

Beyond Technical Competencies: A Needs Analysis of Socioemotional Skills Teaching for Career Transition Among Adolescents with Autism.

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Abstract

This study explores the socioemotional skill needs of adolescents with autism in preparing for career transition beyond technical and vocational competencies. Although transition programmes often emphasise vocational training, adolescents with autism may continue to experience difficulties adapting to authentic workplace demands when socioemotional competencies are not explicitly addressed. A qualitative needs analysis design was employed involving five secondary school special education teachers and five parents of adolescents with autism aged between 17 and 19 years in Selangor, Malaysia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings were synthesised into four overarching categories: (1) emotional regulation, meltdown management, and adaptive career readiness; (2) social awareness, communication, and workplace norms; (3) self-awareness, career decision-making, and workplace participation; and (4) structural and instructional needs for module development. Emotional regulation emerged as the most prominent issue influencing adolescents' ability to manage stress, adapt to change, tolerate workplace demands, and function independently in employment-related contexts. Participants also highlighted the absence of a structured, autism-specific socioemotional career transition module that explicitly addresses these interconnected competencies. The study underscores the importance of moving beyond technical training by integrating explicit, visual, structured, contextual, practical, and home-school-supported socioemotional instruction. These findings provide an empirical foundation for developing a structured socioemotional career transition module for adolescents with autism in secondary special education settings..

Keywords: Autism, Socioemotional Skills, Career Transition, Needs Analysis, Special Education.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from school to employment is a critical developmental phase for adolescents with autism, particularly as they approach the end of secondary schooling and prepare to exit school-based services. During this period, adolescents are expected to move beyond school-based routines and prepare for adult roles that include employment, independent living, social participation, and broader community life (Anderson et al., 2018; Lord et al., 2020; Giummarra et al., 2022). However, for adolescents with autism this transition is complex because readiness for employment is not determined solely by technical or vocational competence (Fong et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2024). Instead, successful employment preparation also depends on socioemotional and adaptive capacities, including emotional regulation, communication, understanding social expectations, adaptability, decision making, and the ability to function within real workplace environments (Whittenburg et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2013; Sung et al., 2019; Morán et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2024).

Existing transition programmes for adolescents with autism have often emphasised vocational training, job-related exposure, and technical skill acquisition. These elements remain important because they provide adolescents with practical preparation for future employment. Nevertheless, recent literature suggests that vocational competence alone is insufficient to ensure successful transition outcomes because employment success is also shaped by social, behavioural, and environmental factors (Whittenburg et al., 2020; Fong et al., 2021; Scott et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2024). Adolescents with autism and young adults continue to face challenges in employment readiness, interpersonal skills, work habits, independence, adaptive functioning, sensory tolerance, mental health, and access to appropriate support services (Cheng et al., 2024; Radey et al., 2025). These challenges may affect their ability

to sustain employment, participate meaningfully in workplace interactions, and cope with the expectations of adulthood.

Socioemotional skills are therefore increasingly recognised as an essential component of career transition preparation. For adolescents with autism, socioemotional readiness includes the ability to identify and manage emotions, understand the perspectives of others, respond appropriately to social cues, seek help when needed, accept feedback, adapt to workplace routines, and make informed decisions about future pathways. Employment-related soft skills such as conversing with others, asking for help, presenting oneself appropriately, and responding to feedback have been shown to support work self-efficacy and job-related social skills among young adults with disabilities (Lu et al., 2025). Similarly, vocational social skills instruction using video modelling and feedback has been found useful in teaching workplace-related social behaviours to employment-aged autistic youth (McLucas et al., 2024).

This growing emphasis is supported by a recent bibliometric analysis which found that research on socioemotional learning and career readiness among autistic adolescents has increased substantially after 2015 with emerging themes related to mental health, emotional regulation, transition planning, employment readiness, family support, and intervention-based practices (Ebrahim et al., 2026). The need to address socioemotional competencies is also linked to the broader issue of quality of life and adulthood outcomes among autistic individuals. Transition to adulthood is often associated with increased vulnerability, including difficulties in employment, mental health, social participation, independent living, and service access (Pagán, Montenegro, et al., 2025; Radey et al., 2025). MacKenzie et al. (2024) further highlighted that mental health and emotion dysregulation are important correlates of quality of life among autistic individuals. This suggests that preparing adolescents with autism for employment should not be limited to technical task performance but must also address emotional regulation, social participation, and adaptive functioning.

In addition, transition interventions are more likely to be meaningful when they are situated in real-life contexts and tailored to the specific needs of youth with disabilities. A realist review by Zidan et al. (2025) found that transition interventions are strengthened when they occur in inclusive and real-life environments that support self-advocacy, confidence, self-determination, and active participation. This is particularly relevant to adolescents with autism because they may require explicit instruction, predictable routines, visual support, repeated practice, and opportunities to generalise skills across school, home, and community settings.

In the Malaysian secondary special education context, adolescents with autism are often exposed to vocational or life skills activities as part of school-based preparation. However, there remains a need to understand whether existing support sufficiently addresses socioemotional readiness for career transition. Teachers and parents are key stakeholders in this process because they observe adolescents' functioning across school, home, and community contexts. Teachers are directly involved in classroom instruction, vocational activities, behavioural support, and transition preparation, while parents provide important insights into emotional regulation, independence, communication, daily functioning, and future concerns beyond school.

