



Research

An Examination of International and Scottish Key Principles Guiding Early Years Transitions: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This study seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the factors underpinning children's transition from early years provision into primary education. It draws on both international perspectives and the Scottish policy context to establish a more comprehensive view of what supports effective, child-centred transitions. Consideration of approaches from Europe, Australia, North America and the Nordic countries enable a broader appreciation of how cultural, pedagogical and policy influences shape children's early experiences of formal schooling. Within Scotland, transitions are firmly embedded in national policy and curriculum guidance, with a strong emphasis on continuity of learning, progression and the promotion of children's wellbeing. Approaches that prioritise relationships, holistic support and developmentally appropriate, play-based learning are central to supporting children during this period. These principles reflect a commitment to viewing transitions not as isolated events, but as part of a continuous learning journey. Through examining both international research and the Scottish context, the study identifies key principles that contribute to high-quality transitions. It also highlights shared themes across different countries, alongside challenges shaped by specific contexts. This comparative perspective demonstrates how global insights can inform and strengthen local practice. Overall, adopting an international lens provides valuable opportunities to enhance understanding and improve transition processes, supporting the continued development of approaches that promote continuity, equity and positive outcomes for all learners as they begin primary education.

Keywords

Transitions, early years, primary, education, development

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Introduction

Transitions within the educational system have been widely explored in academic literature, reflecting their central role in shaping children's developmental trajectories (Packer, Thomas, Jones, & Watkins, 2021). Particular attention has been given to the movement from nursery to primary school, as well as from primary to secondary education, due to the profound influence these transitions can have on learners' cognitive, social, and emotional well-being (Packer et al., 2021). International research further highlights that transitional periods contribute meaningfully to a child's identity, sense of belonging and self-perception as they progress towards adolescence and adulthood (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Griebel & Niesel, 2000; Purtell et al., 2020).

Transitions are a universal aspect of human experience, occurring throughout the lifespan and often marking significant developmental milestones. These experiences can range from changes in career and relationships to educational progression and contribute to the formation of personal identity (Beach, 1999). In the context of education, the transition from early years settings to formal schooling is widely recognised as a critical juncture in a child's developmental trajectory. It is during this period that children begin to navigate new social environments, expectations, and routines, all of which can significantly influence their emotional wellbeing, academic engagement, and long-term outcomes (Fabian, 2002; Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010). According to the OECD's Starting Strong report (2017), quality transitions should be child-centred, well-prepared, and supported by trained staff working collaboratively across settings. Such transitions enhance the likelihood that the benefits of early learning will be sustained throughout primary education and beyond. Among the range of educational transitions, the move from early years setting, such as public or private early childhood centres, to formal schooling is one of the most significant and universally experienced (Fabian, 2002). This period marks a major developmental shift in which children begin to negotiate new expectations, routines, and social norms. Furthermore, this stage introduces children to unfamiliar educators, peers and learning environments, requiring them to develop new competencies and adaptive strategies. (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010; Brooker, 2008). Research from diverse international contexts which include Australia, New Zealand, Portugal, and Scandinavia consistently demonstrates the success of the above transition is closely linked to the quality of collaboration between early childhood professionals, primary teachers, and families (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Peters, 2010; Moir & Johnson, 2021; Einarsdóttir, 2011). Effective communication, shared expectations, and relational trust have been shown to facilitate continuity of learning and reduce anxiety for both children and caregivers.

The term transition is best understood as an ongoing process rather than a discrete event. It typically involves significant shifts in roles, relationships, routines, and identity Jindal-Snape, (2016). While some transitions, such as bereavement or sudden illness, are unpredictable and cannot be fully prepared for, many educational transitions are anticipated and can therefore be supported through structured planning and guidance (Brooker, 2008; Pace-Schott et al., 2019). However, without appropriate support, transitions can also become sources of stress or disruption, particularly for children who may already be vulnerable or experiencing disadvantage (OECD, 2017; Margetts, 2007). Given the significant impact that transitional periods can have on an individual's emotional, social, and academic development, support and guidance must be implemented methodically and with care.

The present study therefore seeks to examine how transitions support is conceptualised, delivered, and structured within early years settings, with specific reference to the Scottish context while incorporating international insights. Subsequent sections outline the analytical framework and synthesise key principles from the global literature to provide a robust foundation for understanding effective transition practices. By integrating insights from diverse educational systems, the analysis contributes to a more comprehensive and theoretically informed understanding of high-quality transition practice. Such an approach enhances the capacity to evaluate, adapt and refine transition strategies in ways that respond to the varied developmental, social and cultural needs of learners as they move from early years settings into formal schooling.

Background to the study

Transitions are an essential aspect of human development, occurring throughout life and often marking significant change. Education Scotland (2017) defines transitions as a necessary process, while Jindal-Snape (2016) argues they should be viewed as ongoing and dynamic, shaped by cultural, systemic, and policy shifts. The transition from nursery to primary school is typically anticipated with excitement, though for some children it presents challenges that require support from educators and families (Education Scotland, 2017). Across Scotland, Early Years transitions are supported by a clear set of policy and legislative frameworks that promote continuity, wellbeing and inclusive practice for children, families and practitioners (Scottish Government, 2009; 2014). National policy from the Scottish Government, including The Early Years Framework (Scottish Government, 2009) and Early Learning and Childcare Statutory Guidance (Scottish Government, 2021), highlights the importance of early intervention, collaborative working and ensuring children experience consistent, high quality support as they move from ELC into primary school. Practice guidance such as *Realising the Ambition: Being Me* (Education Scotland, 2020) provides a shared pedagogical vision that emphasises play-based learning, nurturing relationships and progression, supporting practitioners to align approaches across sectors and phases. Legislative frameworks, notably the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, place statutory duties on local authorities to safeguard children's wellbeing, actively involve families in decision-making and ensure that appropriate supports are in place at key transition points. These duties are further strengthened by the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) national approach (Scottish Government, 2012), which promotes child centred, multi-agency planning and continuity of support. Collectively, these frameworks create a policy context that supports practitioners to plan purposeful and inclusive transitions. Furthermore, this can encourage family involvement in children's learning and helps children experience transitions positively and with confidence. This aligns with Fabian and Dunlop's (2007) view of transitions as a process through which children make "human sense" of change, a process that can be particularly demanding in educational settings as children adjust to new environments, expectations and relationships.

