. These limitations result in reliance on external support and hinder their ability to apply learned skills in real-life situations. However, the findings also highlight that structured school-based programs, teacher support, and assistive technologies provide meaningful opportunities that enhance students' independence, confidence, and readiness for adulthood. Despite these supports, gaps remain in consistent skill performance, particularly in independent living and mobility, emphasizing the need for continued development beyond the classroom. The study further underscores the critical role of family and teacher collaboration in reinforcing skills across environments, ensuring continuity of support. Overall, it emphasizes the need for a comprehensive, structured intervention program that integrates life skills training, social development, assistive technology, and multi-stakeholder involvement to effectively bridge the gap between school support and independent living for students with ASD.

Acknowledgement

The researcher would like to sincerely thank the National University, Philippines, and the journal reviewers for their invaluable support, guidance, and constructive feedback in the completion of this study.

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