Despite the growing recognition of socioemotional needs among adolescents with autism, there remains limited empirical evidence on the specific socioemotional issues and challenges that affect career transition in secondary special education settings. There is also a lack of structured, autism-specific teaching modules that integrate socioemotional learning with career transition preparation. This gap highlights the need for a needs analysis that captures the perspectives of teachers and parents in identifying the challenges, content, teaching strategies, and support mechanisms required for module development.

Accordingly, this study focuses on Phase 1 of module development, namely the needs analysis phase. The purpose of this phase is to explore the socioemotional issues, challenges, and module development needs related to career transition among adolescents with autism aged 17 to 19 years. Specifically, this study aims to a) identify the socioemotional issues and challenges faced by adolescents with autism aged 17 to 19 years in preparing for career transition from the perspectives of teachers and parents; and b) identify the essential components required in developing a socioemotional skills teaching module for career transition among adolescents with autism aged 17 to 19 years.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the integration of socioemotional learning, career transition readiness, and autism-specific instructional support. These three perspectives are considered relevant because career transition among adolescents with autism requires more than vocational exposure or technical training. It involves the development of emotional, social, adaptive, and decision-making competencies that enable adolescents to participate in employment-related contexts and adult life.

2.1 Socioemotional Learning as a Foundation for Career Transition

Socioemotional learning provides a useful framework for understanding the competencies required by adolescents with autism during career transition. In general, socioemotional learning focuses on the development of self-

awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These domains are closely aligned with the socioemotional challenges commonly experienced by adolescents with autism, particularly in relation to emotional regulation, social communication, understanding others' perspectives, managing relationships, and making decisions about future pathways.

In the context of career transition, self-awareness allows adolescents to recognise their strengths, interests, limitations, emotional triggers, and support needs. Self-management enables them to regulate emotions, cope with frustration, manage anxiety, and respond appropriately to changes or workplace demands. Social awareness supports their ability to interpret emotions, body language, tone of voice, and social cues in others. Relationship skills are necessary for initiating communication, seeking help, accepting feedback, working with others, and interacting with supervisors or co-workers. Responsible decision-making helps adolescents evaluate options, understand consequences, and make informed choices about training, employment, and future goals.

For adolescents with autism, these competencies often need to be taught explicitly rather than assumed to develop naturally. This is because adolescents with autism may experience difficulties interpreting indirect communication, recognising subtle emotions, generalising social rules across contexts, and adapting to unfamiliar situations. Social skills and employment-related soft skills interventions have emphasised the importance of explicit teaching in areas such as conversation, help-seeking, and responding to feedback (Lu et al., 2025). Therefore, socioemotional learning in autism must be delivered through structured, visual, repeated, and context-based instruction.

2.2 Career Transition Readiness among Adolescents with Autism

Career transition readiness refers to the extent to which adolescents are prepared to move from school-based learning into post-school pathways, including employment, training, further education, and community participation. For adolescents with autism, transition readiness is multidimensional. It includes technical skills, work habits, adaptive functioning, communication, independence, emotional maturity, self-advocacy, and the ability to participate in social and vocational environments.

Recent literature highlights that adolescents with autism and young adults often encounter barriers during the transition to adulthood. These barriers include difficulties accessing services, limited employment support, mental health challenges, reduced social participation, sensory sensitivities, and gaps in transition planning (Binte Mohd Ikhsan et al., 2025; Cheng et al., 2024; Pagán, Montenegro, et al., 2025). Radey et al. (2025) also reported that autistic young adults may be less likely to achieve traditional adulthood milestones such as full-time employment, independent living, and financial self-sufficiency compared with non-autistic peers. These findings indicate that transition planning requires holistic support that addresses both individual competencies and systemic barriers.

Career transition readiness is also connected to mental health and emotional functioning. MacKenzie et al. (2024) found that depression, anxiety, social participation, and emotion dysregulation were associated with quality of life among autistic individuals. Similarly, Wiggins et al. (2024) reported that adolescents with autism were more likely to experience depressive symptoms and lower activity engagement compared with adolescents without developmental disabilities. These findings suggest that emotional regulation and psychosocial support should be considered central to transition readiness rather than separate from career preparation.

In this study, career transition readiness is understood as the integration of technical, socioemotional, adaptive, and decision-making competencies. Technical skills alone may not be sufficient if adolescents are unable to manage emotions, communicate needs, adapt to instructions, tolerate workplace demands, or understand social expectations. Therefore, the proposed module is positioned as a support mechanism to strengthen socioemotional readiness as a foundation for sustainable career transition.

2.3 Autism-Specific Instructional Support

Autism-specific instructional support is essential because adolescents with autism often learn best through approaches that are structured, predictable, visual, and directly connected to real-life situations. Traditional verbal instruction may be insufficient when learners experience difficulties with abstract language, inference, social interpretation, or generalisation. Therefore, teaching strategies for socioemotional career transition should be designed according to autistic learning profiles.

Several instructional approaches are relevant to this study. Visual supports can help adolescents understand routines, expectations, emotions, social rules, and decision-making steps. Social stories and social narratives can present social and workplace situations in a concrete and predictable format. Klein et al. (2025) described the use of social narratives and technology-based activities to support social skills development among transition-age youth with autism, particularly in relation to employment. Video modelling can also demonstrate appropriate behaviours such as greeting others, asking for help, responding to feedback, managing frustration, or following workplace instructions. McLucas et al. (2024) found that video modelling combined with feedback was effective in teaching vocational social skills to employment-aged autistic youth, although generalisation to new supervisors and community work settings remained mixed.