Understanding the emotional and cognitive demands of transition is crucial, as it influences children's development and early school experiences. Bandura (1997) emphasises the role of schools in fostering environments that support self-efficacy, motivation, and independence. Broström (2002) highlights the complexity of transitioning to primary school, noting that it involves more than a physical move because it is a critical developmental phase. International literature identifies two key strands: the "settling-in" period, which focuses on familiarisation through structured visits, and the

shift in learning experiences, which contrasts preschool play-based approaches with more formal school expectations. While academic readiness is important, emphasis is often placed on building relationships and fostering a sense of belonging (Broström, 2002; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). A holistic approach to transition is widely advocated, involving collaboration among families, educators, and wider support networks (Brooker, 2008). Besi and Sakellariou (2019) found that teachers view parental involvement as a key factor in successful transitions, reinforcing the importance of shared responsibility.

In Scotland, the Children and Families Transitions Position Statement (Education Scotland, 2019) emerged from the Pedagogies of Educational Transitions (POET) and Transitions as a Tool for Change (TAATFC) projects, developed collaboratively by academic, governmental and practitioner groups. This national work identified six guiding principles: aspirations, entitlements, expectations, participation, opportunities and contributions, to shape coherent and inclusive approaches to transition. These principles align with wider Scottish policy frameworks, including *Realising the Ambition* (Education Scotland, 2020) and Curriculum for Excellence Early Level guidance, both of which emphasise leadership, play-based pedagogy, curriculum continuity and reflective practice as essential components of effective transitions (Education Scotland, 2023).

International research demonstrates marked alignment with Scotland's approach. Studies from Australia similarly emphasise the importance of collaborative partnerships, shared expectations and child centred pedagogies in supporting successful transitions to school (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Nordic research, particularly from Iceland and Norway, highlights the role of playfulness, relational trust and continuity of early childhood values as children move into formal education (Einarsdóttir, 2011; Zachrisen, 2021). In the United States, Pianta and colleagues (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003) stress structured communication between early childhood settings and schools, noting that well-designed transition practices significantly enhance children's social and academic adjustment. European studies, including work from Portugal and Germany, further underline the need for family engagement, professional collaboration and pedagogical alignment to ensure positive transitions (Seabra-Santos et al., 2021; Griebel & Niesel, 2000). Taken together, Scotland's policy principles are strongly supported by a growing international evidence base, indicating that effective transitions are best achieved through coherent leadership, shared professional understanding, relational continuity and environments that promote play, participation and emotional security.

Ultimately, transitions should be understood as a series of interconnected events requiring time, sensitivity, and collaboration. Fabian (2002) refers to this process as acculturation which means adapting to new cultural and social norms. For young children, this involves learning new routines, environments, and relationships. As O'Connor (2013) notes, successful transitions are not defined by isolated visits but by sustained, child centred programmes that prioritise emotional security and continuity. International research consistently demonstrates that well-managed transitions enhance children's sense of belonging, support continuity of learning and contribute to long-term educational outcomes (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Studies across Europe, Australia and the United States highlight that transitions are strengthened when educators apply key principles such as relational continuity, effective communication, collaborative planning and child centred pedagogy (Griebel & Niesel, 2000; Peters, 2010; Margetts, 2007). Within Scotland, national policy framework which includes *Realising the Ambition* (Education Scotland, 2020) and the Children and Families Transitions Position Statement (2019), reinforces these principles by

emphasising play-based learning, strong professional relationships and partnership with families as foundational to high-quality practice. Recognising and applying these underpinning principles enables educators to create supportive, predictable and responsive environments that reduce anxiety, promote resilience and ensure that children experience continuity as they move between settings. Consequently, a deep understanding of educational transitions and their key principles is vital for fostering equitable, positive and developmentally appropriate experiences for all learners.

Theoretical perspectives

Throughout literature, the concept of transition from early childcare to the initial stages of formal education is strongly underpinned by a range of theoretical perspectives (Dockett, Griebel, & Perry, 2017). Transitions are addressed across multiple theoretical frameworks, reflecting diverse interpretations and applications. Numerous models have been adopted by contemporary researchers and policymakers to explore and support transitional experiences (Hannah, Gorton, & Jindal-Snape, 2010). However, no single theory comprehensively defines the concept of transition; rather, it is represented as a network of interrelated terms and ideas embedded within broader developmental and educational theories.

When children begin adapting to new educational environments, such as primary school, emotional security is considered a critical factor. The ability to adjust to new challenges is closely linked to the child's emotional wellbeing (Fabian, 2002). During this period, children may undergo shifts in identity and assume new roles within their social context. The concept of acculturation is often used to describe this process of adaptation to unfamiliar surroundings. Various theoretical approaches have attempted to explain transition through the lens of separation and attachment, which are explored further in subsequent sections.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is frequently cited as a particularly relevant framework for understanding the environmental influences on children's transitions. This perspective emphasises the interconnectedness of individual, relational, and systemic factors that shape the child's experience during periods of change. American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, widely recognised for his contributions to the Head Start programme, argued that young children experience more successful transitions when they feel secure within their ecological environment (Tudge, Navarro, Merçon-Vargas, & Payir, 2021; Brooker, 2008; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Known as the Ecological and Human Ecological Theory, Bronfenbrenner's framework posits that human behaviour is shaped by the various environments encountered over time. These environments influence adaptation to social and cultural contexts, relationships, and behavioural development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Tudge et al., 2021).

