

Early Childhood Education Practices for Learners with Down Syndrome

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ABSTRACT:

The transition from home to school is crucial for learners with Down Syndrome, involving navigating routine and expectation changes, often worsened by cognitive and adaptive challenges. Given limited resources in South African schools, early home routines and rules are crucial to support learners and ease their transition to school. To investigate how home-based prep, routines, rules, and demonstrations impact learners with Down Syndrome transitioning to early childhood education. A qualitative study consisting of N = 3 participants was conducted at a special needs school in Gauteng. A qualitative case study within an interpretivist paradigm was employed. Data were gathered through semi-structured and narrative interviews with parents, teachers and school management, alongside document analysis of inclusive education policies. Thematic analysis methods to identify key patterns. Four core themes emerged: (1) Establishing predictable home routines to support school readiness, (2) Use of clear and consistent rules to promote behavioural adjustment, (3) Hands-on demonstration as a primary learning strategy at home, and (4) Family support as a foundation for resilience during transition. This study affirms that home-based preparation, through routines, clear rules, and demonstrations, is crucial for a successful transition to early childhood education for learners with Down Syndrome. Supporting families as primary agents of early transition is crucial for learners with Down Syndrome, emphasising the importance of early engagement and home preparation in school readiness. This study emphasises the importance of home-based prep and family support in helping children with Down syndrome make successful transitions.

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1. Introduction

The transition from home to school is a critical phase in early childhood development for learners with Down Syndrome. This transition involves

changes in routines, roles, expectations, and social environments (Barclay, 2017). For learners with Down Syndrome, these changes are often complex due to cognitive, language, and adaptive challenges.

Early childhood education practices must therefore begin before school entry, within the home environment. Preparation at home plays a central role in smoothing the transition to school for learners with Down Syndrome. Consistent routines provide predictability, which supports emotional regulation and adaptive behaviour. Clear rules help learners understand expectations and reduce anxiety during unfamiliar situations. Hands-on demonstrations support learning by linking actions to meaning and repetition. Families are the first and most influential support system for learners with Down Syndrome. Daily home practices shape early learning, communication, and independence skills. When routines at home align with school expectations, learners experience continuity rather than disruption. This continuity reduces adjustment stress and supports participation in early childhood classrooms. In South Africa, preparation at home is essential due to limited resources in schools. Teachers often face challenges related to large class sizes and insufficient specialised support (Mbuva, 2019). Home-based preparation compensates for these systemic gaps during early school entry. Strong family involvement, therefore, becomes a foundational element of inclusive early childhood education. This study foregrounds preparation at home as a key lesson for supporting learners with Down Syndrome. It emphasises routines, clear rules, and practical demonstrations as early childhood practices. These practices strengthen readiness for school and promote successful transition experiences. Understanding their role is essential for improving inclusive education outcomes in early childhood education.

Early Childhood Transition for Learners with Down Syndrome

The transition from home to school is widely recognised as a critical developmental process in early childhood. Barclay (2017) defines transition as a period of change involving routines, roles, and relationships. This definition is consistently applied across early childhood research. For learners with Down Syndrome, the transition is intensified by cognitive and adaptive challenges. International studies agree that learners with Down Syndrome experience delays in language, memory, and

adaptive functioning (Næss et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2017). These delays affect how children respond to new environments and expectations. South African studies align with this view, noting that early school entry can be overwhelming without structured support (Mbuva, 2019). The literature, therefore, converges on the need for early and deliberate preparation. However, most studies focus on school-based readiness rather than home-based preparation. This emphasis limits understanding of how learning begins before school entry. The home environment is often treated as secondary rather than foundational. This creates a conceptual gap in early childhood transition research.

Role of Home routines in transition

Several studies emphasise routines as essential for early childhood adjustment. Osborn et al. (2006) found that predictable routines support emotional security and behavioural regulation. This finding is supported by Tobin et al. (2022), who link routines to smoother transitions. Both studies emphasise consistency across environments. Research specific to Down Syndrome supports these conclusions. Næss et al. (2015) argue that learners with Down Syndrome rely heavily on predictability. This reliance is linked to limitations in working memory and processing speed. Routines, therefore, act as cognitive scaffolds rather than behavioural controls. Despite agreement on the value of routines, studies differ in focus. International research often examines routines within structured early childhood centres. South African studies emphasise the home as the primary site of routine formation (Selepe, 2021). This difference reflects unequal access to early childhood services. The literature shows limited empirical examination of how home routines prepare learners with Down Syndrome for school. Most studies assume routine transfer without investigating the process. This weakens the evidence base for home-focused interventions.