Role play, job simulation, and structured feedback are also relevant because they allow adolescents to practise socioemotional responses in safe and guided environments. Transition interventions that are connected to real-life contexts may strengthen confidence, self-advocacy, and active participation among youth with disabilities (Zidan et al., 2025). Therefore, socioemotional career transition instruction should not remain theoretical but should be embedded in realistic work-related scenarios.

Home-school collaboration is another important component of autism-specific support. Teachers and parents observe adolescents in different settings, and consistency between school and home can strengthen the generalisation of socioemotional skills. Families often require trusted guidance to manage the psychosocial and healthcare needs of youth with autism, particularly during transition to adulthood (Campbell et al., 2025). For this reason, the needs analysis in this study includes both teachers and parents as key informants.

The development of a socioemotional career transition module should therefore consider several instructional principles. First, the module should be explicit, with clear teaching objectives and direct explanations. Second, it should be visual and structured, using predictable sequences and concrete examples. Third, it should be contextual, linking socioemotional skills to real workplace and daily living situations. Fourth, it should be flexible, allowing teachers and parents to adapt activities according to the adolescent's functioning level, interests, and support needs. Finally, it should promote generalisation across school, home, and community contexts.

2.4 Conceptual Position of the Present Study

Based on the literature, this study positions socioemotional readiness as a foundational element of career transition among adolescents with autism. Technical and vocational skills remain important, but their effectiveness depends on the adolescent's ability to regulate emotions, understand self and others, communicate appropriately, build relationships, adapt to workplace routines, and make responsible career-related decisions. Therefore, the needs analysis in this study focuses on identifying the socioemotional issues, challenges, skill domains, and instructional supports required for module development.

The conceptual position of this study can be summarised as follows: career transition readiness among adolescents with autism is shaped by the interaction between vocational competence, socioemotional readiness, adaptive functioning, family-school support, and autism-specific instructional strategies. This framework provides the basis for examining teachers' and parents' perspectives and for informing the development of a structured socioemotional skills teaching module for career transition.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative needs analysis design to explore the socioemotional issues, challenges, and support needs related to career transition among adolescents with autism. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and concerns of teachers and parents who were directly involved in supporting adolescents with autism during the transition from school to post-school life.

The needs analysis design was selected as this study formed the first phase of module development. This phase aimed to identify the actual needs of stakeholders before developing a socioemotional skills teaching module for career transition. Through this approach, the study was able to examine the gap between existing career transition preparation and the socioemotional competencies required by adolescents with autism to function in real workplace contexts.

This design was particularly suitable because socioemotional readiness for career transition is a complex phenomenon that is shaped by individual characteristics, family support, school practices, and environmental demands. By focusing on the perspectives of both teachers and parents, the study provided rich and contextualised insights into the emotional, social, adaptive, communication, and decision-making challenges experienced by adolescents with autism aged 17 to 19 years.

3.2 Participants and Setting

The study was conducted in secondary special education settings in Selangor, Malaysia. This setting was selected because it involved adolescents with autism who were approaching the end of secondary schooling and were preparing for post-school pathways, including vocational training, employment, or further transition programmes. A total of ten participants were involved in the study, comprising five secondary school special education teachers and five parents of adolescents with autism aged between 17 and 19 years. The teachers were selected because they had direct experience teaching and supporting adolescents with autism in special education classrooms, vocational activities, and transition-related learning. Meanwhile, the parents were selected because they had first-hand knowledge of their children's emotional regulation, independence, communication, social functioning, and future career concerns outside the school context.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. This sampling method was appropriate because the study required participants who could provide rich and relevant information based on their direct involvement with adolescents with autism. The inclusion of both teachers and parents enabled the study to capture perspectives from school and home contexts, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the socioemotional needs and module development requirements. Table 1 presents the background of the ten respondents involved in this study.

Table 1

Summary of Respondent Background

Teacher Respondent	Teaching Experience in Special Education	Parent Respondent	Age of Adolescent with Autism
Teacher 1	7 years	Parent 1	19 years
Teacher 2	10 years	Parent 2	17 years
Teacher 3	21 years	Parent 3	19 years
Teacher 4	23 years	Parent 4	18 years
Teacher 5	6 years	Parent 5	17 years

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was used because it allowed the researcher to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in depth while maintaining consistency across the main areas of inquiry. Semi-structured interviews also provided flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions and obtain clarification on important issues raised by participants.

The interview protocol was developed based on the objectives of the needs analysis and relevant literature on autism, socioemotional skills, career transition, and module development. The interview questions focused on several key areas, including emotional regulation, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, adaptive readiness, career decision-making, workplace preparation, teaching strategies, and the need for a structured socioemotional module.

Each interview was conducted individually to allow participants to share their views openly. The teachers were asked about their experiences in supporting adolescents with autism in school-based learning, vocational activities, social interaction, emotional management, and transition preparation. Parents were asked about their children's socioemotional functioning at home and in the community, their concerns about future employment, and the type of support they believed was needed to prepare their children for adulthood and career transition.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The use of verbatim transcription ensured that participants' meanings and expressions were preserved accurately during the analysis process. The interviews were conducted in Malay, which was the participants' preferred language. Selected excerpts were translated into English for reporting purposes. The translated excerpts were checked against the original transcripts to preserve the intended meanings of the participants' responses.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected because it is suitable for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. It also allowed the researcher to organise participants' experiences into meaningful themes related to socioemotional needs and career transition preparation.

The analysis process involved several stages. First, the researcher familiarised himself with the data by reading the interview transcripts repeatedly. This process enabled the researcher to gain an overall understanding of the participants' responses and identify initial patterns. Second, initial codes were generated by labelling meaningful segments of data related to socioemotional issues, career transition challenges, and module development needs.

Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories and potential themes. These themes reflected recurring patterns across teacher and parent interviews. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the data and were aligned with the research objectives. Finally, the themes were defined and named to clearly explain the socioemotional needs and instructional considerations required for the development of the module.

The initial analysis generated ten interrelated themes concerning emotional regulation, emotional sensitivity and meltdown triggers, adaptive readiness, workplace safety, self-awareness, social awareness, workplace norms, relationship skills, career decision-making, and module development needs. During the theme-reviewing stage, conceptually overlapping themes were consolidated into four overarching categories to improve analytical coherence while retaining the meanings represented in the original data. The four categories were: emotional regulation, meltdown management, and adaptive career readiness; social awareness, communication, and

workplace norms; self-awareness, career decision-making, and workplace participation; and structural and instructional needs for module development.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study. Credibility was enhanced through the use of semi-structured interviews, verbatim transcription, and the inclusion of two groups of informants, namely teachers and parents. The use of multiple perspectives helped strengthen the interpretation of the findings because the socioemotional needs of adolescents with autism were examined from both school and home contexts.

Member checking was also conducted to ensure that the participants' views were represented accurately. Participants were given the opportunity to review or confirm the accuracy of their responses and the meanings interpreted from the interview data.

Dependability was addressed by maintaining a systematic research process, including documentation of interview procedures, transcription, coding, theme development, and interpretation. This audit trail allowed the research process to be reviewed and followed clearly.

Confirmability was supported through reflexive practices. The researcher remained aware of personal assumptions throughout the research process and ensured that interpretations were grounded in the participants' actual responses. Relevant excerpts from the interview data were used to support the development of themes.

Transferability was strengthened by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and data collection procedures. These descriptions allow readers to determine the extent to which the findings may be applicable to other secondary special education settings or similar populations.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Generic participant descriptors were used when reporting the findings to protect participants' identities. All audio recordings, transcripts, and research data were stored securely and used only for the purpose of this study.

The study was conducted with respect, transparency, and sensitivity, particularly because it involved discussions about adolescents with autism and their socioemotional challenges. Care was taken to ensure that participants' experiences were represented respectfully and that no identifying information was disclosed in the reporting of the study.

4. Results

The initial thematic analysis generated ten interrelated themes, which were subsequently consolidated into four overarching categories to improve analytical coherence and reduce conceptual overlap. These categories were developed from the perspectives of five secondary school special education teachers and five parents of adolescents with autism aged 17 to 19 years. The four overarching categories were: emotional regulation, meltdown management, and adaptive career readiness; social awareness, communication, and workplace norms; self-awareness, career decision-making, and workplace participation; and structural and instructional needs for module development.

4.1 Emotional Regulation, Meltdown Management, and Adaptive Career Readiness

The findings show that emotional regulation was the most frequently emphasised concern among both teachers and parents. Participants reported that adolescents with autism were often capable of learning vocational or technical tasks, but difficulties in regulating their emotions affected their readiness to function in real work-related environments. Emotional responses were commonly triggered by rejection, stress, noise, repeated instructions, changes in routine, unfamiliar situations, and uncertainty.

Several teachers described that adolescents with autism had difficulty controlling their emotions independently and often required intervention from adults to return to a calmer state. As one teacher explained, "*For autistic students, it is quite difficult for them to control their emotions. So, the teacher is the one who usually has to help and persuade them to regulate their emotions.*" This view was further supported by another teacher, who emphasised that the main difficulty was not necessarily the students' ability to learn but their emotional instability: "*Autistic students can actually learn quite easily, but their emotions are very unstable.*"

Parents described similar concerns in home and school contexts. One parent explained that her child had not yet developed a specific self-calming strategy, stating, "*His emotional management is about fifty-fifty. He does not know specific techniques such as deep breathing to calm himself down.*" Similarly, another parent indicated that

emotional regulation remained largely dependent on adult support: *“Usually, I am the one who has to cool him down.”*

The findings further showed that emotional dysregulation could manifest in different ways. Some adolescents became silent or cried when overwhelmed, while others expressed anger verbally or behaviourally. A teacher stated, *“When they are stressed, some will become silent or cry.”* Another teacher explained that students sometimes needed to release their anger before they could be guided back to a calmer state: *“Usually, they will release their anger first, so we are the ones who have to calm them down.”* Parents also reported more severe responses, including behaviour that could result in self-injury. As one parent stated, *“She once acted aggressively by overturning a table until she injured herself.”*

Beyond general difficulties in emotional regulation, participants also highlighted heightened emotional sensitivity and vulnerability to meltdown. Adolescents with autism were described as being strongly affected by criticism, repeated reprimands, stressful situations, environmental changes, and unfamiliar demands. One teacher described how daily functioning was often influenced by mood: *“Everything depends on their mood. If the mood is good, they are okay. If not, they can be moody throughout the day.”*

Parents similarly emphasised the intensity of their children’s emotional sensitivity. One parent stated, *“He is quite sensitive. If we scold him too much, he will feel very sad.”* Another parent explained, *“They are actually very sensitive, even far more sensitive than typical people.”*

Meltdowns were reported to occur when adolescents were exposed to excessive instructions, unfamiliar tasks, changes in location, loud noise, or repeated pressure. A teacher explained, *“New tasks that they do not understand, changes in place, loud noise, and too many instructions can trigger a meltdown.”* A parent similarly stated, *“If she experiences stress, meltdown, or is pressured with repeated instructions, she will show extreme tantrum.”*

Uncertainty and changes in routine were also identified as significant sources of anxiety. Adolescents with autism were described as becoming panicked, nervous, fearful, or emotionally overwhelmed when encountering situations that were new or unpredictable. One teacher explained, *“Usually, adolescents with autism find it difficult to control their emotions when routines change.”* This was consistent with a parent’s experience: *“She will feel panicked, nervous, and afraid.”*

These emotional challenges were closely related to participants’ perceptions of career readiness. Teachers and parents viewed career preparedness as extending beyond the ability to perform vocational tasks. Emotional maturity, independence, adaptive behaviour, time management, the ability to follow instructions, and readiness to function outside familiar environments were considered essential indicators of preparedness for employment.

