



Transitions between school placements for students with special educational needs: A scoping review

Romana Snozzi ^{a,b,*} 

^a Department of Special Education, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

^b University of Teacher Education in Special Needs, Zurich, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Students with special educational needs (SEN) attend a wide range of school placements, including mainstream classes, special classes within mainstream schools, and segregated special schools. Research on *normative* school transitions (e.g., the move from primary to secondary school) suggests that transitions can be particularly challenging for students with SEN. Yet research on school placement transitions (e.g., the move from mainstream to special school) remains relatively limited and has not previously been brought together in a systematic review. This scoping review aimed to provide an overview of the current state of research on school placement transitions for students with SEN by identifying the scope of existing studies and mapping findings related to transition processes and experiences. The review included 23 studies from various countries that addressed diverse research aims and involved students with different SEN types. Most studies employed qualitative methods and had small sample sizes (<20 cases). More than half of the studies examined transitions towards more inclusive placements, reflecting a research interest in supporting inclusive schooling. Across studies, placement transitions were often described as stressful, with students showing short term difficulties but generally adapting with time. The direction of the transfer and its underlying motives (i.e., strategic versus reactive) may shape the transition experience. Students were reported to benefit from environmental adaptations, including adjustments to instructional approaches or reducing mobility barriers, as well as from targeted skills training. More comprehensive research, including quantitative studies, is needed to deepen the understanding of the complex processes involved in placement transitions.

1. Introduction

Despite commitments to inclusive education, most countries have not reached full inclusion (Boyle & Anderson, 2020). Many countries offer a continuum of school placements for students with special educational needs (SEN), including inclusive schooling settings within mainstream classes, special classes within mainstream schools, and segregated schooling in special schools (Ramberg & Watkins, 2020; Schwab, 2021). These placement options often exist in parallel, and students may transition between different types of placements throughout their educational career trajectories (Snozzi et al., 2024).

School transfers disrupt established social relationships and the continuity of the learning environment and have been associated

* Corresponding author at: University of Teacher Education in Special Needs, Schaffhauserstrasse 239, Postfach 5850, 8050 Zürich, Switzerland.
E-mail address: romana.snozzi@unifr.ch.

with adverse academic and social outcomes (Marion et al., 2024; Rumberger, 2015; Welsh, 2017). A substantial body of research has examined normative school transitions, which are regulated by the school system and occur simultaneously for all students (e.g., primary to secondary school transition). This research indicates that school transitions can be particularly challenging for students with SEN (e.g., Harris & Nowland, 2020). However, transitions between different types of placements may differ from normative school transitions with regard to their timing, underlying reasons, and implications for students' participation, which may in turn shape the processes and experiences associated with these transitions (e.g., Cooney et al., 2006; Garrote et al., 2026; Rumberger, 2015).

Research on placement transitions for students with SEN has emerged across different educational contexts and student populations and has employed a range of methodological approaches (e.g., Croydon et al., 2019; Mann et al., 2018; Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014). However, the literature has not previously been brought together in a systematic review.

This review seeks to provide an overview of the current state of research on school placement transfers for students with SEN, which will inform future studies and practice. Given the heterogeneity of the existing literature on placement transitions, a scoping review design was deemed appropriate. The guiding research question is: What is the nature and scope of research on transitions between different types of school placements for students with SEN? Specifically, the review examines (1) the contexts and designs of existing studies and (2) what is known about the processes and experiences associated with placement transitions. The review aims to identify research gaps and inform future research and educational practice.

1.1. School placements for students with SEN

SEN is an official educational designation that a child requires additional support to meet their learning needs (Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). Students identified as having SEN constitute a highly heterogeneous group of children and adolescents with diverse types and intensities of support needs. In line with the biopsychosocial model of disability, SEN is understood as arising from interactions between individual characteristics and environmental factors rather than being attributed solely to deficits or impairments within the student (Norwich, 2016; OECD, 2020).

Many countries offer multiple school placement options for students with SEN. Although the specific arrangements vary across countries, three broad categories can be distinguished (Enrich, 2021; Ramberg & Watkins, 2020). *Inclusive schooling* refers to the education of students with SEN in mainstream classes with additional support. *Separated schooling* involves placement in special classes located within mainstream schools. In *segregated schooling*, students with SEN are educated in separate, specialised schools.

The placement of students with SEN is a complex and contested issue within the field of special education (Boyle & Anderson, 2020; Haug, 2017; Kauffman & Badar, 2014). Placement decisions are often characterised by tensions between participation in mainstream settings and the provision of specialised support (Norwich, 2008). Inclusive settings within mainstream schools are often viewed as offering greater opportunities for social participation and reduced stigmatisation, whereas special school settings are often perceived as better equipped to provide specialised support and specialised instruction (Satherley & Norwich, 2022; Shaw, 2017).

1.2. School transitions

Children and adolescents typically undergo several school transitions throughout their educational trajectories. Normative school transitions, such as entering kindergarten or moving from primary to secondary school, are regulated by the school system and happen at roughly the same age for all students. In contrast, non-normative school transitions can occur at any time and concern individual students. Such transitions are often triggered by family relocations, but may also result from school closures, disciplinary and safety concerns, or the pursuit of higher quality schools (Welsh, 2017). Transitions between different types of school placements for students with SEN, for example from mainstream to special schools or vice versa, also represent a form of non-normative school transition and are the focus of the present review.

Research on normative school transitions suggests that transitions occur across multiple domains of students educational life (Harris & Nowland, 2020; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). For example, students transitioning from primary to secondary school will experience changes in classroom instructions and teacher expectations, relationships to peers and teachers, the physical school environment, as well as other life transitions (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). Experiences across the various domains are likely to be interconnected (Harris & Nowland, 2020; Jindal-Snape, 2023a). Moreover, rather than being understood as isolated events, transitions can be viewed as dynamic processes shaped by changing educational and social environments (Jindal-Snape, 2023b). Transitioning from one school to another begins prior to the move and extends well beyond it (Symonds, 2015). Accordingly, experiences are likely to change over time. For example, students often experience initial declines in academic achievement following the transition to secondary school, although these effects are typically transient and academic achievement tends to recover over time (Harris & Nowland, 2020).

1.3. Transition challenges for students with SEN

Literature reviews on normative school transitions (e.g., transition to primary school or from primary to secondary school) consistently indicate that these transitions can be particularly challenging for students with SEN across educational stages (Dockett & Perry, 2013; K.-R. Foley et al., 2012; Harris & Nowland, 2020; Jacobs et al., 2018; Jindal-Snape et al., 2020; Malone & Gallagher, 2009). In line with the biopsychosocial model of disability (OECD, 2020), transition challenges experienced by students with SEN are likely to reflect interactions between students' individual characteristics and environmental factors.

