

Review on Chinese and International Research About Transition to School

Shujing Cui

Charles University, Faculty of Education, Institute for Research and Development in Education

Abstract: Transition to school lays the foundation for development of children throughout the school year. It is a research topic of interest across many countries including China. Extant reviews on transition to school mainly addressed international research written in English, however, the major foci and research findings of Chinese research were not included. This review included 131 international studies and 113 Chinese studies on school readiness and transition to school, from 1999 to 2021, to identify major foci and findings of both international and Chinese research on this topic. A considerable of overlap of foci and consistent findings between international and Chinese transition research were found in this review. The unique focus of Chinese research on psychological pressure of children in transition to school and its implication were discussed. Differences of methods adopted in international and Chinese studies were identified. Conclusions about the trends and future research directions are presented.

Keywords: transition to school, China, school readiness, review

Transition to school, or more specifically, transition from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to school, is a global concern and a topic of interest for educational researchers across countries in a world-wide scope. In China, recent years have witnessed rising attention to transition from ECEC to school both in policy and research. In March 2021, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of China published *Guidance on promoting transition from kindergartens to school*, which highlighted the child-centered, bidirectional, and systematic approach to ease children's transition, especially the cooperation between ECEC settings and primary schools (MOE of China, 2021a). Chinese studies on transition to school were brought into the limelight of the early childhood research in China due to the above initiative. Internationally, a consolidated body of research addressed this research topic extensively, covering the theory, conceptualization, the influential factors, policies, practices, etc. Over the past two decades, a handful of reviews probed into the international perspectives on the research topic based on literature written in English (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Boyle et al., 2018a), providing a wealth of information about the research findings among a lot of countries, such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, as well as many European countries (Peters, 2010; Dockett & Perry, 2013; OECD, 2017). However, reviews in this field seldomly included studies written in Chinese even though some reviews covered papers written in English in relation to

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44 transition to school in Asia (Dockett & Perry, 2013), which might provide a limited insight about Chinese studies. Thus, given that Chinese studies were underrepresented in the extant reviews on transition to school, a gap is implied in the literature review from an international perspective. Nonetheless, Chinese studies could be similar and different with the existing research findings from other countries in some way. Consequently, the present review aimed to identify the main foci and research findings of studies on transition to school in Chinese and international research over the past two decades.

1 Literature Inclusion and Review Approaches

To identify and compare the main findings in international and Chinese studies on transition to school, a narrative review was conducted in this study. This part illustrates the literature inclusion process, the characteristics of resources and terminologies used in the review.

1.1 Literature Inclusion Process

Though transition to school is used above, in the existing literature, two major terminologies, “school readiness” and “transition to school”, were employed to discuss the phase that children start school. The two terminologies entwined with each other and related studies both address questions about starting school. Thus, studies surrounding both terminologies are included in this review to get a comprehensive understanding of existing research findings and gaps. Unlike school readiness, which is used universally in studies across countries, several terminologies with trivial differences are used in extant literature across countries as equivalent to “transition to school”, including “transition from early childhood education and care to school / primary school”, “transition(s) to school”, “transition to kindergarten”. Using the phrase “transition to kindergarten” might generate outcomes that refer to a different age group in the United States and other countries. However, all the papers included in the collection from Web of Science found using key word “transition to kindergarten” were from the USA and they refer to the relevant age group.

Based on the terminologies above, the literature from 1999 to 2021 were searched in Web of Science by title with the following Boolean operator: “school readiness” OR “transition* to school” OR “transition* from ECEC to school” OR “transition* to kindergarten”, then the search results were refined within the research scope of psychology development, educational and psychological education research and psychology educational. Additional criteria included also the language as English, finally 432 papers were found (including articles, proceedings papers and book chapters) in Web of Science. Accordingly, Chinese literature was searched in the same timespan by using the corresponding Chinese terms in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the dominant database of Chinese academic papers, including only the

publications in the core periodicals and source journals of Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI). 260 Chinese papers were found in this process.

The following criteria were employed to include, exclude, and extend the literature corpus for review both Chinese and English. Criterion 1 was considered to control the quality of studies reviewed. Though multiple terms were used to stand for transition to school, which is a multi-disciplinary research topic, this review only focused on studies addressing mainstreaming-education-specific studies about transition to the education level of ISCED 1, so Criterion 2 and Criterion 3 were for specifying the scope of studies reviewed. Furthermore, the references of papers searched were tracked to see if eligible papers should be included.

1. The study had to be peer-reviewed.
2. The study had to deal with transition to school (ISCED 1) rather than other education level, specifically, the study had to address the transition to school of children aged from around 4 to 8 years old.
3. The study had to be mainstreaming-education-specific, e.g., studies using methods from health science were excluded, also studies about special education were excluded.
4. References of the review papers were tracked, and eligible papers were included.

1.2 Characteristics of Resources

Having read the abstracts of those articles, I excluded 60 English papers and 147 Chinese papers according to the criteria above, and then retrieved 130 English papers and 113 Chinese papers with full-text available for further review. The final literature corpus reviewed includes 11 review papers and 119 primary studies in English, 17 review papers and 96 primary studies in Chinese. Table 1 shows the time and numbers of studies reviewed (only journal papers, conference presentations and reports, and book chapters). All Chinese studies reviewed include items written in both Chinese and English. For studies written in Chinese, English titles were provided in the references. Nevertheless, the references cited in this review did not exhaust all papers reviewed.