Bronfenbrenner's model is often visualised as a series of interlocking systems, "concentric circles nested within the next," or, as described by Jindal-Snape (2016, p. 45), "a set of Russian dolls." The ecological model of human development outlines four key systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Each system represents a layer of experience, encompassing relationships, activities, and environmental characteristics that influence development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The microsystem is particularly relevant to early educational transitions. It includes the immediate environments in which children interact, such as family, peers, and early years settings. Re-search by Packer, Thomas, Jones, and Watkins (2020) highlights the complexity of

these interlocking systems and emphasises the importance of understanding the learner's experience during transitions. The microsystem is shaped not only by the physical environment but also by changes in key adults, peer groups, routines, and other contextual factors. Bronfenbrenner (1986) stressed that a child's perception of these elements plays a critical role in psychological development and future adaptation.

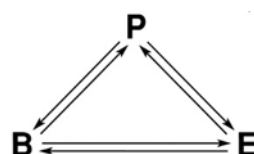
Positive early experiences, such as structured visits to primary school can foster a sense of safety, belonging, and acculturation, laying the foundation for successful transitions and long-term educational engagement (Fabian, 2002). Bronfenbrenner acknowledged that his theory drew upon earlier philosophical and psychological work, including the Thomas Theorem, which asserts that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). Kurt Lewin's work also influenced Bronfenbrenner's thinking, particularly the emphasis on environmental perception and social interaction as determinants of behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While Lewin's theory presents valuable insights, its empirical application in contemporary settings is limited due to ethical constraints. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 24) noted the importance of discovering "how situations are perceived by the people who participate in them," underscoring the need for context-sensitive research in educational transitions.

Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests that significant changes in ecological settings can profoundly influence psychological development into adolescence and adulthood. Inadequate support during early transitions, including the move from nursery to primary school, may contribute to future challenges. Bandura's Social Learning Theory complements this perspective by emphasising the role of observation, modelling, and social interaction in shaping behaviour and cognitive development (Bandura, 1977). His concept of triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986) further illustrates the dynamic interplay between personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. Together, these theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive foundation for examining the transition from early years provision to primary education, highlighting the importance of secure environments, relational support, and reflective practice in promoting positive developmental outcomes.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the interplay between personal, behavioural, and environmental factors in human development. Central to this theory is the concept of triadic reciprocal causation, which posits that these three domains are interdependent and continuously influence one another (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997). The model suggests that without functional interaction among these elements, the system becomes unstable, potentially leading to developmental challenges.

Although Bandura's work is often associated with self-efficacy, the triadic model also aligns conceptually with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bandura (1993) identified three core components: behaviour (B), internal personal factors (P)—including cognitive, affective, and motivational elements—and the external environment (E) (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Triadic reciprocal causation model



These components collectively shape individual outcomes, with individuals acting both as products and architects of their environments.

Recent research supports the relevance of Bandura's model in educational contexts, particularly in relation to social, emotional, and behavioural development within learning environments (White et al., 2013). The Scottish Early Childhood, Children and Families Transitions Position Statement (Education Scotland, 2023) similarly emphasises that transitions are an ongoing process that influences behaviour, relationships, and responses to environmental change. This perspective reinforces the importance of considering all three domains of Bandura's model when examining early educational transitions.

Bandura (1997) also cautioned that the three factors may not always operate in synchrony. Empirical studies have highlighted the behavioural component as particularly influential, often emerging as the dominant factor when interacting with personal and environmental conditions. This observation complements Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on the significance of the learning environment in shaping developmental outcomes. Contemporary research has increasingly recognised the role of personal and social factors in early childhood transitions. Elements such as family involvement, peer relationships, and the presence of consistent key adults have been identified as critical to successful adaptation (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008 and Özger, 2022). In this context, attachment theory provides further insight, particularly through the concepts of a secure base and emotional resilience, which are essential for navigating transitions effectively (O'Connor, 2013). Together, Bandura's and Bronfenbrenner's frameworks offer complementary perspectives on the multifaceted nature of early educational transitions, underscoring the need for holistic, child-centred approaches that account for behavioural, emotional, and environmental influences.

To conclude, a clear understanding of educational transitions is crucial for educators, as these periods serve as significant developmental milestones that shape children's social, emotional and academic progress. Examining the underpinning principles of transitions through a literature-based analysis grounded in established theoretical perspectives is essential for advancing research in this field. Such an approach enables a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge, highlighting the key factors that contribute to successful transition experiences while identifying gaps requiring further exploration. By comparing international research with the expanding body of Scottish studies, this analysis also reveals both areas of alignment and points of divergence, offering valuable insights into how global evidence can inform and strengthen Scotland's ongoing commitment to high quality, equitable and well-informed transition practices. (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Fabian, 2002; Margetts, 2007; Brooker, 2008; Corsaro & Molinari, 2008; Griebel & Niesel, 2000 and Pianta, Cox & Snow, 2007).

Methodology

This section details the methods undertaken to source the appropriate literature for the research study regarding the underpinning principles of transition between early years settings and primary school. The epistemological thinking behind this study, and the rationale for conducting a review of literature, is considered in two senses.

First sense was to gain a deeper understanding of how the key principles regarding transitions within early years came to be and support the underpinning rationale we see today. Second sense was to

identify any additional knowledge that may question if there are gaps within this field of literature. As Tubbs (2016) suggests, unless you have full knowledge and understanding of certain areas you are researching, your chosen methodology is there to frame questions rather than only provide answers. Therefore, epistemology can be understood as a tool for uncovering deeper knowledge within the field of education. Within the research process, it is important to recognise the professional expertise that educators bring to understanding and interpreting educational practice. As Tubbs (2016, p. 6) notes, “teachers are masters of education, for they have the epistemological mastery of the content and values that are taught to others.”