In terms of individual characteristics, students with SEN may have fewer resources to cope with change than their peers without SEN. For instance, children with autism spectrum disorder often struggle with shifts in routine, such that adapting to new environments becomes exhausting (Chahboun et al., 2024). Similarly, students with intellectual disabilities may find it difficult to adjust to new situations (McIntyre et al., 2006). Students with SEN may also experience greater anxiety due to lower social skills and heightened vulnerability to stigmatisation and social rejection (Harris & Nowland, 2020; Symonds, 2015). With regard to environmental factors, transition planning for students with SEN is typically complex and involves multiple parties (e.g., Malone & Gallagher, 2009). Service provision is often inconsistent or insufficient across settings and for all age groups (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2013; K.-R. Foley et al., 2012).

The individual characteristics and environmental factors associated with transition challenges during normative school transitions are also likely to shape experiences related to placement transitions (e.g., transitions from mainstream to special schools). In addition, placement transitions may be associated with distinct challenges. Placement transitions are the result of a complex decision-making process concerning an individual students' educational situation. The motives underlying a placement transition may vary considerably and are likely to shape transition experiences. For example, voluntary school transfers are often strategic, for instance in pursuit of better educational opportunities, whereas involuntary transfers are typically reactive and less well planned and therefore may be more disruptive (Rumberger, 2015). Placement transitions may also be particularly disruptive, as students' trajectories diverge from those of their classmates. Students entering already established classroom groups appear to face elevated risks of peer difficulties and victimisation (Garrote et al., 2026; Rambaran et al., 2020; Tenhunen et al., 2024). In addition, the different types of school placements for students with SEN can carry different social statuses and levels of stigma (e.g., Cooney et al., 2006), accordingly, challenges related to stigma and identity may be heightened during placement transitions.

2. Methods

Scoping reviews typically address broad research questions, allowing for an overview of a wide area of inquiry and the exploration of new topics (Peterson et al., 2017). They are particularly useful for mapping heterogeneous bodies of literature and for identifying gaps in existing research (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Peters et al., 2021; Tricco et al., 2018). General PRISMA guidelines were used for this literature review (Page et al., 2021) as well as additional specifications for scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2018). No formal protocol was registered.

2.1. Eligibility criteria

The PCC (population, concept, context) mnemonic was used to formulate the inclusion criteria (Peters et al., 2021). Studies were included in the review if they met the following criteria (overview provided in Table 1): First, the study population included children and young adults of compulsory school age with identified SEN. The review focused on compulsory schooling because this is the educational stage at which different school placements for students with SEN are most relevant. Second, in line with the focus of the review on placement transitions as a distinct form of school transition, the study addressed transitions between different types of school placements for students with SEN. Studies were included regardless of whether they focused on specific phases of the transition process (e.g., preparation, transfer, or adaptation) or on the transition process more broadly. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on the prevalence of school placement transfers without examining aspects related to the transition process, as the review aimed to explore transition processes and experiences rather than the frequency of placement transfers. Studies addressing transitions unrelated to school placements (e.g., transitions from school to employment) or transitions within the same type of placement (e.g., from one inclusive setting to another) were also excluded, as these transitions did not involve changes between different types of school placement for students with SEN. Third, publications were limited to English, German, French, or Italian due to the language competencies available for the review. Fourth, only peer-reviewed empirical articles were included to focus on studies with a clearly identifiable empirical basis. Accordingly, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies were included, whereas reports of programmes or recommendations without verifiable empirical evidence were excluded. Finally, studies published between 1994 and 2024 were included. The starting point was chosen because the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) marked an important international shift toward inclusive education and debates surrounding the placement of students with SEN.

2.2. Search strategy

The search was conducted using the EBSCOhost platform, which covers seven databases (details in Fig. 1). The following search string was used on 10 February 2025:

Table 1
Eligibility Criteria for the scoping review.

Population	Children and young adults of compulsory school age with identified SEN
Concept	Transitions between different types of school placements
Context	International research
Language	Publications in English, German, French, or Italian
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed articles with identifiable empirical evidence
Year of Publication	1994 (year of the Salamanca Statement) to 2024

(transition OR transfer OR mobility) AND

(mainstream* OR general OR regular OR inclus*) AND

(special class* OR special school* OR separat* OR referral OR remedial OR aspect

school OR aspect class OR satellite class) AND

(school* OR education* OR classroom*)