One teacher emphasised that emotional control should be established before career placement: *“The most important thing for autistic students is that they must first be able to control their emotions. If they cannot control their emotions in the outside environment, when facing outsiders, can they really hold back their emotions?”* Another teacher similarly connected emotional stability with employability, stating, *“If their emotions are stable, they can do any job.”*

Parents, however, expressed concern that their children were not yet sufficiently mature or independent to enter the world of work. One parent explained that she extended her child’s schooling experience to provide more opportunities for social exposure and maturity: *“At the age of 18, I enrolled her in Form 5 again so that she could have longer social experience in school. Adolescents with autism must be truly mature and have life experience.”* Another parent highlighted delayed maturity as a barrier to transition: *“His maturity is quite delayed compared with peers. I feel he is not ready yet because his maturity is still lacking.”*

Adaptive readiness was reflected in adolescents’ ability to manage themselves, follow routines, understand instructions, arrive on time, and respond consistently to work expectations. As one teacher stated, *“The indicators I look at include the ability to manage oneself, arrive on time, communicate basically, and accept work instructions.”*

Parents also emphasised the importance of developing functional skills beyond the adolescents’ comfort zones. One parent explained, *“They need to know social skills outside their comfort zone, such as how to take the bus or LRT, manage time, complete work on time, understand instructions, and respond consistently to work instructions.”*

Overall, these findings indicate that emotional regulation, management of sensory and situational triggers, tolerance of uncertainty, emotional maturity, and adaptive independence are interconnected elements of career readiness. Socioemotional preparation should therefore include explicit instruction in recognising emotions, identifying triggers, using self-regulation strategies, managing changes in routine, seeking assistance, following workplace expectations, and responding to unexpected demands. Employment preparation should not focus solely on vocational task performance but should also strengthen the emotional and adaptive competencies required to sustain participation in workplace environments.

4.2 Social Awareness, Communication, and Workplace Norms

The findings also revealed substantial difficulties in social awareness, social communication, relationship skills, and understanding workplace norms. Adolescents with autism were described as having difficulty recognising other people's emotions, interpreting facial expressions and body language, understanding tone of voice, and responding to indirect or figurative communication.

Teachers reported that adolescents with autism were often more likely to recognise overt negative emotions, particularly anger, than subtle or positive emotional expressions. One teacher explained, *"Most of them do not understand and do not really care about other people's feelings."* Another teacher observed that sadness was less likely to be recognised than anger: *"If someone is sad, they usually do not realise it. But if someone looks angry, they notice it more quickly."*

A further account suggested that some adolescents could distinguish anger and sadness but had difficulty interpreting positive emotions such as liking, affection, or happiness. One teacher stated, *"He only knows when people are angry with him. But when people like him, he does not realise it. He does not understand emotions such as liking, affection, or happiness. He knows anger and sadness."*

Parents also described the importance of using direct, gentle, and emotionally supportive communication. One parent explained that her child was more responsive when information was communicated calmly and personally: *"If we speak softly and heart to heart, she becomes sensitive and touched. If we speak with an angry tone, she ignores it. We need a slow approach before she becomes responsive and wants to correct her mistake."*

Difficulties interpreting social cues were also evident in participants' accounts. A teacher explained that adolescents might become confused or remain silent when they could not understand figurative language or non-verbal communication: *"They sometimes become confused or remain silent, especially because they find it difficult to understand figurative language and non-verbal cues."* Similarly, a parent reported, *"Yes, that is true. She has difficulty understanding instructions, emotions, or other people's body language. Sometimes she looks blur."*

In addition to difficulties understanding other people's emotions and perspectives, participants emphasised that social manners and workplace norms needed to be taught explicitly. These included greeting others, apologising, speaking politely, waiting for turns, accepting instructions, interacting appropriately with outsiders, and understanding that workplace expectations differ from those experienced at school or at home.

One teacher explained that social manners still required explicit teaching despite the adolescents' age: *"Even though they are already 17 or 18 years old, manners with outsiders still need to be taught a lot."* A parent similarly stressed the need for clear guidance about workplace conduct: *"He needs to know how to carry himself. That is why he needs guidance and guidelines about the world of work, so that he understands that work involves instructions and interaction, and that work is not the same as school."*

Parents described teaching social manners through calm, direct, and repeated explanation. One parent stated, *"The way I teach her emotions now is through slow talk. I have to teach her manners, for example, 'When you meet the teacher, you say good morning' and 'say sorry, teacher.'"*

Teachers also observed that adolescents could demonstrate more appropriate social responses after becoming emotionally calm and receiving clear explanation. One teacher stated, *"When we ask him after he has cooled down, we tell him to stay calm, and then he can apologise to the person. We explain why the person reacted that way, and then he can apologise."*