Epistemology or rather enquiry into true knowledge coincides with understanding the notion for common sense or logic (Tubbs, 2016). However, a challenge regarding epistemology is the question of where to begin when researching any chosen subject (Tubbs, 2016). The selected methodological approach, a literature review, enabled the organisation of existing research into two strands: (1) established knowledge about transitions, and (2) areas requiring further, more informed understanding. The ontological position underpinning this work is shaped by the observation of transition practices within early years settings, particularly the movement of children into Primary 1 (age 4 -6 years old). However, the fact that a particular educational setting adopts a specific transition pro-gramme does not imply that it represents the only or most effective approach. Furthermore, this study does not seek to determine a definitive right or wrong method, but rather to interpret and understand transition practices from multiple perspectives. This orientation informed the decision to conduct a scoping review of the literature, drawing on the insights and expertise of researchers within the field of early years transitions.

The scoping review has become a progressively popular approach to review and analyse literature (Pham, Rajic, Greig, Sergeant, Papadopoulos and McEwen, 2014). The overarching aim is to map previous and existing literature within the field of interest but still regarding the volume and specific characteristics of the primary research at hand (Arksey and O’Malley, 2005).

Identifying the research question

The focus of this research is to identify the key principles that underpin the transition process within early years settings. The development of the research question was shaped by professional experience within early childhood education and guided by the methodological aim of gaining a deeper, evidence-informed understanding of the factors that support effective transitions from early years provision to formal schooling in Scotland. Denby, Butroyd, Swift, Price and Glazzard (2008) emphasise that a methodology should directly address the research questions while offering a clear and transparent acknowledgement of any limitations or challenges encountered throughout the process.

From the outset, the breadth of this research area was evident, and a scoping review aligned with Arksey and O’Malley’s framework was identified as a suitable methodological approach for a literature-based study (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). This design offers a comprehensive and systematic structure, enabling repeated steps where necessary to ensure rigour and depth. Arksey and O’Malley’s model is specifically constructed to support a thorough exploration of existing literature, making it well suited to studies that seek to map key concepts and identify gaps within a broad field of inquiry.

The initial search

As discussed in the previous section, the Arksey and O'Malley framework (2005) was used to ensure quality and comprehensive coverage of the relevant literature. Conducting a scoping review using Arksey and O'Malley's framework enabled the research to be driven in a methodical manner, allowing the researcher to reflect upon, process and validate findings from the main scoping review (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005, p.22).

Arksey and O'Malley's model comprises five key stages:

1. identifying the research question, 2. identifying relevant studies, 3. selecting studies, 4. charting the data and 5. collecting, summarising and reporting the results (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005).

For this desk-based study, the chosen method facilitated an in-depth review of the literature and supported the analysis and synthesis of the most relevant and insightful information, in alignment with the five stages outlined in the framework. Due to the chosen research topic, the initial search returned a broad range of literature. It was therefore imperative at the outset not to allow the parameters surrounding the key definitions to become too broad. From the beginning, it was recognised that the term transitions within education can be vague, hold multiple meanings, and could inevitably produce an unmanageable number of studies (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005).

Considering these implications was instrumental in determining how key studies would be identified through the application of specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1). An additional table (see Table 3) has been included in charting data section to present supplementary inclusion and exclusion criteria used when identifying relevant studies, due to the broad nature of the term transitions.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Early-years	Secondary schools and home schooling
Primary education	Children beyond the age of 5 or under the age of 4
Education-based studies	Papers older than 10 years (pre-2014)
Environment	Non-English papers
Role of teaching staff and parents/caregivers	Medical publications
Transition process	Children with additional needs (e.g., Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, or other needs)

Identifying relevant studies

To begin identifying relevant studies, online databases were searched using keywords specifically related to the topic area, including *transition*, *early years*, *preschool*, *environment* and *primary*

school. The search strategy sought to be as thorough as possible by focusing on primary studies published within a defined time frame. This ensured relevance to the aim of understanding the key principles underpinning the transition process within early years settings. Evidence was sourced from a range of materials, including published government policies and reviews, electronic databases accessed through the university library, reference lists, hand-searching, grey literature, and outputs from relevant organisations and conferences. From a practical standpoint, the time available for the review necessitated the narrowing of the search parameters, particularly in relation to publication dates. As a result, journal articles and policy documents published within the last ten years were prioritised. Limiting the search to literature from 2014 onwards enabled the inclusion of significant developments in transition practice while capturing a contemporary representation of current discussions within the field.

A review of the literature published from 2014 onwards identified ten key sources that met the inclusion criteria and aligned closely with the themes emerging from the review of early years transitions. empirical studies by Beers (2021), Moir and Johnson (2021) and Özger (2022) provide direct insight into children's transition experiences, highlighting themes of resilience, adjustment and the role of school practices in supporting wellbeing during periods of change. The importance of family involvement and relational continuity is emphasised in Besi and Sakellariou (2019), Fenmachi (2024) and Packer et al. (2021), all of which foreground parental perspectives and children's voices as central to successful transitions. Broader systemic and contextual influences on transition are addressed in Jindal-Snape (2016) and Jindal-Snape (2018), which conceptualise transitions as complex, multi-layered processes shaped by relationships, environments and policy contexts, including within Scotland. Policy and practice perspectives are further developed in Dockett and Perry (2014) and Purtell et al. (2020), which examine how continuity of learning and supportive transition practices are embedded within educational systems. Collectively, these studies meet the inclusion criteria by focusing explicitly on early childhood transitions, employing empirical or applied methodologies, and addressing key themes of wellbeing, relationships, continuity and children's lived experiences within diverse educational and cultural contexts. Additionally, it is worth noting that, due to the limitations set and the time constraints involved, some relevant literature and documents may have been unintentionally overlooked. See Table 2 illustrating the ten included studies, their focus, methodology and how they align with your review themes and inclusion criteria.