Clear rules and behavioural understanding

Clear rules are consistently associated with improved behavioural adjustment. Smith et al. (2017) report that explicit rules support understanding for learners with Down Syndrome. This finding aligns with cognitive research on

delayed abstract reasoning. Rules must therefore be concrete and consistently reinforced. South African research supports this view but emphasises contextual challenges. Mbuva (2019) notes that many classrooms lack individualised behavioural support. Therefore, learners who lack prior rule exposure struggle with classroom norms. Home-based rule-setting becomes a compensatory strategy. However, the literature rarely examines how rules are taught at home. Most studies assume parental competence without empirical validation. This assumption limits the applicability of findings across diverse socio-economic contexts. The strength of existing evidence is therefore uneven.

Hands-on demonstration as a learning strategy

Hands-on demonstration is widely supported as an effective strategy for learners with Down Syndrome. Smith et al. (2017) argue that visual and practical learning supports comprehension. This perspective aligns with Antonarakis et al. (2020), who emphasise limitations in verbal processing. Learning through action reduces cognitive load. International studies emphasise demonstration within classroom instruction. In contrast, African literature points to learning through daily home activities (Selepe, 2021). This divergence reflects differences in resource availability. Home environments provide natural contexts for repeated demonstration. Despite strong theoretical support, empirical studies often lack methodological rigour. Many rely on small samples or descriptive designs. This limits the generalisability of findings. There is a need for context-specific investigation grounded in lived practice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study integrates home-based preparation, Ubuntu philosophy, and resilience theory to explain early school transition for learners with Down Syndrome. The framework views transition as a relational and adaptive process shaped by the interaction between the child, family, and broader social context (Barclay, 2017). It is grounded in inclusive education and early childhood transition literature. At the centre of the framework are home preparation practices, specifically routines, clear rules, and hands-on demonstrations.

These practices provide structure, predictability, and repeated learning opportunities. Routines support emotional regulation and adaptive behaviour (Osborn et al., 2006). Clear rules help learners with Down Syndrome understand expectations and boundaries (Smith et al., 2017). Hands-on demonstrations support learning by compensating for verbal and memory limitations (Næss et al., 2015).

The framework is informed by Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises interconnectedness, shared responsibility, and collective care. Ubuntu asserts that individual development occurs through relationships with others (Kamga, 2018, p. 626). In this study, Ubuntu frames families, teachers, and communities as interdependent partners in supporting learners with Down Syndrome. Home preparation is therefore understood as a collective responsibility rather than an individual task. Resilience theory further strengthens the framework by explaining how supportive environments promote positive adaptation. Resilience theory emphasises the role of consistent relationships and structured support in enabling learners to cope with challenges (Bertsia & Poulou, 2023). Home routines and demonstrations act as protective factors that enhance coping and adjustment during school transition.

These theoretical perspectives link home preparation practices to school readiness outcomes. School readiness is defined as the learner's capacity to participate socially, behaviourally, and cognitively in the school environment. Adequate home preparation reduces transition stress and supports early engagement (Tobin et al., 2022). The framework is situated within the South African inclusive education environment, where early childhood resources are limited. Policy frameworks promote family involvement but offer limited operational guidance (Department of Education, 2001). Ubuntu and resilience, therefore, provide culturally and contextually relevant lenses for understanding family-led preparation. This conceptual framework explains how home-based practices, supported by Ubuntu philosophy and resilience theory, contribute to successful early school transition for learners with Down Syndrome.

Research gap

Research consistently shows that the early transition to school is challenging for learners with Down Syndrome. Most studies emphasise school readiness programmes implemented within early childhood centres (Hunter et al., 2022; McCartan et al., 2023). There is limited focus on preparation that occurs before school entry, particularly within the home. International literature recognises the importance of family involvement in early learning (Rey-Guerra et al., 2022; Pilarz et al., 2024). However, family practices are often discussed in general terms rather than examined in detail. Specific practices such as routines, clear rules, and hands-on demonstrations are rarely analysed systematically. South African research on Down Syndrome mainly addresses policy, access, and teacher preparedness (McKenzie et al., 2020; Opoku et al., 2021). Few studies document how families prepare learners for school in the everyday home environment (Selepe, 2021; Niklas et al., 2024; Pratt et al., 2024). The role of culturally grounded approaches, such as Ubuntu, is largely absent from empirical studies. There is also limited integration of resilience theory in early childhood transition research. Existing studies rarely examine how home practices function as protective factors. This creates a gap in understanding how learners with Down Syndrome adapt during early school transition.