These difficulties were further reflected in inconsistent relationship skills and functional communication. Adolescents with autism were described as having difficulty initiating conversations, sharing problems, asking for help, working in groups, and communicating spontaneously. Help-seeking was a particular concern because some adolescents attempted to resolve problems independently rather than approach another person for assistance. One teacher explained, *"They do not like to ask questions and prefer to make their own decisions. Usually, they will solve the problem by themselves or find their own solution."* Another teacher stated, *"Usually, they are shy to ask for help because they do not know the appropriate way to start a conversation."* Parents reported similar patterns, with one parent observing, *"She also very rarely asks others for help even when she faces difficulties."* Teachers also described communication as non-spontaneous, direct, and literal. In many situations, adults needed to initiate conversations before the adolescents responded. One teacher explained, *"We are the ones who need to start the conversation first. They cannot converse spontaneously."*

Another teacher illustrated how direct communication could affect performance during a formal interview: *"They like to speak directly. For example, during an interview, when asked, 'Why did you enter vocational college?' the student answered, 'Because my mother told me to.' That is autistic students. They say things directly; there is no filter."*

Parents similarly reported that sarcasm, figurative language, and indirect instructions could easily be misunderstood. One parent described a situation in which sarcasm was interpreted literally: *"Her father once used sarcasm to ask her to do a task, but she thought it was a real instruction and immediately left the task. So, if we are angry or sad, we need to speak straight to the point because they cannot understand figurative language."*

Overall, these findings demonstrate that social awareness, communication, relationship skills, and workplace norms are closely interconnected. Adolescents with autism require explicit, visual, concrete, and repeated

instruction in recognising emotional expressions, interpreting social cues, understanding perspectives, initiating conversations, asking for help, clarifying instructions, responding to feedback, apologising appropriately, and interacting with unfamiliar adults. Such instruction should be embedded within meaningful workplace-related situations because employment requires interaction with supervisors, co-workers, and customers in contexts that may be less predictable than interactions at school or at home.

4.3 Self-Awareness, Career Decision-Making, and Workplace Participation

The findings further revealed that self-awareness, career decision-making, workplace safety, and employer support were closely related aspects of career transition. Adolescents with autism were not always able to identify their own strengths, weaknesses, interests, limitations, and support needs without assistance from teachers or parents.

One teacher explained, *“Sometimes they do not know their own strengths and weaknesses, unless teachers identify and make them aware. If they have one strength, they only focus on that strength and ignore their weaknesses.”*

Another teacher similarly stated, *“To identify their weaknesses, they still need guidance from teachers and parents.”*

Although self-awareness was limited in some areas, participants also acknowledged that adolescents with autism could demonstrate strong interests and abilities in specific fields, including arts, music, cooking, acting, photography, and structured hands-on activities. One teacher stated, *“If they like drawing, dancing, or music, that becomes their strength.”*

Parents provided examples of interests that could potentially be developed into meaningful career pathways. One parent shared, *“At the moment, she is interested in photography and modelling. She has the passion to know more, but I have not yet found a suitable academy nearby for her.”*

Another parent described how her child’s abilities became more visible through acting rather than through the vocational options available at school: *“When she was given an English script, she had no problem because her English functioning was very good. She could understand the crew’s instructions, express the character, and even improvise the script. That was when I saw her real potential and talent; it was actually towards acting, not sewing.”* These findings suggest that career preparation should not assume that the vocational pathways available in school are automatically suitable for every adolescent with autism. Instead, career planning should consider individual interests, strengths, functional abilities, support requirements, and realistic opportunities beyond the immediate school context.

Limited self-awareness was closely connected to dependence on adults in career decision-making. Participants reported that adolescents with autism could sometimes express preferences but often required adult guidance to understand available options, compare consequences, assess suitability, and make informed decisions about future training and work. One teacher explained, *“At first, it is difficult for them to make decisions on their own.”* A parent similarly stated, *“She can make her own choices but still needs guidance.”*

Teachers emphasised that career-related decisions needed to be supported through repeated, concrete, and explicit explanation. One teacher stated, *“They need to be guided because they do not know what is good, bad, okay, or not okay.”* The same teacher further explained, *“We need to explain to them why, what for, and for what reason. It has to be repeated many times.”* Parents expressed similar views, particularly regarding the need to explain the future implications of actions and decisions. One parent stated, *“Autistic students need very clear justification and explanation. If they understand the implications of something for their future, they will try their best to control themselves.”*

Another parent emphasised that understanding should not be assumed after a single instruction: *“The explanation needs to be more detailed so that he understands. We cannot assume that once we give an instruction, he will understand it by himself.”* Career decision-making therefore needs to be structured and scaffolded rather than entirely directed by adults. Adolescents should be supported to identify preferences, compare alternatives, understand consequences, evaluate the suitability of career choices, and gradually participate in decisions affecting their futures.

At the same time, participants highlighted that successful career participation depended not only on the adolescents’ individual competencies but also on workplace conditions, safety, employer understanding, and the availability of appropriate adjustments. Adolescents with autism were described as requiring preparation to face challenges such as noise, workload demands, bullying, manipulation, exploitation, unfamiliar expectations, and social pressures.