Table 1 Geographic and chronological characteristic of studies reviewed

Origin	Number of studies		Total
	Publication year		
	1999–2009	2010–2021	
International	29	101	130
China	20	93	113

1.3 Review Approaches

This review takes the form of a narrative review, which aims to get an overview of study in a field through critical reading and general evaluation of the literature (Bryman, 2012; Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016). In contrast with the organized step-by-step procedures of systematic review approach, we took more general review approaches. After the inclusion process of literature, we read all of them thoroughly and critically, identified 6 major themes in the existing literature which form the structure of the following sections of this paper. Based on the major themes presented in the literature, we summarized the main findings of studies in a critical way and structured the current review according to the emerging 6 themes. Thus, following the main foci of studies in English and Chinese, the present review is structured in line with the following thread, the conceptualization of transition to school and theoretical perspectives, school readiness assessment and related child's characteristics, influence of family-related factors, ECEC and school based influential factors, children's perspective, and continuity in transition. The classification of research reviewed in the current paper was inspired by other literature review published so far, mainly the review of Boyle et al. (2018b). However, we integrated other newly published English papers and Chinese studies, adjusted the classification respectively and arrived at the 6 categories of research themes mentioned above.

Besides, as mentioned above, several terminologies were used in the international and Chinese studies for addressing transition to school. As Early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting is used more prevalently both in international and Chinese studies to refer to preschool, ECEC setting is employed in this review to avoid ambiguity. Transition to school and transition from ECEC to school are used as synonyms in this review.

2 Conceptualization of Transition to School and Theoretical Perspectives

One major focus of transition to school research is the conceptualization and the theoretic frameworks backing up the empirical studies. Both in the international and Chinese studies, multiple theoretical perspectives were used for guiding the empirical studies. In the international studies, five major theoretical perspectives were identified, namely developmental, bioecological, socio-cultural, critical and ontological perspectives (Boyle et al., 2018a, 2018b). Thus, the shift of theoretical framework of transition to school was evident over the past two decades in international research. Whereas, in Chinese studies, such dramatic shift was not identified and most studies on transition to school were based on the developmental and bioecological theories explicitly.

In general, the conceptualization of transition has been changing over the past two decades in international studies. According to the review of Boyle et al. (2018b),

the construct of transition to school went through the shift from an event to a process, and then to continuity practices. In the earlier times, researchers adopted the term of school readiness to address the issues of school entry and concentrated on children's readiness for school, as research progressed, there emerged a trend to consider the entry to school as a process in the context of the theory of ecological system of Bronfenbrenner (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) and Vygotskian socio-cultural theory (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Then the term of transition to school was adopted frequently in research and the re-conceptualization of the term of school readiness focused on continuity of children's experience, partnership with stakeholders and system coherence across extended time periods (Petriwsky et al., 2005). Recently, a new conceptual model was also advanced to reframe transitions as continuity practices from the ontological perspective (Boyle et al., 2018b).

In Chinese studies, though the conceptualization of transition to school were not explicitly addressed in theoretical discourses, the foci of empirical studies implied the emphasis on understanding transition to school as a long-term process and improving the continuity in such process (Yang & Wu, 2007; Zhao & Lv, 2008; Cheng et al., 2021). Besides, the theoretical discussion on transition to school in Chinese context featured a large body of papers on preventing ECEC settings from teaching what children were supposed to learn at primary school in the disguise of transition to school (Xu, 2020), which suggested the critique on the underlying conceptualizing transition to school simply as one-off event related to such practices. Thus, Chinese studies were aligned with the international studies regarding the conceptualization of transition to school in Chinese context to some extent. However, as the conceptualization of transition to school in Chinese context was not defined explicitly, this part compared the international and Chinese studies in the thread of the three common conceptualizations stated above.

2.1 Transition as an Event With the Developmental Theoretical Basis

Transition to school was conceptualized as a one-off change event or point in time from the perspectives of maturation or developmental theories in the international research (Vogler et al., 2008). From this theoretical perspective, school readiness assessment of children was the major concern and children's maturation was considered as an important influential factor (La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Vogler et al., 2008; Boyle et al., 2018a). Thus, school readiness was used for addressing the school entry issue and implied that children should be ready for entering the primary school. Based on such assumption, a multitude of research papers concerned with using normative scales or check lists to measure children's capacities in multiple domains such as pre-academic skills, behavioral problems, and social competence in order to determine or predict whether children's transitions to school would be smooth (Janus & Offord, 2007; Russo et al., 2019). In Chinese studies, though such conceptualization was not explicitly advanced in the literature, one stream of research focused

48 on measuring school readiness of children, implying the influence of developmental or maturation theories (Qian & Ding, 2010; Liu et al., 2012).

However, the conceptualization of transition to school as a one-off event and concentration on measuring whether children are ready for school incurred some criticisms in both international studies. Researchers doubted on the psychometric properties of screening tests used in prevalence to determine whether a child was ready for school and questioned the risk of misplacement of children according to the unreliable instruments (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). Besides, the focus on associating school readiness with children's inherent characteristics such as pre-academic skills was related to some consequences on ECEC settings, children, and parents. The pressure of the primary school on academic skills trickled down to ECEC curriculum and could result in the "schoolification" of ECEC settings, featuring exposing children to more teacher-directed and academic-oriented pedagogies, which is problematic for young children's well-being (Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood, 2008; Moss, 2013). The school readiness assessment classifying children as ready or unready also was critiqued as oversimplification of transition to school regardless of the complex surrounding contexts that transition took place (Vogler et al., 2008). Apart from the above discourses on the tensions surrounding conceptualization of transition to school as a one-off event, focusing on assessing children's school readiness led to some consequences in practice. For instance, in the USA and Australia, some parents use the practice of delaying their children's school entry, or so-called redshirting to help children transition to school, which is also called the 'gift of time' (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). In response to the above criticisms and problematic consequence in practices, researchers stressed that school readiness should not be a unitary construct but a bidirectional one with school being also ready for children with different patterns of developmental strengths and weaknesses (Carlton & Winsler, 1999).