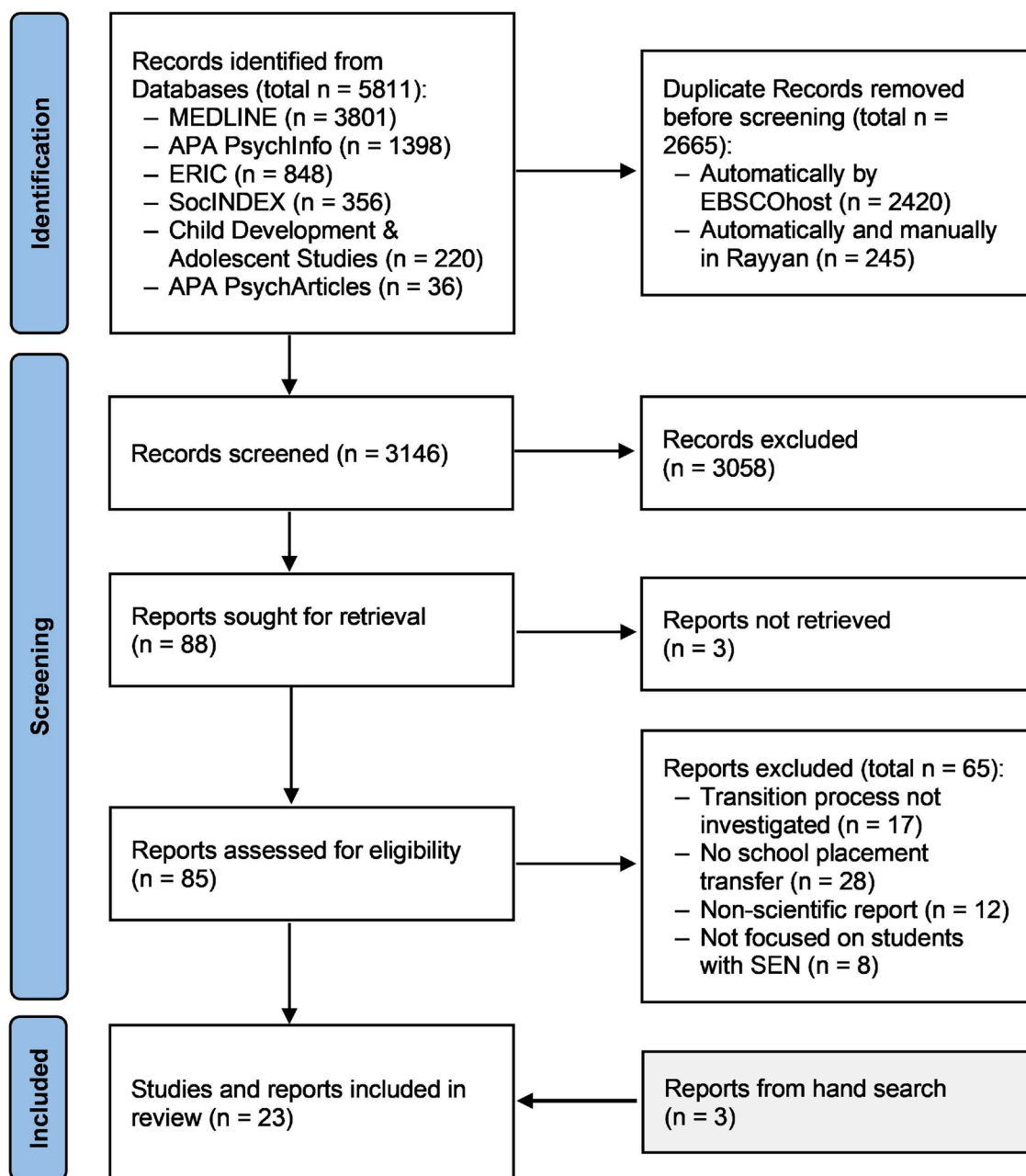


Fig. 1. Adapted PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the number of records processed per individual review step (Page et al., 2021).

with additional limiters on language, publication type, and years, consistent with the inclusion criteria. In addition to database searches, relevant literature was identified through citation tracking using Research Rabbit and reference list screening for articles that met the inclusion criteria.

Search results were downloaded from EBSCOhost and imported into Rayyan (Ouzzani et al., 2016) for screening. Some duplicates were automatically removed by EBSCOhost prior to download, and additional duplicates were identified and deleted in Rayyan when records shared at least 90% similarity. Remaining duplicates were resolved by comparing entries manually. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by a full-text review to determine final eligibility.

2.3. Data extraction and synthesis

A structured data charting form was used to extract information on the *context and design* of the studies. This included the year of publication and study location (country). Studies were reviewed for the presence of a theoretical framework on transitions. They were categorised according to the direction of transfer investigated and the research focus. To describe the student population, information on sex, grade level, and type of SEN was recorded. Data on research design included the study type, data collection method, participant groups, and number of cases or informants. For participant groups, students, parents (including other family members), and professionals (including teachers, assistants, principals, and policy makers) were distinguished.

A content-structuring qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022) was conducted to organise and interpret findings reported in the results and discussion section of each study. To capture transition-related processes and experiences across different

Table 2

Coding guidelines for transition-related outcome categoriesI am unsure, whether that maybe got lost.

Category	Description	Examples
Psychological adaptations	Psychological adaptations are understood as students' internal states, emotions, and self-perceptions associated with their school placements and the transition experience. This category includes aspects such as emotional wellbeing, self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-confidence, maturity, and independence.	"Eleven principals reported that students often presented with social-emotional difficulties as a consequence of negative experiences in mainstream schools associated with a loss of self-esteem, poor self-image, a lack of self-confidence, and feeling like a failure." (Kelly et al., 2014, p. 78) "This confidence has led to a change in his approach to tasks, as he is "willing to try new things and progress further" than he was able to before the transition." (Pillay & Di Terlizzi, 2009, p. 499)
Social adaptations	Social adaptations are understood as students' social behaviours, interaction and communication skills with others associated with their school placements and the transition experience. This category includes both positive and negative forms of behaviour towards peers, teachers, or family members (e.g., acting as a role model or showing aggressive behaviour), as well as the development and use of social and communication skills. It also encompasses support measures aimed at fostering these skills, such as social skills training or behavioural plans.	"Parents of all four students cited participation in the satellite class programme as a key factor in the students' progress. Specifically, the focus on social and communication skills was considered to be particularly beneficial." (Keane et al., 2012, p. 1012) "This was echoed by his Aspect teacher, as she explained that at that time Kai had 'reached his potential at Aspect and was a role model for the other students'." (Martin et al., 2019, p. 646)
Educational adaptations	Educational adaptations are understood as students' learning-related experiences associated with their school placements and the transition experience. This category includes aspects such as academic skills and achievement, learning motivation and engagement, curriculum content and adaptations, and perceived workload. It also encompasses future-oriented outcomes, such as post-school opportunities or career prospects.	"Initially, it was a struggle, but with adjustments like interpreting from signing to speech and support from assistant teachers, the students could quickly follow classroom instructions independently." (Andersson & Adams Lyngbäck, 2022, p. 256) "Teachers indicated that the students with disabilities were concerned with academic problems, such as the curricula not being modified to meet their individual needs, the amount and difficulty of the class work and homework, and fears regarding post-graduation plans." (Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014, p. 63) "She went on to express concern that the necessary structure and support does not always exist at the DS [district school]." (Buchanan et al., 2016, p. 139)
Changes in context	Changes in context are understood as aspects of the school environment and the support structures associated with students' school placements and transitions. This category includes the school culture and physical environment, as well as professionals' knowledge, attitudes, and collaboration with colleagues and parents. Moreover, it encompasses transition support provided by institutions and support from parents or other significant adults.	"Based on the results, the experts seemed to place high importance for the mainstream educators to demonstrate sufficient knowledge in inclusive readiness skills and the implementation of the inclusive programme in Malaysia." (Mah Tjun Lyn et al., 2024, p. 584) "For Tom, his friendships with other students have also aided his transition." (Martin et al., 2019, p. 469)
Changes in interpersonal relationships	Changes in interpersonal relationships are understood as students' interactions and relationships with peers at school associated with their placements and transitions. This category includes friendships, contact and engagement with peers, and experiences of bullying or peer conflict.	"Most of the participants found it difficult to make friends. Their peers often teased them because they struggled with their schoolwork." (Rens & Louw, 2021, p. 6)
Changes in identity	Changes in identity are understood as aspects of students' social identity and status associated with their school placements and transitions. This category includes feelings of belonging and connectedness, as well as experiences of feeling different or special within the school environment.	"The negative experience permeated their self-understanding, again symbolised by the hearing aids and the consideration to conceal them. When seeing how every student had them, the sense of likeness could be expressed: everyone's the same." (Andersson & Adams Lyngbäck, 2022, p. 255) "The social status of the participants changed considerably with the transition to an LSEN class." (Rens & Louw, 2021, p. 6)