Table 2. Analysis of Included Studies on Early Year Transitions (2014- Present)

Author(s) & Years	Study Focus	Methodological Approach	Key Themes Identified	Contribution to Review Criteria
Beers (2021)	Children’s lived experiences of transition	Empirical study	Resilience, adjustment, emotional responses	Direct insight into children’s perspectives on transition and wellbeing
Moir & Johnson (2021)	School practices during transition	Empirical study	Role of school environment, adaptation, support structures	Highlights how educational practices influence adjustment
Özger (2022)	Children’s transition experiences	Empirical study	Coping strategies, relational support	Explores children’s agency and wellbeing in transition contexts
Besi & Sakellariou (2019)	Parental perspectives on transition	Empirical study	Family involvement, relational continuity	Foregrounds parental voice in successful transition processes
Fenmachi (2024)	Family engagement in early transitions	Empirical study	Home–school partnerships, communication	Emphasises collaboration and shared responsibility
Packer et al. (2021)	Children’s and parents’ experiences	Applied/empirical research	Children’s voice, wellbeing, relational continuity	Connects lived experience to transition success
Jindal-Snape (2016)	Theoretical conceptualisation of transitions	Theoretical	Multi-layered transitions, ecological influences	Frames transitions as complex systemic processes
Jindal-Snape (2018)	Systemic and policy influences (including Scotland)	Conceptual/applied	Relationships, policy context, environmental factors	Links individual experiences to broader policy systems
Dockett & Perry (2014)	Transition practices within education systems	Applied research	Continuity of learning, structured transition practices	Policy-to-practice alignment
Purtell et al. (2020)	System-level approaches to transition	Empirical/policy-oriented	Educational systems, continuity, structural supports	Examines embedding transition support within systems

Collectively, these ten studies met the inclusion criteria by focusing explicitly on early childhood transitions (2014 onwards), employing empirical, applied or conceptual methodologies, and addressing core themes of wellbeing, relationships, continuity and children’s lived experiences across diverse educational contexts. The studies span child centred, family centred and systemic perspectives, providing a multi-layered understanding of transition processes. It is acknowledged, however, that due to the defined inclusion parameters and time constraints associated with the review process, some relevant literature may not have been captured.

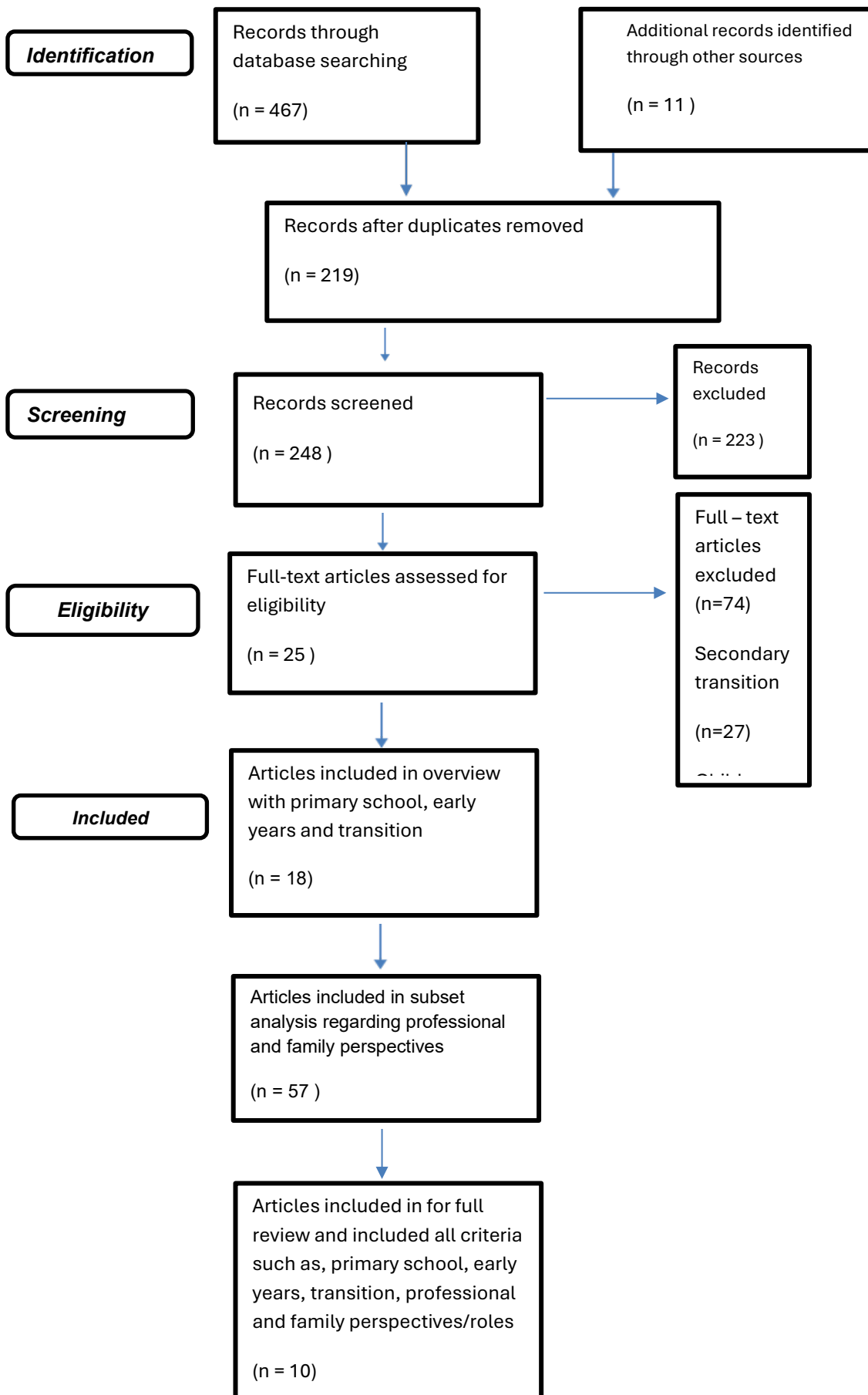
Study selection and electronic databases

The search process began with the ERIC database, using the terms early years, transition, primary school and Scotland, and limiting results to studies published within the last ten years. ERIC is widely regarded as one of the largest and most comprehensive databases for educational research (Alotaibi & Pardede, 2019). The search was further refined by applying filters for early childhood education and international contexts, resulting in 17 studies. While only a limited number were directly applicable to the Scottish context, these studies provided a valuable foundation for subsequent hand-searching.