In Chinese literature, discussion about the conceptualization of transition to school as a one-off event was not explicit. In comparison with international studies, school readiness assessment was not used in practice for deciding whether children were ready for school but only as a research instrument. Meanwhile, as the statutory cut-off date policy for school entry has been strictly implemented in China in recent years, holding back children for one more year for school entry was not a common practice and corresponding topic was seldomly identified in Chinese literature. Nevertheless, the debate and policy on prohibiting the schoolification in ECEC pedagogy and discouraging parents' overemphasis on knowledge preparedness have been the predominant issue about school readiness over the past two decades (MOE of China, 2018). Such attention to the banning on teaching what pupils learn in primary school to preschoolers, namely schoolification in Chinese scenario, mirrored the criticisms of construct of transition as a one-off event implicitly. Much debate among Chinese studies about the schoolification was entwined with transition to school and also reflected the tension between children being ready for school and school being ready for children. Recently, such tensions were explicitly discussed in Chinese studies. Liu

(2019) addressed that primary school should be ready for children and accommodate to school entrants' needs instead of emphasizing ECEC settings and children being ready for primary school's requirements.

2.2 Transition as Processes From Socio-Cultural and Ecological Perspective

Based on socio-cultural and ecological perspective, a paradigm shift was advanced and transition to school was conceptualized as processes in international studies. To tackle the problematic conceptualization of transition as a one-off event, including the popularity of delayed entry, transition class as a result of the poor validity and reliability of school readiness assessment for children, Carlton and Winsler (1999) proposed the need for the paradigm shift. On the one hand, Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) advanced a dynamic relationship-based model of transition to school, the ecological and dynamic model of transition and highlighted the importance of taking the relationships and the dynamic surrounding contexts into consideration. On the other hand, socio-cultural perspective was employed as a lens to theorize transition to school considering the contexts in which transition took place. From socio-cultural perspective, transition process is more a guided participation of children in the changing and dynamic social activities than a one-off event (Vogler et al., 2008). Transition to school involves changes in role, identity, status, agency of children as they move into new educational environments (Rogoff, 2003). Contrasted with the construct from developmental perspective, the ecological and sociocultural conceptualization of transition to school stressed more the contexts in which the transition process happened.

No original theoretical elaboration on the conceptualization of transition to school from the bioecological and sociocultural perspectives was identified in Chinese studies, however, the bioecological and dynamic conceptual model on transition was introduced from international studies by Chinese researchers to provide the basis for empirical studies on transition to school in China (Li et al., 2010). Thus, Chinese studies in transition to school over the past decade featured by referencing the conceptualization of transition to school from bioecological theory for empirical studies or standpoint of discourse (Yang & Wu, 2007; Lu et al., 2014; Li et al., 2015; Yu et al., 2019). However, only a few Chinese studies referred to both the bioecological and sociocultural perspectives as the guidance framework and deemed transition to school as a process involving in a series of changes, interactions, and even conflicts among stakeholders in a complex bioecological system (Ma, 2019).

2.3 Transition as Continuity Practices From Ontological Perspective

As the importance of contexts in which transitions happen was recognized and widely accepted in international transition studies, the necessity of explaining the

50 unfolding of transition in particular sites and settings began to emerge. Boyle et al (2018b) reframed the concept of transition to school as continuity practices by shifting from epistemological perspective to ontological perspective and developed a conceptual model of transition to school, highlighting that transition is continuity practices which rarely universally unfold across different sites and different time. Three important domains of continuity, including developmental continuity, contextual continuity, and structural continuity, were addressed by their conceptual model. According to their conceptual model, the following factors could facilitate or constrain transition to school, including the shared professional knowledge or pedagogical understanding of teachers in both settings (ECEC and primary school), the separation of ECEC from the primary school or its integration with primary school in terms of physical distances, and the collaborative or unequal relationship among stakeholders of transition to school (Boyle et al., 2018b).

The conceptualization of transition to school as continuity practices was not identified in Chinese literature, however, such trend in international research exerted an influence on Chinese studies in two ways. On one hand, a stream of research addressed the issue about discontinuities in transition to school in China, including the professional discontinuities, curriculum and pedagogical discontinuities and structural discontinuities (Yang & Wu, 2007; Zhao & Lv, 2008; Chen, 2014). Even though the conceptualization of transition to school as continuity practices was not explicitly advanced, the theoretical discussions on enhancing continuities in transition to school and empirical studies on exploring the above discontinuities reflected a trend towards defining transition to school as continuity practices in Chinese context. On the other hand, the main findings of *Starting Strong V* report by OECD were introduced to Chinese researchers in a comparative perspective, which highlighted the importance of facilitating continuity in transition and shed light on the policy and practice pointers for bridging gaps between ECEC and school (Xu & Liu, 2019). The enlightenments from such trend of international research also brought about the advancement of several governmental guidelines and documents on improving continuity practices between ECEC and school, including the *Guidance on promoting transition from kindergartens to school* (MOE of China, 2021a), *Guidance on school readiness instructions for preschoolers* (MOE of China, 2021b), *Guidance on school adjustment instructions for primary schools* (MOE of China, 2021c), etc.