domains, the categories were defined deductively with reference to the definition of transitions proposed by Jindal-Snape (2023a). This definition conceptualises transitions “an ongoing process of psychological, social and educational adaptations due to changes in context, interpersonal relationships and/or identity” (Jindal-Snape, 2023a, p. 530). Accordingly, six categories were used: psychological adaptations, social adaptations, educational adaptations, changes in context, changes in interpersonal relationships, and changes in identity. MAXQDA 24 (VERBI Software, 2024) was used for coding. The coding process followed an iterative approach. Initially, all studies were coded according to the deductive categories. Passages assigned to the same category were then compared across studies to identify and resolve inconsistencies. Subsequently, the transition-related categories were refined and described in more detail, with examples added to illustrate each category (Table 2). The coding was revised and checked for consistency using these guidelines. Coded sections were then summarized by transition-related outcome category and document, and the resulting summaries were used to formulate the study results.

3. Results

In accordance with the research aims, the results are organised into two main sections: (1) study contexts and designs and (2) findings related to processes and experiences of placement transitions.

3.1. Study context and design

The literature search identified 23 studies that met the inclusion criteria (overview provided in Table 3). One study was published before 2000, and three to six studies were published in each subsequent five-year period. The studies originated primarily from Europe ($n = 11$), North America ($n = 4$), and Australia ($n = 3$), with only a few from Asia ($n = 2$), Africa ($n = 2$), and South America ($n = 1$).

In the introduction section, most studies addressed policy contexts and prior research on inclusive schooling, with a focus on the country and the specific types of SEN represented in the study. Six studies specifically referred to a theoretical framework on transitions. Three drew on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1994). One study applied a model of institutional conditions that shape personal, social, and organisational resources (Eberhard, 2012) relevant to placement decisions. Another viewed transitions as critical life events (e.g., Filipp & Aymanns, 2009) and focused on students' appraisal and coping strategies (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Schlossberg's transition theory (Anderson et al., 2022; Schlossberg, 2011), a framework often used in adult counselling, was referred to in one study examining the pre-transition stage.

Thirteen studies investigated the transition towards more inclusive placements: from special to mainstream school ($n = 7$), from special class to mainstream class ($n = 5$; in two of these studies, a minority of students also transitions to separated placements), and from special school to special class ($n = 1$). Seven studies examined transitions towards less inclusive placements: from mainstream to special school ($n = 6$) and from mainstream to special class ($n = 1$). Three studies considered both directions of transfers between mainstream and special school.

The studies had diverse research foci. Nearly half examined the transition process ($n = 11$), four investigated the reasons for placement transitions, and four compared the characteristics and outcomes of students who underwent a placement transfer with those who remained in the same school. In addition, the following themes were each explored by one study: expectations about the transition, transition support, transition outcomes, and the facilitators and barriers to inclusive schooling.

Many studies did not report student sex ($n = 11$). Of the studies that did report student sex, the proportion of female students ranged from 0% to 100%; only one study reported an over-representation of females. Student grade ranged from kindergarten to secondary school, with some studies covering a large age range. The studies investigated 8 SEN types: autism spectrum disorder ($n = 4$), speech and language impairments ($n = 4$), intellectual disabilities ($n = 3$), deaf or hard of hearing ($n = 2$), learning difficulties ($n = 2$), behavioural or emotional difficulties ($n = 1$), vision impairments ($n = 1$), and physical disabilities ($n = 1$). Five studies did not focus on a specific SEN type.

Most studies were qualitative ($n = 16$). One-on-one interviews ($n = 15$) were the most common methodology, followed by questionnaires ($n = 9$) and focus groups ($n = 3$). Many studies combined two of these methodologies. Some additionally used observations ($n = 2$), diary entries ($n = 1$), or projective techniques ($n = 1$). One questionnaire study combined qualitative and quantitative analyses. Of the six studies that used quantitative analyses, two administered standardized tests, three used questionnaires, and one used a combination of interviews, questionnaires, and standardized tests.

Studies collected information from students ($n = 12$), caregivers ($n = 14$), or professionals who work with SEN students ($n = 16$). Roughly half of the studies ($n = 12$) included two or three of these perspectives. More than half of the studies focused on less than twenty cases; however, most of these studies collected data from multiple informants for each case. Sample sizes exceeded 100 participants in three quantitative studies and one mixed-methods study.

Although the small number and heterogeneity of studies limit broader generalisations, several tentative patterns were observed. Studies that examined reasons for transfer exclusively investigated transitions from mainstream to special schools. Studies that compared students who transitioned with those who stayed in the same placement consistently employed quantitative methods. Research on special classes focused mostly on students with autism spectrum disorder or speech and language impairments and stemmed mainly from the UK and Australia.

3.2. Transition processes and experiences

Table 4 presents which categories used to analyse transition processes and experiences were represented in each of the studies

Table 3

Characteristics of studies on placement transitions of students with SEN included in the scoping review.