Given this research gap, it becomes crucial to explore how families can effectively support the early transition of learners with Down Syndrome into school, as their home-based preparation practices are important (Pratt et al., 2024), however, underrepresented in existing literature. Learners with Down Syndrome in South Africa experience difficulties when transitioning from home to school. These difficulties include challenges in adapting to routines, rules, and learning expectations. Early childhood education systems often lack sufficient resources and specialised support. Families, therefore, play a central role in preparing learners for school entry. Despite this role, home-based preparation practices are not well-documented in research. There is limited evidence on how families support early transition in practical and structured ways. The absence of this evidence limits the

development of practical and contextually relevant practices. It also weakens the alignment between inclusive education policy and early childhood practice. This study addresses this problem by examining home-based preparation for learners with Down Syndrome.

To better understand the complexities of this transition process, this study will explore specific practices employed by families at home. It will focus on how these strategies facilitate the readiness of learners with Down Syndrome for school entry. The following research questions will guide this exploration:

1. *What routines do families use at home to prepare learners with Down Syndrome for school entry?*
2. *How do clear rules at home support behavioural adjustment during early school transition for learners with Down Syndrome?*
3. *How do hands-on demonstrations at home support early learning during school transition for learners with Down Syndrome?*

Research Methods and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach situated within an interpretivist research paradigm (Thanh & Thành, 2015; Watson, 2024). Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and understood through participants' lived experiences (Thanh & Thành, 2015). This paradigm is appropriate for exploring how families prepare learners with Down Syndrome for school transition. A qualitative case study design was employed (Alpi & Evans, 2019). Case study design allows for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within a real-life context. It is particularly suited to inclusive education research involving learners with disabilities. The design enabled a detailed examination of home-based preparation practices within a specific early childhood education program. The study was non-experimental and exploratory in nature. No variables were manipulated. The focus was on understanding meaning, process, and context rather than measuring outcomes. This design aligns with the study's aim to document lived practices rather than test interventions.

Research site

The study was conducted at a selected LSEN School in Gauteng Province, South Africa. The site was chosen due to its inclusion of learners with Down Syndrome in early childhood programmes. The school follows national inclusive education policies guided by the Department of Education. The site provided access to families and teachers involved in early childhood transition. It reflected typical resource constraints experienced in South African early childhood education. This context was appropriate for examining home-based preparation practices. Permission to conduct the study at the site was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education. The approval date was 18 June 2024, with ethics number 8/4/4/1/2.

Participants

The study population consisted of parents or primary caregivers of learners with Down Syndrome enrolled in early childhood education. Participants were selected because they were directly responsible for preparing learners at home. A purposive sampling strategy was used (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Purposive sampling allows the selection of participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under study. Only parents of learners with a confirmed diagnosis of Down Syndrome were included. Inclusion criteria required participants to be a parent or primary caregiver, have a child with Down Syndrome enrolled in early childhood education, and have participated in the child's preparation for school entry. Parents of learners not yet enrolled in school were excluded. This ensured that all participants had experienced the transition process.

Data generation

Data were generated using semi-structured and narrative interviews (Buys et al., 2022; Jamalullail & Ahzani, 2025). Semi-structured and narrative interviews allow flexibility while ensuring alignment with research questions. They are suitable for capturing detailed personal experiences and practices. An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives. Questions focused on routines, rules, and hands-on demonstrations used at home. The guide allowed probing to clarify