2.4 Connections and Differentiation Among Different Theoretical Perspectives

The diverse theoretical conceptualizations of school readiness and transition to school implies the complexity of the concepts. This part of the review does not exhaust the theoretical perspectives concerning with the two concepts, but only illustrates some major ones. As the constructions of transition to school from the above theoretical perspectives shows, different conceptualizations have different foci. The developmental perspective stresses the competence of child, while the

socio-cultural and bio-ecological perspectives highlight the role of stakeholders as well as relationship among them, and the ontological perspective emphasizing enhancing continuity and deeming the transition as practices. The latter three perspectives are more “school ready for child” than the first perspective, however, the first developmental perspective is still important for us to understand school readiness and transition to school. Though assessment for child’s school readiness is criticized in many ways, it is still necessary for us to evaluate child’s competence for providing the optimal education arrangement, identifying children at risk and improving the equity of education. But it is from other perspectives that we could learn that school readiness is not binary, and it could not be oversimplified as child’s school readiness. From the socio-cultural and bio-ecological perspectives, which are used very frequently in school readiness and transition research both in international and Chinese studies, researchers are guided to think about the role of contexts, such as school, culture, relationship in the transition process in a dynamic and interactive way. The ontological perspective is a new trend and focuses on what we need to do to enhance continuity in transition and it’s more specific and directs to the policy and practices of transition. From this standpoint, the four theoretical perspectives complement with each other and diversify the framework of the empirical studies of school readiness and transition to school, offering us different angles to understand this topic.

3 School Readiness Assessment and Related Child’s Characteristics

As it is stated in the section above, from the developmental perspective, researchers are inclined to assess child’s capacities of adapting to school and to explore child’s characteristics related to school readiness. Among the empirical international and Chinese studies, a large body of research focused on measuring child’s school readiness and examining children’s characteristics associated with school readiness, mainly child’s school entry age and socioeconomic status. The following part addresses main findings surrounding this theme.

3.1 Child’s School Readiness Assessment and Related Child’s Characteristics

A wide range of scales were used to measure child’s school readiness, the following part illustrates some scales commonly used briefly. Besides, some empirical study findings concerning with child’s school readiness patterns are also reviewed in this part.

3.1.1 School Readiness Scales

A body of international research measured school readiness by the Early Development Instrument (EDI), which was developed in Canada, rated by teachers on children's school readiness of five domains: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge (Janus & Offord, 2007). EDI was adapted and used across different countries, such as Australia, USA, Jamaica, and some other countries (Janus et al., 2011; Wolf et al., 2017). One adapted version of EDI widely used was the International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA), which was a direct measure of children's school readiness in low- and middle-income countries. IDELA was partly based on and adapted from the EDI and covered also five domains of school readiness, namely emergent numeracy, emergent literacy, social-emotional development, motor development and executive function (Wolf & McCoy, 2019). Though widely used internationally, EDI was criticized in several ways for several limitations, among which the most important one was the narrow definition of school readiness behind this scale because it only measured child's readiness without taking into account the roles of family, school, etc.

Among the above scales, EDI was also adapted to Chinese Early Development Instrument (CEDI) for school readiness assessment of Chinese children (Ip et al., 2013). Another scale, Brief Early Skills and Support Index (BESSI), was translated and used directly in Chinese studies for school readiness assessment (Wang, 2019). Aside from the scales adapted from those used in international studies, local instruments for measuring school readiness for Chinese children were developed, such as the School Readiness Test Battery-Comprehensive Version (SBTB-CV) (Gai, 2007) and the diagnostic scale on maturity of children entering school (Qian & Ding, 2010), which were designed to be administered by trained professionals. Besides, Yu and Gai (2013) developed Children's School Readiness Assessment rated by Chinese parents, which was consisted of three sub-scales, measuring the developmental risks, type of temperament, and self-control. Longitudinal follow-up study showed that the outcome of the scale could predict child's school adjustment one month after school entry. Among these instruments, the most widely used one in Chinese studies is SBTB-CV, which was composed of five domains, basic knowledge and cognition, approaches to learning, language, motor skills, social and emotional development (Gai, 2007).

3.1.2 School Readiness Patterns

One important topic about school readiness assessment is to delineate the transition process and to identify the patterns of school readiness on an individual level. In international studies, three to six profiles of school readiness were found (Sabol & Pianta, 2012; Sandilos et al., 2019), however, in Chinese studies, three to four profiles of school readiness were identified in extant literature (Lu et al., 2012; Gao, 2014).

In the international studies, while examining the patterns of school readiness, Sabol and Pianta (2012) categorized the patterns into six distinct profiles and found that six school readiness profiles at 54 months predicted the academic and

socioemotional outcomes in fifth grade. Their research also reviewed that children's early social competence and self-regulation skills positively predicted the academic achievement in fifth grade. Sandilos et al. (2019) measured more domains of school readiness and adopted latent profile analysis to identify three school readiness profiles at the school entry and the first grade. Their results also showed that the school readiness profiles were stable during transition to school. Additionally, it was also revealed that background characteristics and the teacher-child relationship were associated with child's school readiness profile.