Teachers considered the ability to tolerate busy and noisy environments as an indicator of workplace readiness. One teacher stated, *“If the student can calm down independently and accept a noisy environment, that means the student is ready for a career.”* Parents were particularly concerned about the risk of bullying and exploitation. One parent stated, *“I worry that she may be bullied or taken advantage of because she is a girl, and she does not know what she needs to prevent or protect herself from.”*

Another parent emphasised the importance of maturity and life experience as protection against manipulation: *“Adolescents with autism must be truly mature and have life experience so that when they go out to work, they are not easily manipulated or bullied by the outside world.”*

Participants also stressed that employers and co-workers needed a better understanding of autism. A teacher explained, *“The workplace must brief the employer and staff earlier that the student has autism. The employer must know how to approach the student and learn about autism. If the employer has no knowledge about the student, it will be difficult.”* Parents similarly highlighted the need for clear and appropriate workplace instructions: *“Employers need to know the category of these children so that they are not treated exactly the same as typical workers. Autistic workers need clear instructions.”*

Workload adjustment was also considered necessary because excessive demands could lead to stress and withdrawal from tasks. One teacher stated, *“They cannot be given too much work. Daily tasks need to be given according to their ability. When there is too much work, they become stressed quickly and refuse to continue.”*

Taken together, these findings indicate that self-awareness, supported decision-making, workplace safety, and environmental accommodation should be addressed as interconnected components of career transition. Adolescents with autism need opportunities to identify their strengths and interests, participate meaningfully in career decisions, understand personal safety, recognise inappropriate treatment, request clarification, and seek assistance. At the same time, employers and co-workers need sufficient awareness to provide clear instructions, suitable workloads, predictable expectations, and appropriate support.

4.4 Structural and Instructional Needs for Module Development

The final category concerns the structural and instructional requirements of a socioemotional career transition module specifically designed for adolescents with autism. Teachers consistently reported that no specific module was available to guide the teaching of socioemotional skills in relation to employment preparation. Existing resources were perceived as focusing primarily on academic or vocational competencies, while the socioemotional aspects of career transition remained insufficiently addressed.

One teacher stated, *“So far, there is no specific module.”* This was echoed by another teacher, who explained, *“I have never found or used any specific module related to socioemotional skills for students.”* Another participant similarly stated, *“There has never been a module introduced to guide autistic students.”* A teacher further explained that the available materials did not adequately address socioemotional preparation for employment: *“Existing modules focus more on academics and vocational skills. Socioemotional aspects for work preparation are still given less emphasis.”*

These accounts indicate that, although adolescents may receive academic and vocational instruction, there remains a gap in structured preparation for the emotional, social, communicative, and adaptive demands of employment. Both teachers and parents strongly supported the development of a specific socioemotional career transition module. They viewed the module as beneficial not only for adolescents but also as a reference for teachers and parents. One teacher explained, *“It is important as a reference for parents and teachers so that we can guide their physical and emotional preparation to help them remain longer in the workplace.”*

Parents similarly believed that socioemotional preparation should receive greater attention. One parent stated, *“I really welcome the existence of this socioemotional module because it gives a greater impact compared with focusing on academics alone.”* Another parent explained, *“This is a very good effort because all this time we have not really looked at this aspect. My child is emotionally sensitive, so he really needs more guidance than typical children.”*

In terms of instructional design, participants recommended that the module be visual, structured, contextual, practical, and predictable. These characteristics were considered suitable because adolescents with autism may respond more effectively to concrete examples, visual representation, and clearly sequenced activities. One teacher stated, *“Autistic students depend a lot on visuals and structured sequences.”* A parent similarly explained, *“The best approach must be contextual and use visuals.”*

Video modelling was also recommended because it allows adolescents to observe an appropriate behaviour or response before attempting it independently. One parent stated, *“If there is a video, that is better because he can see it visually. If it is only theory, it is quite difficult.”*

Participants proposed several practical instructional approaches, including role play, workplace simulation, social stories, bilingual instructions, short learning sessions, hands-on activities, calming audio, practical training, and collaboration between home and school. One teacher explained, *“At school, work simulation and role play are very suitable. At home, worksheets are more practical.”*

The importance of continuity across environments was also highlighted. Participants believed that skills taught at school should be reinforced at home to support consistency and generalisation. One parent stated, *“It should create continuity of consistent methods between home and school.”* A teacher similarly explained, *“The module is suitable to be implemented during the career transition period and can also be continued at home with parents.”*

However, participants also identified several factors that could affect the implementation of the module. These included limited instructional time, insufficient teaching resources, the need for teacher training, differences in student functioning and support needs, limited parental time, and limited parental knowledge or skills in supporting autism-related socioemotional development.

One teacher explained, “*The main constraints are usually lack of time, specific materials, teacher training, and the different functioning levels of students.*” Parents also indicated that adolescents may require additional time and appropriately adapted instruction before they fully understand the intended skills. One parent stated, “*The most obvious constraint is their own way of receiving instructions. We need a longer time and the right way of giving instructions to make sure they really understand.*” Another parent highlighted that not all families had sufficient knowledge or experience to implement the activities independently: “*Not all parents have the skills or exposure on how to train autistic children.*”

Overall, the findings indicate a clear need for a socioemotional career transition module that is explicit, structured, visual, contextual, practical, flexible, and adaptable to different levels of functioning and support needs. The module should incorporate workplace simulations, role play, video modelling, social stories, visual supports, guided decision-making, repeated practice, and activities that can be reinforced across school and home contexts. It should also provide clear guidance for teachers and parents to ensure consistent implementation.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that socioemotional readiness is central to career transition among adolescents with autism. Although technical and vocational skills remain important, employment readiness is also influenced by emotional, social, adaptive, and environmental factors (Scott et al., 2019; Whittenburg et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2024). The discussion is organised according to the four overarching categories identified in the findings.