responses and deepen understanding. Interviews were conducted in a language comfortable for participants. Each interview was audio-recorded with participant consent. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information. To enhance credibility, interview questions were reviewed by an inclusive education expert. This ensured alignment with early childhood and disability research standards.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis allows systematic identification of patterns across qualitative data. It is suitable for analysing experiences related to behaviour, learning, and transition. The analysis followed six phases: Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading, Initial coding of meaningful units, searching for patterns across codes, reviewing themes for coherence, defining and naming themes, and producing the final analytical narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was conducted manually to maintain closeness to the data. Themes were derived inductively from participant responses. The analysis focused on how home practices supported transition readiness.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured using credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants. Summarising responses, conducted member checking during interviews. Participants confirmed the accuracy of interpretations. Dependability was ensured through a clear audit trail. All decisions related to data collection and analysis were documented. This allows replication of the research process. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling. The researcher documented assumptions and reflections throughout the study. This reduced researcher bias during analysis. Transferability was supported through thick description. Detailed contextual information allows readers to judge relevance to other environments.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee. Approval was granted on 3 June 2024. The ethics approval number is SEM1-2024-132. Additional approval was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education on 18 June 2024. The departmental ethics approval number is 8/4/4/1/2. Because the study involved children with disabilities, enhanced ethical safeguards were implemented. Parents provided informed consent on behalf of minors. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. An educational psychologist was available for participant support if distress occurred. No adverse emotional or psychological effects were reported. Confidentiality was maintained using pseudonyms. All data were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. Interviews were conducted respectfully and sensitively. The process reflected the Ubuntu ethic of care, emphasising dignity, respect, and relational responsibility.

RESULTS

These results present the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the data. The themes reflect home-based practices used to prepare learners with Down Syndrome for the transition to school. They are directly aligned with the research questions and study objectives. The themes highlight how families support early school readiness within the home environment. They focus on routines, clear rules, hands-on demonstrations, and family support. These practices were consistently identified across participant accounts. The analysis emphasises preparation at home as a structured and intentional process. Families described deliberate strategies used to support adaptation and learning. These strategies were shaped by the child's needs and daily home contexts. The themes also reflect the influence of relational support. Family involvement emerged as central to promoting confidence and adjustment. This aligns with Ubuntu principles of shared responsibility and care. Together, the themes provide a coherent account of how home preparation supports early school transition. They form the basis for understanding practical early

childhood education practices for learners with Down Syndrome.

THEME 1: Establishing predictable home routines to support school readiness

Parents described the use of structured routines at home to prepare their children for school entry. These routines were intentionally aligned with school expectations to familiarise children with daily structure. One parent explained the deliberate creation of school-like routines at home.

"I established a routine that mirrored the school schedule, so he became accustomed to the new daily structure." (Parent 2).

Parents also linked routine preparation to early engagement with the school environment. This included visiting the school and maintaining regular involvement.

"Furthermore, I stayed actively involved in his school life, meeting with teachers, touring the school, and maintaining open lines of communication to ensure he received the care and support he needed." (Parent 2)

Another parent emphasised the disruption caused by unfamiliar routines during transition.

"Everything was different, new faces, routines, and environment." (Parent 3)

The results indicate that predictable routines at home supported familiarity with school structures and reduced the impact of change during transition.

THEME 2: Use of clear and consistent rules to promote behavioural adjustment

Parents reported setting clear rules and expectations to support behavioural understanding. These rules were communicated calmly and consistently to support adjustment. One parent described explicitly explaining expectations and consequences.

"I set basic rules and expectations, explaining them clearly and ensuring he understood the consequences calmly." (Parent 1)

Another parent emphasised using direct and straightforward language when interacting with the child.

"I treated him like a normal child, encouraging his social and communication skills by speaking to him in clear and straightforward language."
(Parent 2)

Parent 1 also described adopting calm communication styles to manage behaviour.

"I always spoke to him kindly and reasonably, avoiding any form of shouting or harshness." (Parent 1)

The results show that clear and consistently communicated rules at home supported behavioural understanding and adjustment during school transition.

THEME 3: Hands-on demonstration as a primary learning strategy at home

Parents identified hands-on demonstration as a key strategy for supporting learning. Learning was facilitated through visual, practical, and repeated activities. One parent explained the importance of demonstrating tasks rather than relying on verbal instruction.

"I often demonstrated what I wanted him to do, as he learned better through visual and practical examples." (Parent 1)

Parents observed similar strategies being effective within the school environment.

"The teachers used visual aids and modified teaching methods that helped my child understand better." (Parent 3)

Preparation for learning also began in early childhood settings before formal schooling.

"I ensured he was enrolled in a suitable creche where he could develop essential skills such as crawling, walking, and interacting with other children." (Parent 2)

The results indicate that hands-on demonstration supported understanding, skill development, and participation during transition.