In Chinese studies, Lu et al. (2012) employed cluster analysis for classify children with different category of school readiness, four types were identified, including good overall readiness, poor readiness on health and motor skills, good readiness on health and motor skills with poor readiness in other domains, and poor overall readiness. Children with good overall readiness had the best school adjustment, whereas those with poor overall readiness had the worst. Gao (2014) adopted the latent profile analysis and identified three types of school readiness, which are well-developed, ordinary, and lagging behind. The level of self-confidence and anxiety differed significantly among three groups of children.

3.1.3 Child's Socioeconomic Status and School Readiness

A consolidated body of international studies empirically substantiated the association between socioeconomic status (SES) and school readiness, which was also evidenced by abundant Chinese studies. The results were consistent in international and Chinese studies. Children from low SES families are less ready for school than those from the upper spectrum of SES families (Gai & Liu, 2008; Zeng & Liu, 2013; Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2015; Wolf & McCoy, 2019; Ren et al., 2020). Though most evidence in English-language literature was from Euro-American research, the results from other countries, including Canada, Ghana, etc., are generally consistent with those from European and American studies. Evidence showed that SES was both directly and indirectly associated with children's school readiness (Razza et al., 2010; Larson et al., 2015).

The disparities of school readiness, especially of academic or cognitive school readiness between children from low SES families and their counterparts from high SES families were significant across countries and ethnicity. Zhang et al. (2019) found that SES predicted Chinese children's later math and science performance after controlling for earlier performance. Briceno et al. (2013) revealed that mothers' education of a high school level contributed additively to child outcomes among the low-income Latino families in the United States. Evidence from research in the United States suggested that social class influenced children's school readiness skills both academically (math and reading abilities) and non-cognitively (self-control, social skills, approaches to learning, and persistence). Significant gaps existed between the reading and math skills of white and Asian children and those of black and Hispanic children. The most socioeconomically disadvantaged children lag behind in non-cognitive skills (Garcia & Weiss, 2015). Iruka et al. (2020) focused on

54 the influential factors on black girls' school readiness patterns, they found that decreased socio-economic resources in the home were associated with more likelihood of being classified as struggling learners. Also, for immigrant children, research results concerning the association between SES and school readiness converged. Researchers utilized the latent class analysis to identify the family risks on school readiness, they arrived at four family risk profiles, including low SES multilevel risk, maternal abuse history, low SES immigrant risk and low risk. They conducted path analyses and revealed that children in low SES multilevel risk and low SES immigrant risk profiles had the weakest school readiness (Browne et al., 2018).

Apart from the school readiness gaps across SES spectrums stated above, Chinese researchers also paid attention to the disparities of school readiness between children in rural and urban area, between those of minority ethnic groups and *Han*, between children in rural area and those who migrated from rural areas to cities, namely, migrant children in Chinese context. Research findings revealed that children in urban areas were significantly surpassed their counterparts in rural areas in school readiness domains of language (Liu et al., 2012), cognition as well as social-emotional development (Gai, 2008; Qian & Zhan, 2011). Children from ethnic minority groups, especially those in rural areas, were also found to lag behind those from Han ethnic group in school readiness domains of language, learning approaches and cognition (Guo & Gai, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2010). In comparison with children in rural areas, migrant children had significant lower performances in language school readiness (Zou et al., 2015), but no significant gaps were found regarding other school readiness domains (Shi, 2016; Zeng & Liu, 2013).

4 Influence of Family-Related Factors on the Transition Process

Both Chinese and international research investigated the influence of family-related factors on transition process empirically, mainly under the framework of the bio-ecological theory. Parents' school readiness beliefs and parental involvement were family-related factors explored in both Chinese and international studies. This part reviews empirical findings surrounding the above topics in international and Chinese studies.

4.1 Parents' School Readiness Beliefs

Some researchers compared parents' school readiness beliefs with teachers' (Chan, 2012; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016), while other researchers explored parents' school readiness beliefs solely (Barbarin et al., 2008). Parents' school readiness beliefs varied across cultures and some patterns were found by researchers. Studies showed that Chinese parents generally value children's academic skills and self-discipline (Chan, 2012; Weng et al., 2021). Whereas, in Denmark, parents deemed

social learning as the most important skills of child's school readiness and academic competence was not important as it could grow naturally (Kjaer et al., 2020). In comparison with parents in the USA, Chinese parents stressed more the school readiness domains of language and cognition, meanwhile, felt more anxiety and pressure about transition to school (Weng et al., 2021). Besides, research revealed that among US immigrant parents from China, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, two profiles of parents' school readiness beliefs were found, the first emphasized academic skills and the second emphasized learning-related skills (Sawyer et al., 2021). Research also showed that Asian American parents and European American parents held different school readiness beliefs. Asian American parents attached greater importance to academic skills and had higher expectations than their European American counterparts (Sy & Schulenberg, 2005). However, no specific research on comparing the school readiness beliefs of Chinese parents and those of Chinese American parents or Asian American parents was found for exploring the difference due to the sociocultural factors.

4.2 Parental Involvement and Parenting Behaviors

International studies found that high-quality dyadic relationship, parental involvement could protect children against adjustment problems and some parenting behaviors were positively associated with school readiness. Kiuru and Laursen (2016) found in their longitudinal study that high maternal support at school entry buffered against adjustment problems for children with low quality relationship with teacher. Additionally, maternal involvement was related to positive school adjustment outcome. A two-wave longitudinal study showed that mother's involvement in language and cognitive activities were positively associated with smooth school transition. It was also revealed that mothers were more involved at children's schools when their children showed lower cognitive skills in ECEC settings (Lau & Power, 2018). Additionally, some parenting behaviors were associated with better school readiness, such as parent responsiveness, supportiveness, richer home learning environment (Rispoli et al., 2019).