Authors (Year)	Country	Theoretical framework	Direction transfer	Research focus	Infor- mants (n)	Cases (n)	Sex	Grade/ age	SEN type	Method	Data collection	Informants**
Andersson and Adams Lyngbäck (2022)	Sweden	Deaf identity; comparison of placement types	Mainstream to special school	Transition process	9	9	N/R	Age 13–17	DHH	Qualitative	Interviews	Students
Bastges-Lienshöft et al. (2020)	Germany	Model of institutional conditions and personal, social, and organisational resources influencing placement transitions (Eberhard, 2012)	Mainstream to special school	Reasons for transfers	38	18	N/R	Grade 3–11	Mixed	Qualitative	Interviews	Students, parents, professionals
Botting et al. (1998)	United Kingdom	Placement trajectories of students in language units (special classes)	Special class to mainstream (n = 62) or other (n = 16)* compared to staying (n = 144)	Factors related to transfer	N/A	222	23% F	Age 6–7, grade 2	SLI	Quantitative	Standardized tests; questionnaires; interviews	Students, parents, professionals
Buchanan et al. (2016)	United States	Needs of students with EBD, collaboration between school and parents	Special school to mainstream	Transition process	27	N/A	N/R	Middle school	EBD	Qualitative	Focus group interviews	Parents, professionals
Croydon et al. (2019)	United Kingdom	Satellite classes for students with ASD in the UK	Special school to special class	Transition process	N/A	19	10% F	Age 8–17	ASD	Qualitative	Interviews	Parents, professionals
Doré et al. (2002)	Canada	Inclusive schooling of students with ID	Special class to mainstream	Transition process	N/A	2	100% F	Age 15	ID	Qualitative	Observations; interviews	Professionals
Gibb et al. (2007)	United Kingdom	Inclusive schooling of students with SEN	Special school to mainstream	Facilitators and barriers to inclusion	18	14	N/R	Age 8–10	Mixed	Qualitative	Interviews	Professionals
Gieske and van Ophuysen (2008)	Germany	Transition as critical life event (e.g., Philipp & Aymanns, 2009); Appraisal of anticipated event (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	Special school to mainstream compared to staying	Factors related to transfer	N/A	73	31% F	Age 10–13, grade 4	SLI	Quantitative	Questionnaires	Students
Keane et al. (2012)	Australia	Satellite classes in Australia as a support measure to transition to full inclusion.	Special class to mainstream (n = 44) or special class (n = 18) or special school (n = 1)*	Transition support	N/A	63	N/R	N/R	ASD	Qualitative	Questionnaires; interviews	Students, parents
Kelly et al. (2014)	Ireland	Success and progress of inclusive placements for students with SEN	Mainstream to special school	Reason for transfer; transition process	54	N/A	N/R	Age 12+	Mixed	Qualitative, quantitative	Questionnaires	Professionals
Mah Tjun Lyn et al. (2024)	Malaysia	Transition theory by Schlossberg (e.g., Schlossberg, 2011)	Special school to mainstream	Pre-transition stage	44	N/A	N/R	N/R	Mixed	Qualitative	Interviews; questionnaires	Professionals

(continued on next page)

Table 3 (continued)

Authors (Year)	Country	Theoretical framework	Direction transfer	Research focus	Informants (n)	Cases (n)	Sex	Grade/ age	SEN type	Method	Data collection	Informants**
Mann et al. (2018)	Australia	Dual provision of special schooling; placement decisions.	Mainstream to special school	Reasons for transfer	80	80	N/R	Age 5–17	ID	Quantitative	Questionnaires	Parents
Martin et al. (2019)	Australia	Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)	Special class to mainstream	Transition process	15	3	0% F	Age 8–10	ASD	Qualitative	Interviews	Students, parents, professionals
Maturana et al. (2019)	Brazile	Inclusive schooling of students with ID	Transfers between mainstream and special school*	Transition process	16	5	N/R	N/R	ID	Qualitative	Interviews	Parents, professionals
Pillay and Di Terlizzi (2009)	South Africa	Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)	Mainstream to special school	Transition process	N/A	1	0% F	Age 9	LD	Qualitative	Focus group interviews; interviews; projective techniques	Student, parents, professionals
Rannard and Glenn (2009)	United Kingdom	Self-esteem in students with SLI	Special class to mainstream	Self-esteem related to transition	N/A	7	29% F	Age 5–7	SLI	Quantitative	Standardized tests	Students
Rens and Louw (2021)	South Africa	Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994); Rites of Passage (Van Gennepe, 2006)	Mainstream to special class	Transition process	N/A	9	N/R	Age 10–13	LD	Qualitative	Interviews; focus group interviews	Students, parents, professionals
Rugg and Donne (2011)	United States	Inclusive schooling of students who are DHH	Special school to mainstream	Transition process	N/A	12	33% F	Kindergarten - grade 9	DHH	Qualitative	Interviews; questionnaires	Parents, professionals
Sorani-Villanueva et al. (2014)	United States	Ecological paradigm on school dynamics in problem solving.	Special school to mainstream	Transition process	75	126	44% F (N/R 29%)	Grade 5–12	Mixed	Qualitative	Questionnaires	Professionals
Strotmann and Tietig (2002)	Germany	Inclusive schooling of students with PD	Mainstream to special school	Reasons for transfer	N/A	5	20% F	Grade 2–3	PD	Qualitative	Interviews	Students, parents, professionals
Theisel et al. (2018)	Germany	Comparison of placements for students with SLI in terms of academic outcomes	Special school to mainstream (n = 47) compared to staying (n = 82); mainstream to special school (n = 6) compared to staying (n = 16)	Factors related to transfer	N/A	151	25% F	Grade 1–4	SLI	Quantitative	Standardized tests	Students, parents, professionals
Van Den Helder et al. (2024)	Nether-lands	Policy and school placements for students with ASD	Special school to mainstream (n = 52), mainstream to special school (n = 78)	Factors related to transfer	N/A	1463	18%–25% F	Age 5–16	ASD	Quantitative	Questionnaires	Parents
West et al. (2004)	Singapore	Inclusive schooling of students with VI	Special school to mainstream	Transition process	N/A	9	N/R	Age 13–17	VI	Qualitative	Interviews; diary entries; observations	Students

Note. F = female, N/A = not applicable, N/R = not reported, ASD = Autism spectrum disorder, DHH = Deaf or hard of hearing, EBD = Emotional and behavioural difficulties, ID = Intellectual disability, LD = Learning difficulties, PD = Physical disability, SLI = Speech and language impairment, VI = Vision impairment.

* Directions of transfers mixed.

** parents include other family members; professionals include teachers, assistants, principals and policy makers.

included in the review. Overall, the six categories were well represented, with between nine and eighteen studies contributing to each. Some studies addressed all six categories, whereas quantitative studies typically concentrated on a single category. Given that outcomes varied according to the direction of the transfer (i.e., towards more versus less inclusive placements), they are discussed separately within each section.

3.2.1. Psychological adaptations

In interview studies, students, parents, and professionals reported that students experienced emotional difficulties in mainstream settings preceding the transfer to special classes or schools, including low self-esteem, stress, anxiety, and in some cases psychosomatic symptoms (Bastges-Lienshöft et al., 2020; Rens & Louw, 2021; Strotmann & Tietig, 2002). Similarly, emotional strain was often cited as a reason for transfer in the studies that used questionnaires (Kelly et al., 2014; Mann et al., 2018). Participants in these studies also reported that although the transition itself was experienced as stressful, student wellbeing, self-confidence, and independence improved once they settled into the new environment (Kelly et al., 2014; Pillay & Di Terlizzi, 2009; Rens & Louw, 2021; Strotmann & Tietig, 2002).