THEME 4: Family support as a foundation for resilience during transition

Parents described providing consistent emotional and practical support throughout the transition process. Support included encouragement, presence, and reassurance during periods of difficulty. One parent described being emotionally and physically available to the child.

"I ensure that I am emotionally and physically available for him, offering constant encouragement and setting clear but reasonable expectations." (Parent 1)

Parents acknowledged the emotional demands of the transition.

"My personal experience has been challenging but ultimately rewarding."
(Parent 1)

Another parent described intense emotional distress during early school entry.

"Mornings were the hardest. My child held onto me, tears streaming down his face, not wanting to let go." (Parent 3)

Over time, parents observed a gradual improvement.

"Slowly but surely, things began to improve." (Parent 3)

A sense of belonging emerged as a key outcome.

"The school's understanding and support helped my child feel like he belonged." (Parent 3)

The results show that sustained family support contributed to emotional coping, adaptation, and resilience during school transition.

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings of the study on early childhood education practices for learners with

Down Syndrome during the transition from home to school. The discussion is organised according to the four themes that emerged from the data. Each theme is interpreted in relation to existing literature, Ubuntu philosophy, and resilience theory. The discussion focuses on how home-based preparation supports school readiness and adjustment.

The study found that preparation at home was central to supporting the successful transition of learners with Down Syndrome from home to school. Parents played an active and continuous role in preparing their children before and during school entry. Four key practices were consistently evident across participant accounts. First, parents established predictable home routines that mirrored school structures. These routines helped learners become familiar with daily expectations such as waking times, activities, and transitions between tasks. Second, parents used clear and consistent rules to guide behaviour. Rules were communicated calmly and reinforced through repetition and explanation. Third, parents relied heavily on hands-on demonstrations to support learning. Skills were taught through showing, modelling, and repeated practice rather than verbal instruction alone. Fourth, sustained family support was evident throughout the transition process. Parents described emotional availability, encouragement, and persistence during periods of distress and adjustment. Together, these practices supported behavioural adjustment, learning engagement, and emotional coping during early school transition.

The findings align strongly with existing early childhood transition literature. Transition is widely defined as a process involving changes in routines, relationships, and environments (Barclay, 2017). The emphasis on routines in this study reflects this understanding. Learners with Down Syndrome are known to benefit from predictability due to challenges in memory, processing speed, and adaptive functioning (Næss et al., 2015). The use of clear rules and explicit communication is consistent with research indicating that learners with Down Syndrome require concrete instruction and consistent expectations (Smith et al., 2017). Studies have shown that unclear or inconsistent expectations increase behavioural difficulties during

transition. The current findings confirm that rule-setting before school entry supports adjustment. Hands-on demonstration as a learning strategy is well supported in international literature. Research consistently shows that learners with Down Syndrome respond more effectively to visual and practical learning approaches than to abstract verbal instruction (Antonarakis et al., 2020). The findings of this study align with this evidence. Family involvement has also been widely recognised as essential for early childhood transition (Tobin et al., 2022). However, much of the existing literature focuses on collaboration between families and schools rather than on preparation within the home. The current study places the home at the centre of transition support. In the South African context, research often focuses on inclusive education policy and teacher preparedness. Less attention is given to the everyday practices of families. This study, therefore, extends the literature by foregrounding family-led preparation as a primary site of support.

The strong emphasis on home-based preparation can be explained by contextual realities within South Africa. Early childhood education settings often face limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient specialised support (Mbuva, 2019). Therefore, families assume greater responsibility for preparing learners with Down Syndrome for school entry. While international studies often describe structured transition programmes implemented by schools, this study shows that similar strategies are implemented informally at home. Routines, rules, and demonstrations are embedded within daily family life rather than formal programmes. The difference lies in setting and formality rather than in purpose or function. Another notable difference is the prominence of emotional experiences in the findings. Parents described anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and gradual improvement over time. Existing literature often reports outcomes such as readiness or adjustment, but gives limited attention to the emotional labour of families. This study emphasises that emotional support is not an additional factor but a central component of transition preparation. The findings also suggest that communication and patience were prioritised over control or discipline. This contrasts with some behaviour-focused approaches reported in the

literature. Parents emphasised calmness, kindness, and explanation rather than corrective strategies. This difference reflects a relational approach to behaviour support.