Chinese studies focused more on the association between parental involvement, parenting style and school readiness. Liu and Li (2015) investigated the parental involvement in China and revealed that parents of girls had higher parental involvement in transition than those of boys. Chinese parents with higher SES were found to be more likely to get involved in helping their child transition to school. Studies on Chinese parents examined three types of parental involvement and their relations with school readiness, the results showed that home-based involvement was positively related to children's school readiness and the effect was stronger than school-based involvement and home-school conferencing (Xia et al., 2020). Xie and Li (2018) found that supportive parenting style were associated with better school readiness for Chinese children.

5 ECEC and School Based Influential Factors

Both international and Chinese studies drew on the influential factors related to characteristics of ECEC and school. Chinese studies focused on investigating the ECEC teachers' and schoolteachers' perspectives as well as introducing transition practices of other countries from a comparative perspective. However, international research covered a much wider range of topics, which Chinese studies did not address, including ECEC quality and classroom engagement, effect of transition practices and the teacher-child relationship. This part focused on the research findings concerning with these topics.

5.1 ECEC Teachers' and Primary School Teachers' Perspectives

Both international and Chinese research probed into ECEC teachers' and primary school teachers' perspectives regarding transition to school. A comparison among teachers' beliefs on children's school readiness across six countries, including Australia, Austria, Colombia, Germany, Nicaragua, and Slovenia, showed that ECEC and primary school teachers rated independence, social skills and concentration as very important, pre-academic and physical development were considered to be the least important school readiness characteristics (Niklas et al., 2018). Chinese primary school teacher rated that Chinese children were the least ready in terms of taking care of oneself and pre-academic skills (Bao & Zhang, 2005). Both Chinese primary school teachers and ECEC teachers valued the school readiness domains of social-emotional and approaches to learning (Zhang et al., 2005). However, Chinese primary school teachers held much higher expectation for children's school readiness than ECEC teachers (Yu, 2019). While in an international study, Abry and LoCasale-Crouch (2015) revealed the impact of differences between ECEC and primary school teachers' school readiness beliefs on children's later adjustment. They found that the alignment of ECEC teachers' and primary school teachers' beliefs on school readiness was positively associated with children's school adjustment, including socio-behavioral and academic adjustment. Furthermore, the socioeconomic background of children moderated the relations between misalignment of beliefs and school adjustment (Abry & LoCasale-Crouch, 2015).

5.2 Transition Activities

A large body of international research assessed the relationship between the number, the pattern of transition activities and children's adjustment. LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) founded that children were rated as more socially competent and having fewer problem behaviors when the preschool they attended implemented more transition activities and, specifically if preschool teachers discussed curricula or specific children with schoolteachers. Cook and Coley (2017) found that more types of transition activities could predict better behavioral readiness but were not

related to children's attention or academic outcomes. For the association between transition activity pattern and children's adjustment, a Finnish study showed that cooperation concerning with curricula and sharing written information about children were the best predictors of the children's skills, however, these were used the least (Ahtola et al., 2011). Furthermore, transition activities targeted at parents were also found to be related to children's better academic adjustment after school entry (Cook & Coley, 2017).

Though studies on transition activities also constituted an important stream of Chinese research, few study investigated or assessed the characteristics of transition activities and effects on children's adjustment. Most Chinese studies adopted a comparative approach to introduce successful transition programs from other countries for enlightenments in Chinese contexts. Countries most identified in the comparative studies surrounding this topic were Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Hong & Cui, 2011; Li & Ye, 2016; Mao, 2016). However, how effective were the local transition practices implemented in China remained a research gap.

5.3 Quality and Pedagogy of ECEC

International studies investigated the impact of quality and pedagogy of ECEC on transition to school. However, the corresponding research in Chinese studies was not identified in the literature corpus, indicating a gap in Chinese research. The international studies revealed positive association between high-quality ECEC and school readiness, as well as between different pedagogical activities and school readiness. A longitudinal study indicated that the benefits of high-quality ECEC in math and literacy accumulated from the end of preschool through age 15 but faded out when the quality of later classroom environment in primary school were low (Arya & Pianta, 2018). The pedagogy of ECEC was also found to be associated with school readiness. Chien et al (2010) identified four patterns of child engagement in preschool classrooms, free play, individual instruction, group instruction, and scaffolded learning, and explored the relations between those classroom engagement patterns and school readiness in different domains. The results showed that free play children were found to gain less in domains of literacy and mathematics than other groups. Individual instruction group made greater gains than other groups academically. International research added to our knowledge about the association between ECEC quality and transition to school, however, the gap of Chinese studies concerning with this topic remained to be filled in.

5.4 Relationship Among Stakeholders

Based on the bio-ecological perspective, relationship among stakeholders plays an important role in transition to school. International studies showed that positive close teacher-child relationship was positively associated with child's school adjustment in terms of academic outcomes (Howes et al., 2008), and teacher-student

58 conflicts were negatively related to children's self-regulation and predicted subsequent school adjustment (Li & Lau, 2018). It was also showed that high positive teacher affect in Grade 1 could reduce adjustment problems for children with low maternal support (Kiuru & Laursen, 2016). More robust result from quasi-experimental research revealed that children demonstrated better inhibitory control when their primary school teacher had been coached to improve teacher-child interactions (Pianta et al., 2017).