Conversely, an interview-based study on transitions from special schools to special classes in mainstream schools found that students and parents were excited about the transition and students were reported to have developed greater maturity in a mainstream environment (Croydon et al., 2019). A questionnaire-based study found that students who transitioned from a special school to a mainstream school held significantly more positive expectations than their peers who transitioned to another special school (Gieske & van Ophuysen, 2008). However, a study of seven students with speech and language impairments found that self-reported self-esteem scores declined for most students after they transitioned from special to mainstream school (Rannard & Glenn, 2009).

3.2.2. Social adaptations

Some students who subsequently transferred to special schools were described in interview studies as experiencing difficulties with social skills in mainstream settings (Rens & Louw, 2021; Strotmann & Tietig, 2002). Similarly, challenging behaviour was often cited as a reason for transfer in both an interview study and a questionnaire study (Bastges-Lienshöft et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2014). In interview studies, parents and professionals also reported that some students initially exhibited aggressive behaviours in the immediate period following transitions, regardless of whether the transfer occurred to special or mainstream schools (Keane et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2019; Rens & Louw, 2021).

In interview studies, parents and professionals viewed students with stronger social skills and those with more passive behaviours as more likely to succeed in mainstream environments (Gibb et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2019; Maturana et al., 2019). In interview as

Table 4

Overview of transition-related outcome categories found in study results.

	PsyA	SocA	EdA	CCon	CIR	CId
Andersson and Adams Lyngbäck (2022)		x	x	x	x	x
Bastges-Lienshöft et al. (2020)	x	x		x	x	x
Botting et al. (1998)	x	x	x			
Buchanan et al. (2016)		x		x	x	
Croydon et al. (2019)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Doré et al. (2002)			x	x	x	
Gibb et al. (2007)		x	x	x		
Gieske and van Ophuysen (2008)	x					
Keane et al. (2012)		x	x	x	x	
Kelly et al. (2014)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Mah Tjun Lyn et al. (2024)				x		
Mann et al. (2018)	x		x	x		x
Martin et al. (2019)		x	x	x	x	
Maturana et al. (2019)	x	x	x	x		
Pillay and Di Terlizzi (2009)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Rannard and Glenn (2009)	x					
Rens and Louw (2021)	x	x	x		x	x
Rugg and Donne (2011)		x	x	x		
Sorani-Villanueva et al. (2014)		x	x	x		
Strotmann and Tietig (2002)	x	x	x	x		x
Theisel et al. (2018)			x			
Van Den Helder et al. (2024)			x			
West et al. (2004)	x	x	x	x	x	x
Documents per category	12	16	18	17	11	9

Notes.

PsyA = Psychological adaptations.

SocA = Social adaptations.

EdA = Educational adaptations.

CCon = Changes in context.

CIR = Changes in interpersonal relationships.

CId = Changes in identity.

well as questionnaire studies, support measures such as social skills training and behavioural plans were considered helpful for adaptation to a new school environment, particularly for students with behavioural and emotional difficulties or autism spectrum disorder (Buchanan et al., 2016; Keane et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2019; Pillay & Di Terlizzi, 2009; Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014). In one interview study, some parents felt that their child benefited behaviourally from the mainstream environment (Croydon et al., 2019).

3.2.3. Educational adaptations

In interview studies, parents and professionals often linked students' success in mainstream environments to their academic abilities (Gibb et al., 2007; Keane et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2014; Mann et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2019; Maturana et al., 2019; Rugg & Donne, 2011). Supporting this view, the large quantitative studies that compared the academic or intellectual skills of students who stayed in a given setting to those who transferred to another type of placement, showed that students who remained in mainstream schools had significantly higher skills than those who moved to special schools; likewise, students who transferred from special to mainstream schools demonstrated significantly higher skills than those who stayed in special schools (Botting et al., 1998; Theisel et al., 2018; Van Den Helder et al., 2024).

At the same time, findings from interview and questionnaire studies suggested that professionals played a crucial role in supporting inclusive schooling, because students with SEN benefitted from adaptations to their learning environments (e.g., Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014). The suggested adaptations by this literature included curriculum and teaching adjustments, smaller class sizes, well-structured classrooms, and manageable workloads (Buchanan et al., 2016; Gibb et al., 2007; Kelly et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2019; Rens & Louw, 2021). For students who transitioned to special schools or classes, the new environment was often described by students, parents, or professionals as better adapted to their needs and supportive of academic progress (Anderson et al., 2022; Keane et al., 2012; Pillay & Di Terlizzi, 2009; Rens & Louw, 2021). In contrast, some parents or professionals in interview studies perceived mainstream schools as more academically stimulating environments that potentially offered better opportunities (Croydon et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Maturana et al., 2019). One interview study found that most students with visual impairments initially reported struggling academically upon transitioning into a mainstream school, and some subsequently chose to move to less demanding academic tracks (West et al., 2004).

In some studies, parents and professionals suggested that learning environment adaptations in mainstream settings was insufficient, in part because teachers possessed limited knowledge of the adjustments SEN students would need (Mann et al., 2018; Maturana et al., 2019). Observational data for two students with ID showed a gradual decline in participation in classroom activities upon transfer into a mainstream class, with increasing time spent on individual tasks (Doré et al., 2002).

3.2.4. Changes in context

Reports from interview and questionnaire studies suggested that students with SEN experienced various barriers in mainstream environments. These included inconsistent provision of technical aids, limited mobility and accessibility, insufficient therapeutic support, and sensory challenges; these barriers were present for both students transitioning from mainstream to special schools (Anderson et al., 2022; Bastges-Lienshöft et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2014) and those moving in the opposite direction (Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014; West et al., 2004). In interview studies and one questionnaire study, some parents and professionals felt that specialist knowledge about inclusive schooling should be fostered by mainstream schools, for example by forming inclusion teams, support provided by special schools, and trainings for mainstream professionals (Croydon et al., 2019; Gibb et al., 2007; Kelly et al., 2014; Maturana et al., 2019).

Independent of the direction of the transfer, parents and professionals deemed transitions planning important (Keane et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2019; Maturana et al., 2019; Rugg & Donne, 2011). Furthermore, in an interview study, many students with vision impairment who had transitioned from a special school reported that they would have liked more time in advance to familiarise themselves with the mainstream environment (West et al., 2004). Interviews and questionnaires found that preparatory practices for students included school visits, partial mainstreaming, use of social stories, and targeted skills training (Keane et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2019; Rugg & Donne, 2011). In interviews, parents and professionals both viewed collaboration between schools and families as crucial for smooth transitions (Buchanan et al., 2016; Gibb et al., 2007; Keane et al., 2012; Mah Tjun Lyn et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2019; Maturana et al., 2019). Collaboration between professionals within and between schools was likewise considered essential (Buchanan et al., 2016; Croydon et al., 2019; Gibb et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2019; Maturana et al., 2019; Strotmann & Tietig, 2002).