5.1 Emotional Regulation, Meltdown Management, and Adaptive Career Readiness

Emotional dysregulation emerged as the most prominent barrier to career transition. Adolescents were reported to experience difficulties managing stress, coping with changes in routine, tolerating unfamiliar demands, and functioning without adult support. This finding is consistent with previous research linking emotion dysregulation, anxiety, depression, and mental health difficulties with quality of life and transition outcomes among autistic individuals (MacKenzie et al., 2024; Wiggins et al., 2024).

The findings also indicate that career readiness extends beyond the ability to complete vocational tasks. Participants associated readiness with independence, punctuality, time management, task completion, adaptability, sensory tolerance, and safety awareness. This supports the view that transition preparation should address employment, independent living, social participation, and community functioning holistically (Anderson et al., 2018; Lord et al., 2020; Radey et al., 2025). Workplace readiness may therefore depend on whether adolescents can apply their vocational skills consistently in environments involving noise, changes, time pressure, and unfamiliar people (Cheng et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2024).

These findings suggest that emotional regulation and adaptive readiness should be taught together. Instruction should include recognising emotional and sensory triggers, applying calming strategies, managing changes, following workplace routines, seeking assistance, and responding appropriately to unexpected demands.

5.2 Social Awareness, Communication, and Workplace Norms

The second category highlights difficulties in interpreting social cues, facial expressions, tone of voice, indirect language, and workplace expectations. These challenges may affect interactions with supervisors, co-workers, customers, and unfamiliar adults. Previous studies have similarly emphasised the importance of conversation, help-seeking, self-presentation, and responding to feedback in supporting workplace participation among autistic youth and young adults (Sung et al., 2019; Whittenburg et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2025). The present findings further indicate that workplace behaviours such as greeting others, apologising, accepting instructions, asking for help, and clarifying misunderstandings require explicit teaching.

Social stories, video modelling, role play, structured feedback, and workplace simulation may provide meaningful opportunities for adolescents to observe and practise these skills in realistic situations (McLucas et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2025). Instruction should be concrete, respectful, and focused on functional communication rather than expecting adolescents to imitate typical social behaviour without understanding its purpose.

5.3 Self-Awareness, Career Decision-Making, and Workplace Participation

Participants reported that adolescents often had identifiable interests and strengths but still required support to recognise their limitations, emotional triggers, support needs, and suitable career environments. This finding reinforces the importance of self-determination, self-advocacy, and informed decision-making in transition planning (Morán et al., 2021; Zidan et al., 2025).

Career decision-making should therefore be scaffolded rather than entirely controlled by adults. Adolescents may benefit from visual comparison charts, choice-consequence activities, guided reflection, and concrete examples of workplace expectations. Such support may help them connect personal interests with realistic career opportunities while gradually increasing their participation in decisions about their futures (Morán et al., 2021; Zidan et al., 2025).

Workplace participation was also influenced by safety concerns, employer awareness, workload, and environmental accommodation. Participants highlighted the risks of bullying, manipulation, excessive demands, and unclear instructions. This supports the broader understanding that employment outcomes are shaped not only by individual competencies but also by workplace attitudes, organisational practices, and the availability of appropriate support (Scott et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2024).

5.4 Structural and Instructional Needs for Module Development

The findings provide strong justification for the development of an autism-specific socioemotional career transition module. Existing resources were perceived as focusing mainly on academic and vocational competencies, with insufficient attention given to emotional regulation, communication, self-awareness, decision-making, safety, and workplace participation.

The proposed module should therefore integrate these competencies rather than teach them as isolated skills. It should also use explicit, visual, structured, predictable, and context-based instruction. Previous research supports the use of social narratives, video modelling, feedback, and real-life practice to strengthen employment-related and social communication skills among autistic youth (Whittenburg et al., 2020; McLucas et al., 2024; Klein et al., 2025).

Home-school collaboration is equally important because socioemotional skills may not generalise automatically across settings. Practical activities that can be reinforced by parents may improve consistency between school, home, community, and workplace environments. Families may also require clear guidance in supporting the psychosocial, adaptive, and transition-related needs of autistic youth (Campbell et al., 2025; Pagán, Montenegro, et al., 2025).

Overall, the findings support ecological and participation-focused approaches that integrate socioemotional development, mental health, family support, and career transition (Ebrahim et al., 2026). Effective transition support should therefore be holistic, inclusive, contextual, and connected to authentic workplace and community environments (Cheng et al., 2024; Radey et al., 2025; Zidan et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study explored the socioemotional needs and module development requirements related to career transition among adolescents with autism aged 17 to 19 years. The findings were consolidated into four interconnected categories: emotional regulation, meltdown management, and adaptive career readiness; social awareness, communication, and workplace norms; self-awareness, career decision-making, and workplace participation; and structural and instructional needs for module development. Emotional regulation emerged as the most prominent concern, particularly in relation to stress, changes in routine, workplace demands, and dependence on adult support. The findings also indicate that adolescents require explicit instruction in social communication, workplace norms, self-awareness, career decision-making, personal safety, and help-seeking.

The study confirms the need for a structured, autism-specific socioemotional career transition module. The module should be explicit, visual, practical, context-based, flexible, and supported through collaboration between school and home. Relevant strategies include visual supports, video modelling, social stories, role play, workplace simulation, calming techniques, structured feedback, and guided decision-making. Overall, this study provides an empirical foundation for developing a socioemotional career transition module for adolescents with autism in secondary special education settings. Future research should validate the proposed content and instructional strategies with relevant experts and evaluate the module's usability and effectiveness in improving socioemotional readiness, workplace participation, and career transition outcomes...

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