Several Chinese studies dealt with the relationship among stakeholders in transition to school. Lu et al. (2014) explored the interpersonal relationship in the ecology system of transition and tried to identify the model of how the expectations of parents influence children's peer relationship, teacher-student relationship as well as their school adjustment. They found that child's peer relationship predicted school adjustment, and parents' expectation had a regulatory effect on the association between peer relationship and school adjustment.

6 Children's Perspectives on Transition to School

Children's perspectives on transition to school developed into a stream of research in international studies and also emerged in Chinese transition studies especially over the past decade. From the sociocultural perspective, researchers, especially in Nordic countries, highlight the importance to probe into children's views on transition to school as they are the main agent in this process. Researchers often adopt ethnographic methods for exploring what children think and feel about the transition process. Child's drawing and photography were used for eliciting opinions about transition to school in the interview or complement with the interview. Research results reached consensus that children were able to think about the transition process and they are active agent in this process (Einarsdottir, 2010, 2011; Salmi & Kumpulainen, 2019). Besides, the mosaic approach, which featured multi-method, was also applied in this field to listen to the voices and views of children about transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Ring, 2016). Children's perspectives on their experience are the main foci of this stream of research both in international and Chinese studies, research questions addressed children's feelings about transition, opinions about the differences between preschool and school as well as child's identity changes, self-development (Ackesjö, 2013; Eskelä-Haapanen, 2016; Roncancio-Moreno & Branco, 2017; Ma, 2019). Regarding children's feelings about transition, international research findings were almost consistent that children had mixed feelings about transition to school, both excited and anxious.

What's noteworthy, in recent years Chinese studies focused on probing into children's stress or pressure in transition to school. Wong and Power (2019) revealed that Chinese children's strategies coping with stress in transition to school were composed of negative coping, positive coping, and distraction. Additionally, distraction might not always be an effective way to help children reduce depressive symptoms, and that

coping strategies might have a greater impact on buffering against later depression risk for girls than for boys. Measuring children's pressure and stress was an emerging topic in Chinese studies about children's perspectives on transition to school. Based on child's interviews, Wang and Liu (2018) found that the main stressors for children were about academic learning, rules in primary schools, primary school teachers' authority and separation from ECEC teachers. They also found that the minor stressors were about peer relations, unfamiliarity with the physical environment in primary school as well as the strict parental behaviors and expectations after entering school. Children were eager to be heard and to be an insider in the process of transition to school (Wang & Liu, 2018). Besides, to probe into the pressure of children during transition to school, Jiang et al. (2020) developed a scale for assessing the psychological well-being of children. The scale was composed of five dimensions, environment adaptation, peer relationship, adult rewards and punishments, individual needs, and academic learning rules. The results of survey applying the scale showed consistent findings with the qualitative research to some extent, indicating stress for children ranked from highest to lowest in transition to school were academic learning rules, adult rewards and punishments, peer relationship, environmental adaptation, individual needs. Girls felt more pressure than boys did. Additionally, children whose parents had a graduate education and above were more stressful than their counterparts whose parents had a lower education (Jiang et al., 2020).

7 Continuity in Transition

Before Boyle et al (2018b) constructed transition as continuity practice from ontological perspective, a body of research had been focused on continuity in transition, however, not explicitly based on a particular theory. While after the proposal of their conceptual model of transition as continuity practices, a handful of international studies employed it as theoretical framework. In Chinese studies, though no such conceptual model was advanced to guide empirical studies, research concerning with continuity between ECEC and primary school constituted an important topic of interest. Given that empirical studies from this newly advanced model and theoretical perspective are few, this part reviews the empirical research findings surrounding continuity in transition in international and Chinese literature. Research concerning with continuity and alignment in transition to school encompasses the continuity of policy and practice, of curriculum, of children's experience, and of leadership between ECEC and school.

7.1 Transition Policy and Practices in Improving Continuity

International studies revealed challenges for transition policies and practices to facilitate continuity across countries and within countries. The report *Starting Strong V* (OECD, 2017) shed light on the continuity enhancement in transition from

60 ECEC to primary school in a larger scope. The findings of OECD survey on transition policy and practice across 30 countries were reported. Challenges in terms of professional continuity, curriculum and pedagogical continuity, and developmental continuity commonly confronted by countries encompass misalignment of perspectives of preschool- and schoolteachers, differences, and discontinuities in curricular, lack of shared pedagogical understanding, engaging parental involvement, difficulty in child development exchanges, etc. Policy pointers were advanced such as encouraging cooperation, collaboration to enhance continuity, support local leadership by national policy framework and so on. Besides, Cohen-Vogel et al. (2020) investigated the instructional policy support alignment between preschool and school in a local level in North Carolina, USA. The results showed that the alignment regarding the standards, curricula, and assessments was weak between preschool and school.

Chinese studies concerning with transition policy and practices continuity featured a large body of comparative studies. The major findings of *Starting Strong V* were introduced in China and enlightened the transition policy and practices (Xu & Liu, 2019). Besides, the policy and practices on promoting continuity in other countries such as Australia (Liu, 2015), Japan (Liu, 2020) were also introduced. On the other hand, based on unique challenges in China, policy and practices recommendations for enhancing the continuity in transition were advanced by researchers, such as governance and organization focusing on improving continuity between ECEC and primary school and aligning the professional training of teachers between two sectors (Yuan & Yang, 2019; Fan et al., 2010), improving collaboration of ECEC teachers, primary school teachers and parents on transition activity action research (Fan et al., 2010; Li et al., 2012). However, research on the effectiveness of these policy and practices was lacking.