3.2.5. Changes in interpersonal relationships

Interviews and questionnaire data suggested that students who later transitioned to special schools or classes struggled to make friends, experienced peer pressure, and were sometimes bullied in mainstream settings (Anderson et al., 2022; Bastges-Lienshöft et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2014; Pillay & Di Terlizzi, 2009; Rens & Louw, 2021). Some of these reports also indicated that students generally found it easier to form friendships after the transition to the specialised setting, with some students even developing leadership qualities (Anderson et al., 2022; Pillay & Di Terlizzi, 2009; Rens & Louw, 2021).

Conversely, some students who transitioned to mainstream classes initially experienced teasing or bullying (Keane et al., 2012) or missed their old friends (Martin et al., 2019). However, most reports indicated that they eventually formed friendships in the mainstream environment (Croydon et al., 2019; Keane et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2019; Sorani-Villanueva et al., 2014; West et al., 2004). In an interview study on students with behavioural and emotional difficulties who transitioned to mainstream classes, parents and professionals identified targeted social skills training as crucial for supporting peer interactions (Buchanan et al., 2016). Students with autism spectrum disorder who transitioned from special school to special classes noted the mainstream environment offered greater

opportunities for social interaction, an observation echoed by their parents (Croydon et al., 2019). Accounts of students with vision impairment who transitioned from special to mainstream schools suggested that peer acceptance was crucial to their sense of inclusion (West et al., 2004).

3.2.6. *Changes in identity*

Results from interview and questionnaire studies suggest that many students who transitioned from mainstream to special schools had felt excluded or set apart in mainstream settings, but developed a stronger sense of belonging in special schools (Anderson et al., 2022; Bastges-Lienhöft et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2014; Pillay & Di Terlizzi, 2009). Students who were deaf or hard of hearing, in particular, reported experiencing the special school environment as supportive in broadening and strengthening their sense of identity (Anderson et al., 2022). In contrast, in an interview study, some students with learning difficulties who transitioned from mainstream to special classes felt a loss of social status and wished to return to mainstream school in the future (Rens & Louw, 2021).

Students with vision impairment who transitioned to mainstream schools described initially feeling different from their peers, but noted that positive interactions gradually helped them feel more included in the group (West et al., 2004). In another interview study, students with autism spectrum disorder and their parents reported that greater independence in the mainstream environment supported the development of a more mature identity, although some also struggled with their disability-specific identity (Croydon et al., 2019).

4. Discussion

This scoping review sought to provide an overview of the scope and nature of research on placement transitions for students with SEN. The 23 studies displayed considerable heterogeneity. To examine processes and experiences related to placement transitions across multiple domains, findings were organised into six categories: psychological adaptations, social adaptations, educational adaptations, changes in context, changes in interpersonal relationships, and changes in identity.

4.1. *Characteristics of existing research*

The studies included in the scoping review differed in research foci, students populations, methodological approaches, and sample sizes. No clear trend in publication frequency could be identified, suggesting that research interest in this topic has not grown substantially. The studies originated primarily from Europe, North America, and Australia, reflecting a dominance of research from high-income, English-speaking contexts. Overall, the findings indicate that research on placement transitions among students with SEN remains limited and fragmented. Studies addressed a wide range of research questions, yet no particular line of inquiry appeared to be extensively developed.

Most studies included employed qualitative research designs with small participant numbers. These studies provided insights into individual transition experiences from the perspectives of students, parents and professionals. The triangulation of perspectives that was used in many studies likely contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the transition process (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020). It is particularly noteworthy that many studies also included students' own perspectives, which are often underrepresented in school transition research (Alnahdi et al., 2024; Neal et al., 2016). The predominance of small-scale qualitative research limits the generalisability of findings. The large-scale quantitative studies included in the review focused primarily on educational variables, such as academic and cognitive skills prior to the transfer. They did not address the domains of psychological and social adaptations or changes in context, interpersonal relationships, and identity. Taken together, this suggests a need for further quantitative research across the multiple domains of placement transitions.

More than half of the studies included in the review investigated transitions towards more inclusive placements. At the same time, research on transfer frequency suggests that transitions from separated or segregated placements to inclusive mainstream settings occur less frequently than transitions in the opposite direction (e.g., Snozzi et al., 2024; Ware et al., 2009). The relative focus on transition towards more inclusive placements in the reviewed studies likely reflects the ongoing debate surrounding inclusive schooling for students with SEN and supports efforts to identify barriers and facilitators to inclusion (e.g., Gibb et al., 2007; Haug, 2017). Given that transitions towards more separated placements may affect a larger number of students with SEN, it also appears important to further investigate these transitions and the related processes.

This emphasis on inclusive education was also reflected in the theoretical framing of the reviewed studies. Most frameworks focused on inclusive education and the educational participation of students with SEN, whereas only a small number explicitly addressed transition processes. This suggests that research on placement transitions has primarily developed within the field of inclusive education rather than within the broader literature on educational transitions.

4.2. *Transition process*

Findings from the reviewed studies suggest that initial experiences following a placement transfer were often characterised by stress, uncertainty, behavioural difficulties, academic struggles, or challenges in peer relationships (e.g., Keane et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2014). Across the reviewed studies, such challenges were reflected, to varying degrees, across all six domains analysed. Findings also suggested that, over time, most students adapted successfully to the new environment as they established new relationships and became familiar with the new routines (e.g., Pillay & Di Terlizzi, 2009; West et al., 2004). Similarly, heightened anxiety, experiences of bullying, and behavioural difficulties have been reported among students with SEN when starting primary or secondary school

(Cantali, 2019; McIntyre et al., 2006; Welchons & McIntyre, 2017). Research on normative transitions also suggests that, compared to students without SEN, students with SEN typically require more time to adapt to a new school environment (T. Foley et al., 2016; Symonds, 2015).