The next stage involved searching the SCOPUS database using the same keywords within article titles and abstracts. This initial search produced a broad retrieval of 467 studies. To refine the results, the search was limited to publications relating specifically to primary school, preschool and transitions, resulting in 25 studies suitable for full-text appraisal. Table 2 outlines the characteristics of the included studies relating to primary school and early years.

Figure 1.1 presents the search process using the PRISMA model, illustrating the synthesis approach adopted and providing justification for the selection of primary studies (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 2. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram detailing search process



Charting the data

Data were extracted according to specific research objectives. Firstly, the educational setting had to relate to preschool or early years provision. The age of the children included in the studies was required to fall between 4 and 5 years, and the transition process had to be a central focus. In addition to these general characteristics, publication dates were restricted to ensure that the selected studies reflected contemporary understandings of transition, as the research question examines the underpinning principles of transition practices as they are observed in education today.

A subset search was also conducted to identify publications outside the primary date range, studies from countries beyond the UK, and research that exceeded the ten-year limit but offered relevant perspectives from professionals or families. Although these studies did not fully meet all criteria, they contained elements that aligned with the necessary inclusion parameters and were therefore noted. Table 3 below provides an overview of the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied.

Table 3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Category	Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
Subject	The review subject must include and examine children’s transitions from either home or their early years setting and upon entering formal primary education in school. The review subject must also examine studies within the last 10 years and within Scotland.
Population	Children between 4 and 5, parents/caregivers. Excluded children transition between final stage of primary school to secondary.
Review type	Literature reviews, case studies, policies.
Publication date	Reviews must have been published within the last 10 years except for publications having specific inclusion criteria.
Availability	Publications must be available online and must be available in English.

Collating and summarising the results

The first stage when summarising the results was to characterise all the chosen studies regarding preschool, early years, transition and primary school. This included key criteria such as, the specific search period of no longer than 10 years, publication period of studies, age and setting of the children in the studies selected and any additional information from the chosen studies.

Ethics

An additional reason for directing the research through a literature-based study relates to the ethical implications involved. This section outlines the justification for this approach and explains why a literature-based study was the most appropriate option. In the context of scoping reviews, it is uncommon for researchers to require ethical approval (Dickson, Pilkington, Cherry & Boland, 2024). Nonetheless, potential ethical concerns may arise, particularly due to the inability to exclude unethical studies from the review process (Dickson et al., 2024). If such studies are identified during the literature selection phase, they would be addressed during the quality assessment process (Dickson et al., 2024).

The primary aim of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the key principles that influence the transition between early years settings and the commencement of primary education. These factors have been shaped by historical and contemporary research, including longitudinal studies involving families, case studies, and ethnographic methods. Due to time constraints, it was not feasible to conduct a qualitative study that would have explored the transition process in depth. Such an empirical investigation would have required approximately 18 months, following participants from age four in nursery through to their preparation for Primary 2. This would have involved multiple observations, questionnaires, and interviews with professionals, parents, caregivers, and children across both nursery and primary school settings.

The purpose of this research is to provide an in-depth perspective on the theoretical foundations of the transition process, rather than to examine its direct impact on children and families. A literature based study offers a robust framework for exploring the existing body of knowledge surrounding transitions in early education. This approach also establishes a foundation for potential future empirical research.

Given the considerations outlined above, the investigation adopts an inductive approach. The findings from the literature review will be analysed across three core sections in the latter part of the study. Inductive reasoning supports the synthesis of diverse sources, leading to a focused and coherent analysis of the research topic (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Results and Findings

Arksey and O'Malley (2005) state that the primary purpose of employing a scoping review methodology is to identify gaps within existing literature. Additionally, such a review should generate questions that warrant further exploration and have not yet been comprehensively addressed. The summary of findings indicates a clear correlation between the transition process and professional involvement. The selected timeframe, chosen for its relevance to contemporary practice, underscores the significance of parental involvement and professional perspectives in discussions surrounding key issues in the transition process.

To broaden the scope of studies focusing on professional perspectives, the search parameters were extended to include literature from 2010 onwards. Within this expanded range, the small-scale study by White et al. (2013) emerged as a valuable source, offering data derived from teacher questionnaires conducted in Scotland. This study contributed to the development of several discussion points outlined in subsequent sections.

Two key themes identified through the scoping review were: (1) parent/caregiver involvement, and (2) the role of the teacher and the influence of the learning environment. These themes were rooted in the broader context of educational transitions and evolved as the literature was analysed. While certain themes, such as parental engagement, professional roles, and environmental factors were complementary, others revealed inconsistencies, particularly in the dynamics between parents/caregivers and teachers.

Key theme 1: parental/primary caregiver involvement

One key finding emerging from the literature review highlights discrepancies in parental involvement during the transition process and uncertainty regarding the nature of their role (Fenmachi, 2024).

Fenmachi's study further explores teachers' beliefs about the extent to which parents and caregivers should participate in transition activities. Professionals reported that increased parental and caregiver engagement enhanced opportunities to build positive relationships between families and teachers (Fenmachi, 2024). In addition, other research indicates that parents and caregivers often feel well supported when included effectively in the transition process, contributing to an over-all positive experience (Dockett & Perry, 2014). However, Purtell et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of the early years practitioner acting as the primary facilitator of the transition, as families frequently report a stronger sense of connection with early years staff than with the receiving primary teacher. Historically, findings also suggest that communication between nursery staff and families tends to be more open and informal, whereas this level of communication is not always maintained once children move into primary school (Purtell et al., 2020).

To link with the earlier discussion on theoretical perspectives, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasises the importance of positive, trusting and respectful relationships between teachers and caregivers. As previously highlighted, Purtell et al. (2020) underscores the significance of fostering positive and collaborative relationships among all stakeholders, with two groups identified as particularly influential. The role of the parent or primary caregiver is crucial, as they support children in developing a sense of readiness for starting school. Similarly, the role of the early years practitioner is influential because they provide a high-quality connection between the early years setting and the school. When support from both stakeholders is strong and effective, children are more likely to feel settled, engaged and happy to participate in learning within their new environment (Packer et al., 2021).