7.2 Investigation on Discontinuities and Program Enhancing Continuity Through Leadership

Both international and studies examined the discontinuity of pedagogy, curriculum and children's experience in transition. The extant literature identified significant discontinuities between ECEC and primary school across countries. Vitiello et al. (2020) examined the continuity of children's classroom experience between preschool and school by comparing the structural, process features of classroom as well as the teacher beliefs and practices between two sectors. Longitudinal data were employed, independent sample t tests and Chi-square tests were conducted to compare the indicators. Results showed that several discontinuities existed, including more teacher-structured activity and less effective teacher-child interactions at schools than preschools. Chinese researchers investigated the discontinuity in curriculum and found that significant differences existed between ECEC and primary school curriculum in terms of resources available, decision-making process of the contents (Qin & Hou, 2005). Chen (2014) compared the teaching practices in Chinese ECEC and primary school. It was revealed that the major discontinuity of teaching

practices between two sectors lied in that primary school teachers adopted more knowledge-centered pedagogy while teaching in ECEC was more child-centered.

Based on the conceptual model of transition as continuity practices from ontological perspective, Boyle and Wilkinson (2018) in New South Wales of Australia adopted the critical participatory action research method to enhance shared understanding of practices in a transition program through cross-sectorial leadership. The results revealed that through leading practices including inclusive communication, negotiating shared goals and differences, shared understandings of transitions to school practices could be established between professionals in two settings, namely ECEC and school. The transition policy and practice specific to the scenario was built based on the shared understanding. In terms of Chinese research findings, Fan et al. (2010) also reported some practices on promoting continuity through leadership though not explicit under any theoretical framework. Coordinated by local authorities, they launched a transition collaboration program between ECEC and primary schools and reported some practices including bidirectional collaboration on constructing the curriculum, communication and exchange between ECEC and primary school teachers in practice, joint training on transition for teachers of two settings, as well as the one-to-one partnership between classes in the last year of ECEC and those in lower grades of primary school. However, empirical evidence for the effect of those practices was not explicitly stated.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed Chinese and international studies over the past two decades on school readiness and transition to school. Four major theories in transition to school were identified in international studies, which were developmental or maturation perspective, biological and sociocultural perspective, and ontological perspective. In general, the empirical studies in extant literature could be categorized into the four theoretical frameworks. Each theoretical perspective addresses questions from a different standpoint. Generally speaking, the developmental and maturation theory is most closely related with children's school readiness assessment, relationship and perspectives of stakeholders as well as children's voices in transition are backed up mainly by bioecological and sociocultural theories. The continuity in transition is emerging as a key topic and supported by the ontological perspective. Based on different theories, the different aspects of school readiness and transition to school are presented and the properties of transition to school are unfolded.

The comparison between the themes of international and Chinese empirical studies shows a great deal of overlap. The common topics are the school readiness assessment, the influential factors related to family, ECEC and school, and the continuity of transition. Among these findings, some consistent research findings and a common research trend are highlighted as follows. The disparity of children's school readiness across different levels of SES is found across countries internationally as well as in

62 China, revealing the education equity issue in transition to school to be tackled continuously. Different patterns or typologies of school readiness found in international and Chinese studies remind us of both the education equity and the need of making school ready for children with different characteristics. Studies under the bioecological and sociocultural perspective reveal some protective factors associated with stakeholders, including parental involvement, supportive parenting style, high-quality ECEC program, and alignment of perspectives on child's school readiness between ECEC teachers and schoolteachers. Transition activities play a positive role in facilitating transition to school, especially those concerning with collaboration between ECEC and school on curriculum and sharing information about children. Listening to the voice of children is an important and common research trend in both international and Chinese studies. Discontinuities exist between ECEC and primary school in multifaceted ways, building continuity practices through leadership could be an effective way to smooth transition.

Additionally, one unique focus of Chinese studies recently, the attention to children's pressure and stress during transition period, is significant in Chinese scenario and might be also important for international studies. Such a theme reflected the perspective of children's wellbeing, as the transition to school involves in a great deal of anxiety for Chinese children from their own perspective. It would be an issue to be tackled for the future Chinese studies even international studies. Furthermore, conceptualization of transition to school as continuity practices provides us with a new perspective of understanding transition and indicates further research direction and trend.

The comparison between international and Chinese studies regarding the research methods revealed some major differences apart from similarities. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were adopted in international and Chinese studies. However, international quantitative studies featured with a large body of longitudinal research yielding more robust quantitative results, which was relatively lacking in Chinese studies on transition to school. However, the longitudinal research design is of particular value as transition was conceptualized as a long-term process. In such sense, the longitudinal research remains to be developed in Chinese studies on transition to school. In comparison with international studies, Chinese studies emphasized more exploring the effective transition policy and practices in a comparative perspective. Such a perspective is helpful for improving transition practices in Chinese contexts; however, more empirical research is needed for determining the effectiveness of practices learned from other countries.

The current review adds to the existing literature in two folds. On one hand, this paper brings the insight of Chinese studies and enriches the existing reviews in terms of the geographic diversity. On the other hand, this paper adds to the extant studies by inclusion of Chinese research foci and findings, which sheds light on the comparison between Chinese research and other countries. However, limitation of this review is worth mentioning. For literature written in English, only relevant studies

published in Web of Science were included, the absence of published studies in other databases and unpublished ones restricted the scope of this review.

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Shujing Cui
Institute for Research and Development in Education
Faculty of Education, Charles University
Magdalény Rettigové 4
116 39 Prague 1
Czech Republic
jingshucui@163.com