In the studies included in this review experiences across domains appeared to be interconnected. For example, peer acceptance appeared related to students' sense of belonging and identity (e.g., West et al., 2004), while environmental adaptations influenced educational participation and emotional wellbeing (e.g., Andersson & Adams Lyngbäck, 2022). Regarding transition support, findings from the reviewed studies suggest that transition planning and collaboration between sending and receiving institutions, as well as between schools and families, are perceived as central to successful transitions (e.g., Maturana et al., 2019; Rugg & Donne, 2011). Findings further suggested that during transitions to inclusive settings, students benefited from targeted skills training (e.g., Keane et al., 2012) and adaptations to their learning environment, such as modified curricula, instructional methods, or behavioural support plans (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2019). Overall, these findings resemble recommendations for supporting students with SEN during normative school transitions (e.g., Gooden & Rous, 2018; Strnadová et al., 2023). They further highlight, in line with a biopsychosocial understanding of SEN, that transition experiences may be supported both through strengthening individual skills and through adaptations to the educational environment.

Most studies focused on a specific type of SEN. This seems reasonable, as students' needs and barriers vary across types. Examples from the reviewed studies include students who are deaf or hard of hearing who relied on the consistent provision and use of technical aids in class (Andersson & Adams Lyngbäck, 2022); students with vision impairments who required support for mobility within the school environment (West et al., 2004); students with intellectual disabilities who depended on adaptations to the curriculum and instructional methods (Doré et al., 2002); and students with behavioural and emotional difficulties who benefited from behavioural support plans and social skills training (Buchanan et al., 2016). Although transition planning tailored to students' individual needs is often recommended for students with SEN (Harris & Nowland, 2020; Neal et al., 2016), the findings suggest that addressing transition-related challenges may also require specialised knowledge regarding the specific support needs and barriers associated with different SEN types. Reflecting these concerns, some parents in the reviewed studies emphasised the importance of teacher training and support within mainstream schools (e.g., Buchanan et al., 2016). Since specialised expertise is often concentrated in special schools or classes, collaboration between professionals across settings may help mainstream schools better understand and address the needs and potential barriers experienced by students with SEN during placement transitions (e.g., Gibb et al., 2007).

4.3. Tensions related to school placements

Three large-scale quantitative studies included in the review indicated that among students with SEN, those with lower academic skills were more likely to transfer from mainstream to special schools, whereas those with higher academic skills were more likely to transfers from special to mainstream schools (Botting et al., 1998; Theisel et al., 2018; Van Den Helder et al., 2024). In qualitative studies, parents and professionals viewed higher academic skills as important for successful participation in mainstream settings (e.g., Maturana et al., 2019). These findings suggest that placement decisions are closely tied to academic abilities. This interpretation is consistent with cross-sectional research showing that students with more complex SEN are more often educated in segregated settings (Kleinert et al., 2015; Kurth et al., 2014). It may also help explain why the proportion of students educated in segregated settings tends to increase from primary to lower secondary education across many European countries (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2025). One possible mechanism is that achievement gaps often widen over the course of schooling, particularly among students with more severe support needs (Biewer et al., 2015), potentially increasing the likelihood of placement in more segregated settings.

The reviewed studies further suggest that the circumstances surrounding placement transitions may differ depending on the direction of transfer. Transitions into more segregated placements were frequently initiated as a response to negative experiences in mainstream classes; as such, they appeared to be reactive efforts to resolve difficulties within the mainstream environment (e.g., Mann et al., 2018). In contrast, some transitions towards more inclusive placements were explicitly perceived as opportunities to further students' development (e.g., Croydon et al., 2019). These differing motives reflect broader tensions surrounding inclusive schooling, particularly the balance between participation in mainstream settings and access to specialised support (Norwich, 2008; Satherley & Norwich, 2022; Shaw, 2017). They may also shape students' transition experiences, as reactive transfers may be experienced differently from strategically planned moves (Rumberger, 2015). However, these interpretations remain tentative, as the reviewed studies did not directly examine how underlying motives relate to students' transition experiences.

Different types of SEN placements may carry different social meanings and levels of stigma (e.g., Cooney et al., 2006). Accordingly, issues of identity, belonging, and stigmatisation appear central to placement transitions. Findings from the studies suggest that students' sense of identity often shifted during the transition process, with most experiencing an improved sense of belonging in their new placement – regardless of the direction of the transfer. In line with previous research (Most, 2007; O'Byrne & Muldoon, 2017; Vyrastekova, 2021), this suggests that the extent of stigmatisation depends not only on placement type but also on its interplay with other contextual factors and individual characteristics. Nevertheless, some placement arrangements may create particular risks for stigmatisation. For example, placements in special classes situated within mainstream schools may heighten experiences of stigmatisation as students remain in “full view of mainstream students” (Banks & McCoy, 2017, p. 451). This notion was supported by one study included in the review, in which some students with learning difficulties who moved into special classes perceived a decline in social status (Rens & Louw, 2021).

4.4. Strength, limitations, and future directions

This scoping review is the first to provide a systematic overview of research on placement transitions for students with SEN. It integrates studies from different countries that employed diverse methods and focused on various SEN types. The aim was to map the existing research; thus, the results reflect the breadth rather than the depth or robustness of the available evidence.

This scoping review has several limitations. Study identification was dependent on the selected databases, search terms, and language restrictions. Consequently, relevant studies not indexed in the searched databases or published in other languages may have been missed. In addition, screening, data extraction, and categorisation were conducted by a single reviewer. Although a predefined protocol was used, decisions regarding the extraction and categorisation of findings may have been influenced by subjective interpretation. Given the heterogeneity of the studies, evidence regarding different aspects of placement transition processes and experiences remains limited. Moreover, most studies employed qualitative, small-scale designs. Accordingly, the findings should be regarded as exploratory rather than generalisable.

Given the fragmented state of the existing evidence, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of the complex processes underlying placement transitions. The review suggests that the direction of the placement transition, the motives underlying the transfer, and the type of SEN may influence students' transition experiences, yet these aspects have not been examined systematically. A more systematic investigation could contribute to a better understanding of how the various circumstances shape students' experiences during placement transitions. Moreover, as most existing studies employed qualitative designs, further quantitative research is needed. To date, quantitative studies have focused primarily on educational variables, particularly students' academic skills prior to the transfer. Extending quantitative research to psychological, social, relational, and identity-related aspects of placement transitions could provide a broader and more generalisable understanding of transition processes and experiences.

Although the evidence base remains limited, tentative implications for practice might be drawn from the reviewed studies. The reviewed studies suggest that students with SEN often experience challenges across multiple domains during the initial period following a placement transfer. This highlights the importance of not only preparing students for the transition but also providing support during the early stages of adaptation to the new educational environment. The findings also underscore the perceived value of collaboration between families, sending schools, and receiving schools. Finally, transition support is likely to benefit from a combination of targeted skills training and adaptations to the receiving environment that are tailored to students' individual needs.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Romana Snozzi: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose. Ethics approval was not required.

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