Key theme 2: the role of the teacher and the impact of the environment

It has been widely discussed the impact professionals have during the transition process and the necessary role teachers have regarding the learners feeling ready for school (Jindal-Snape, 2016). It has been suggested children who receive the correct support during their time settling into a new setting have shown to perform better on standardised assessments, particularly in literacy (Hannah, Gorton and Jindal-Snape, 2010). As outlined earlier in this review of literature, the transition process from one setting to another should be approached holistically and evaluated collaboratively by a team of professionals. (Brooker, 2008).

However, professionals are noticing there are significant challenges surrounding the maturational approach and are debating whether there should be more focus on the school starting optimal age (Jindal-Snape, 2016). In addition, the readiness for school seems to be influenced by families and caregivers but it falls on the practitioners to deal with supporting behaviour, emotional and social difficulties (Hannah, Gorton and Jindal-Snape, 2010). Furthermore, professionals are becoming under more pressure and debates are occurring regarding which approach is better, the maturationist approach or the interactionist approach (Hannah, Gorton and Jindal-Snape, 2010).

Rantavuori (2018) states a key factor to a successful transition from preschool to primary school is a continuity and consistency with regards to pedagogy and collaboration between professionals and their environments. Furthermore, this study suggests if professionals work closely together regarding the children feeling familiar and settled in their new setting, they are more likely to

achieve throughout their school journey (Rantavuori, 2018). This point concurs with Brooker (2008) stating the process should be reviewed holistically and the starting age of when the child started school should be considered when planning for starting school. While a range of factors contribute to children's experiences of starting school, research highlights the pivotal role of the child's first teacher, whose practice and relationships are shown to have a strong influence on children's early adjustment and engagement with beginning primary school (Fabian, 2002). Therefore, if children are feeling unsettled in their new unfamiliar setting it has been suggested that building positive relationships and healthy attachments to their teacher is key (O'Connor, 2013 and McKenzie, 2023). The role of the practitioner when children are beginning school is imperative with regards to a successful transition (O'Connor, 2013). Practitioners who prioritise building positive and purposeful relationships with the child's family or primary caregivers will reassure the learners and this will strengthen the continuity between the child's different environments – home and school (O'Connor, 2013). This point relates to Bronfenbrenner's theory of how important a child's microsystem is and why the teacher's role is fundamental. Furthermore, teachers who can evoke empathy, assurance, patience and acceptance have been positively related to increase pupils' academic performance (Rodgers, 1983).

Discussion

The analysis, charting, and synthesis of literature identified two principal areas for discussion: understanding the setting in a microsystem and the role of the adult in facilitating the transition process between microsystems. These areas form the basis for further consideration of potential directions for future research.

Understanding the Setting in a Microsystem

Across the reviewed literature, a recurring theme emerged highlighting the importance of strong connections between the significant settings a child transitions between. This theme is rooted in Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, particularly *The Ecology of Human Development* (1979), which emphasises that transitions should involve more than isolated visits. Instead, they should encompass a network of "interlocking systems" that influence child development both directly and in-directly (Brooker, 2008, p. 20). These systems include the exchange of information, presence of familiar adults, continuity of objects, and repeated opportunities for engagement. While Bronfenbrenner's theory provided a foundational lens for interpreting transitions, it is important to acknowledge its historical context. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) note, research conducted in a specific era reflects the conditions of that time and may not fully represent contemporary practice.

More recent studies offer updated perspectives. For example, Stephen and Cope (2003) conducted an exploratory study in Scotland examining transitions from early years settings to primary school, focusing on the experiences of teachers and primary caregivers. Their findings underscored the importance of liaison between settings and the provision of opportunities for children to become familiar with their new environments. However, inconsistencies in liaison practices were noted, with nursery practitioners reporting that primary teachers often prioritised academic readiness over developmental continuity (Stephen & Cope, 2003; Stephen, Brown, Cope & Waterhouse, 2003). Further literature explored inclusive approaches to transition, with Moir and Johnson (2021) advocating for a nurturing framework supported by collaborative practice across providers. Although

the role of adults was previously emphasised, gaps remain in understanding which specific activities most effectively support transitions.

The Role of the Adult Facilitating the Transition Process Between Microsystems

Successful transitions are more likely when children perceive continuity between their previous and new settings (Moir & Johnson, 2021). This can be supported by adults who consider the child's interests and expectations. When children move from environments where they have formed relationships and exercised autonomy, they anticipate similar experiences in their new setting (Stephen et al., 2003).

Literature consistently recommends that transition activities occur regularly and involve familiar adults (Brooker, 2008). Familiarity can be reinforced by having key workers or early years practitioners accompany children during visits to their new school (Moir & Johnson, 2021). Additionally, the presence of families and caregivers during these visits enhances engagement and comfort.

The development of strong parent–practitioner relationships is also highlighted as a critical component. Effective practice involves the formal transfer of information between settings, typically facilitated by professionals (McKenzie, 2023). This data informs the receiving setting about the child's needs and experiences. While parental contributions are considered valuable, there is limited research detailing how professionals utilise this information or why it is deemed beneficial. Furthermore, Jindal-Snape (2016, p.26) identifies ambiguity surrounding the term “parental involvement,” noting its varied interpretations across psychological, relational, and participatory dimensions. The literature lacks clarity on the specific roles families should play during transitions. A shift in terminology from “parental involvement” to “parental participation” has been proposed to better reflect the active and supportive roles families can assume (Jindal-Snape, 2016, p.26).

Professional facilitation of transitions often involves building relationships that support both children and families. However, this can present challenges when professional judgments differ from parental expectations (McKenzie, 2023). This tension underscores the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's microsystem theory, which emphasises the importance of the environment and relationships in shaping developmental outcomes. Clear expectations and shared understanding among families and professionals may foster more effective home–school partnerships and enhance the transition experience.