The findings indicate that preparation at home functions as a foundational mechanism for school readiness in learners with Down Syndrome. Home routines provided structure and predictability, which reduced uncertainty during transition. Clear rules supported understanding of expectations and behavioural adjustment. Hands-on demonstrations enabled learning through observation and practice. Family support provided emotional stability and reassurance during periods of stress. From an Ubuntu philosophy perspective, these findings reflect collective responsibility and relational care. Parents understood their role as interconnected with the child's well-being and development. Support was grounded in patience, understanding, and shared commitment rather than individual achievement. The child's transition was treated as a family and community concern. From a resilience theory perspective, home-based preparation acted as a protective system: consistent routines, guidance, and emotional support reduced stress and supported adaptation. Resilience was not viewed as an individual trait but as a process supported by relationships. Learners developed coping capacity through sustained support rather than through exposure alone. The findings therefore suggest that resilience in learners with Down Syndrome emerges through stable, supportive home environments during early transition. Home preparation strengthens the learner's capacity to engage, adapt, and participate in the school environment. These findings reinforce the importance of recognising families as central partners in inclusive early childhood education.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was qualitative and focused on a small number of participants. The sample was limited to parents of learners with Down Syndrome from one geographical context. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all families, schools, or environments. The study relied on self-reported data from parents. Self-reported data may be influenced by memory, perception, or social

desirability. However, this approach was necessary to capture the lived experiences of home-based preparation. The study focused on home-based practices and did not include direct classroom observations. Teacher perspectives were not explored in depth. This limits insight into how home preparation aligns with classroom practices after school entry. Despite these limitations, the study provides detailed and contextually grounded insights. The findings remain valuable for understanding early transition practices within a similar environment or situation.

CONCLUSION

With regards to implications for practice, the findings emphasise the importance of supporting families as primary agents of early transition. Early childhood practitioners should actively engage parents before school entry. Guidance on establishing routines, clear rules, and hands-on demonstrations should be shared with families. Schools should recognise home preparation as a legitimate component of school readiness. Transition support should begin before formal enrolment. Simple, practical guidance can strengthen continuity between home and school. Implications for policy, Inclusive education policies emphasise family involvement but provide limited practical direction. The findings suggest a need for more precise policy guidance on home-based transition support. Early childhood policies should explicitly recognise the role of families in preparing learners with Down Syndrome. Policy implementation should include parent-focused transition programmes. Such programmes should be culturally responsive and contextually appropriate. This is particularly important in resource-constrained schools. In regard to implications for families, the findings validate the role families already play in supporting early transition. Routine-setting, clear communication, and demonstration are effective practices. Families do not require specialised resources to support transition. Consistent emotional support is equally important. Patience, reassurance, and presence contribute to adjustment and coping. Families should be recognised as central partners in inclusive education.

This study examined early childhood education practices for learners with Down Syndrome during the transition from home to school. The findings show that preparation at home is critical to a successful transition. Predictable routines, clear rules, hands-on demonstrations, and sustained family support emerged as key practices. The study contributes to inclusive education literature by foregrounding the home as a primary site of transition support. It extends existing research by documenting lived family practices within South African schools. The findings highlight the emotional, relational, and practical dimensions of transition. Ubuntu philosophy provides a lens for understanding transition as a collective responsibility. Resilience theory explains how consistent support enables adaptation under challenge. Together, these frameworks deepen understanding of early childhood transition for learners with Down Syndrome. The study concludes that inclusive early childhood education cannot be effective without recognising and supporting families. Home-based preparation is not supplementary but foundational. Strengthening family support is essential for improving transition experiences and educational inclusion for learners with Down Syndrome.

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Competing interests

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Credit authorship contribution

Mohamed Mosala: Conceptualisation, Formal Analysis, Project Administration, Methodology, Writing original draft, Writing review & editing. Maximus M. Sefotho: Supervision. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research; they do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or publisher, and the authors are solely responsible for the article's results, findings, and content. This article has been reviewed using Grammarly, an AI-powered grammar and writing assistant. Grammarly assisted in refining grammar, spelling, and clarity, which enhanced the readability and professional presentation of the study, allowing me to focus more deeply on the substance of my arguments and the originality of the authors. The intellectual contributions, interpretations, and conclusions remain entirely of the authors.

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