Research further suggests that inclusive involvement of all stakeholders during transitions can mitigate feelings of low self-efficacy and low self-esteem in children (Jindal-Snape, 2016; Moir & Johnson, 2021). Adults with significant influence should be present in both settings to establish continuity and familiarity. Arnold-Baker (2020) emphasises the need for sensitive handling of transitions, with a strong focus on relationship-building from the outset. This approach is believed to reduce potential challenges and promote smoother, more positive transitions for children and adults supporting them.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in how preparations for children transitioning to primary school are approached, with increasing care and consideration given to the process (Özger, 2022). One of the most significant factors influencing a successful transition is the child's social environment, including family structure, parental attitudes, and the relationships formed with peers

and educators. Although the present study does not explore the socio-cultural dimension in depth, it remains an essential aspect of the transition experience. Corsaro and Molinari (2008) provide valuable insight into how children's interactions evolve over time and how these developments shape their experiences. Their work suggests that the transition from early years settings to primary school should be understood as a collaborative sociocultural process. This perspective aligns with evidence indicating that effective communication among all stakeholders including children, families and professionals is fundamental. Recognising each child's unique needs and expectations, and planning transitions with flexibility, is therefore vital. A uniform, standardised approach is unlikely to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Another area that warrants attention, though not explored in depth within this study, is the age at which children begin school. This remains a topic of ongoing debate, with literature offering inconclusive findings on both the maturational and interactionist approaches (Jindal-Snape, 2016). From a practitioner's standpoint, understanding school readiness is complex and multifaceted. To gain deeper insight, future research would benefit from adopting ethnographic and longitudinal approaches that follow the same cohort of children from nursery through primary education, and potentially into secondary schooling. Such designs would enable a richer understanding of how transition experiences evolve over time, how early relationships and pedagogical practices shape later outcomes, and how individual, familial and contextual factors interact to influence children's long-term adjustment and educational trajectories. A study of this kind would allow for rich observations across multiple transitions and developmental stages.

However, undertaking research of this scale would require significant investment, not just in terms of funding, but also in building trusting relationships with families and professionals, and most importantly, time. Such research holds significant value and should be considered a priority for future inquiry.

Conclusion

While this review of literature has intentionally excluded studies focusing on children with additional support needs, due to the distinct nature of their specific transition programme and differing structural requirements, this exclusion highlights an important gap for future research. Transitions for children with additional needs often involve multi-agency planning, specialised support frameworks and differentiated pedagogical approaches that fall outside the scope of transitions designed for children without such requirements. However, understanding these unique processes is essential for promoting inclusivity across early years and primary education. Future research could therefore examine how principles of effective transitions such as relational continuity, communication, family engagement and pedagogical alignment—can be adapted to support diverse learners. Comparative studies across international contexts may also illuminate innovative, inclusive practices that Scotland could adopt to strengthen equity in transition experiences. Addressing this gap would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of transition processes and ensure that future guidance and policy are responsive to the needs of all children, including those requiring additional support. This distinction underscores the complexity and individuality of the transition process, which varies according to each child's social, emotional, and physical needs. Education Scotland (2015) acknowledges this, stating: "Children and young people's mental, emotional, social and physical needs are taken very good account of when we are planning transitions, including

during any shared activities and experiences. There are effective arrangements in place to involve families and relevant agencies in designing transitions for those requiring additional support” (p. 23).

It is important to recognise that for some children, the transition process is not a straightforward journey but rather a challenging experience, likened to crossing a dense ditch rather than a bridge (Packer et al., 2021). Within the Scottish context, early years transitions are embedded within national curriculum and policy frameworks, including Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2008), GIRFEC (Scottish Government, 2012) and Building the Ambition (Scottish Government, 2014). Therefore, future research would benefit from incorporating policy analysis alongside empirical evidence in order to better understand how transitions are recognised, planned for and supported at a systemic level. This would enable a more comprehensive examination of the alignment between policy intentions, curriculum design and children’s lived experiences of transition in Scotland. Literature highlights the need for broader representation of learners’ perspectives in transition research. Providing children with opportunities to express their concerns and views is considered essential for informing practice and facilitating meaningful change (Packer et al., 2021). Greater consideration of children’s voices can support their sense of agency during transitions between educational settings. Mowat (2023) further emphasises that the extent to which children successfully navigate transitions is closely linked to the level of support provided by all involved agencies.

In conclusion, while transitions are a routine and often inevitable part of educational progression, research suggests that adopting a nurturing, collaborative, and consistent approach while viewing transition as an ongoing process can enable stakeholders to engage with the experience through a more holistic and child centred lens. Scotland stands to benefit significantly from ongoing international research into transitions from early years education to formal schooling, as global evidence continues to evolve and highlight innovative, child-centred approaches. While Scotland has developed a progressive landscape, particularly through Realising the Ambition (Education Scotland, 2020) and the Children and Families Transitions Position Statement (2019), international studies reveal emerging practices that can further enhance continuity, wellbeing and equity during the transition period. Research from countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the Nordic nations and North America demonstrate the value of strengthened family–school partnerships, enhanced play-based pedagogies, cross-sector collaboration and systems-level supports that reduce variability in children’s experiences (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Peters, 2010; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Engaging with this comparative evidence enables Scotland to identify new strategies that complement existing strengths, address persistent challenges such as inconsistencies in communication or pedagogical alignment and refine transition practices to better meet the needs of diverse learners. Continued alignment with international research therefore provides a critical mechanism for ensuring that Scotland’s transition policies and practices remain dynamic, evidence-informed and responsive to the changing needs of children and families.

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Data Availability Statement

No primary data was generated or analysed during this study. All secondary data sources used in the literature review consist of publicly available publications, including peer-reviewed articles, policy documents and organisational reports. These materials can be accessed through academic databases, institutional repositories or official government and organisational websites.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Author Contributions

The author has done all the literature-based research, synthesising of literature, drafting the article, critical revisions all for the purposes of the publication of this article.

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