

Perspectives of Children, Parents and Teachers on School Readiness and School Transitions in Mainland China: A Narrative Literature Review

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Abstract

This paper presents a review of the literature on the perspectives on school readiness and the transition to school process of children, parents, kindergarten- and primary teachers in Mainland China. In addition, the ways in which parents and teachers support child transitions from kindergarten to primary school are examined. Forty-seven publications from three English databases and one Chinese database were included. On measures of cognitive and socio-emotional development, urban children were reported to outperform their rural counterparts, and girls outperformed boys. Compared with children of ethnic minority backgrounds, Han children demonstrated higher levels of cognitive and socio-emotional development than their peers. Children with special educational needs scored lower than typically developing children on assessments of school readiness. Kindergarten and primary teachers acknowledged the importance of socio-emotional development and approaches to learning, but differed on expectations relating to academic achievement and behavior. Family socioeconomic status (SES) and the extent to which parents prioritized academic skills were associated with parents' beliefs, practices, and children's school readiness. Authoritative parenting contributed to children's socio-emotional, cognitive and language development on measures of school readiness. Research implications and future directions regarding the perceptions and practices involved in children's transition to school are proposed.

Keywords: kindergarten and primary teachers, Mainland China, parents, school readiness and transition

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Introduction

In Mainland China, tens of millions of children start school each year (Ministry of Education, 2020), with the associated transition-to-school process impacting upon their families, kindergarten and primary teachers. The notion of ‘starting school’ has evolved from marking the day a child starts school, to the recognition that it is a process that occurs over an extended period of time and involves multiple stakeholders. Children who have developed the skills and dispositions that equip them for this process are likely to experience smoother transitions than their peers who are not school-ready (Niklas et al., 2018; Wesley & Buysse, 2003). Participation in early childhood education (ECE) contributes positively to this process (Lloyd & Hertzman, 2010; Rao et al., 2012). This is important, as longitudinal research demonstrates that positive school transitions are associated with academic achievement and lifelong success (Davies et al., 2016; Duncan et al., 2007; Ramey & Ramey, 2010). School transition is deemed to include young children learning about school life, beginning formal school education, and adapting themselves to meet school demands (Ramey & Ramey, 2010) and thus school readiness is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that includes a wide range of capabilities that equip a child to succeed in formal education (Britto, 2012; Kagan et al., 1995; Kiernan et al., 2008; Lau et al., 2012). However, school readiness is not only a child characteristic but encompasses ready children, ready schools, ready families and ready communities (Britto, 2012; Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, 2005), and thus the transition process occurs within a broader bioecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Children’s transition to primary school is regarded as one the most significant milestones in the early years (Lau, 2013; Vitiello et al., 2011), yet perceptions of school readiness are inherently culturally constructed (Bloch & Kim, 2015; Britto, 2012). Asian parents hold particularly high expectations for their children’s educational outcomes (Li & Xie, 2020; Spera et al., 2009; Suizzo & Stapleton, 2007), and place great emphasis on children’s academic results – reflected in the notion of ‘赢在起跑线’ which translates to ‘winning from the starting point’ (Lau, 2013, p. 408). In an effort to prevent the push-down of primary school curriculum to kindergarten, the *Law on Compulsory Education of the People’s Republic of China* was introduced in 1986 and updated in 2018 (Ministry of Justice of the People’s Republic of China, 2018). This law states that formal schooling does not officially

commence until a child reaches six years of age.

In Mainland China, ‘kindergarten’ refers to center-based ECE for children aged 3 to 6 years. Kindergarten 1 (K1, *youeryuan xiaoban*) caters for 3- to 4-year-old children, Kindergarten 2 (K2, *youeryuan zhongban*) for 4- to 5-year-olds, and 5- to 6-year-old children attend Kindergarten 3 (K3, *youeryuan daban*). In some rural areas, children attend pre-primary classes (*xueqianban*) before formal schooling; this refers to one-year, subject-based programs for children aged 5 to 7 years (Feng, 2017). These children are in ‘school-transition’ and have not yet started primary school. For the purposes of this review, kindergarten and pre-primary children are both deemed to be enrolled in ECE.

Policy regarding the support for child transitions to school has been a focus in China for many years. For example, the *Guidance for Kindergarten Education (Trial Version)* (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China [MOE], 2001) stated that kindergartens should work closely with families and communities to prepare children to enter primary school. Further, in 2010, The State Council stated that ECE institutes should cease the primary-school-oriented teaching content and educational approach and promote the collaboration with children’s families (The State Council, 2010). The *Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3 to 6 Years* was introduced in China two years later in 2012 and acknowledged the educational goal of guiding young children to be curious about and eager for primary school life. Recently, MOE (2021b) advocated for the establishment of transition mechanisms between ECE and primary schools, based on evidence of processes that support positive transitions to school. Recognition of the importance of ECE and smooth transitions to school was further specified by the *Instructions of Enhancing Scientific Transitions from Kindergartens to Primary Schools* (MOE, 2021a), in which physical and mental readiness, life readiness, social readiness and learning readiness have been proposed, and bidirectional connections have been formally stipulated for kindergartens and primary schools.

This issue has thus received much attention in recent years. However, to the best of our knowledge, no recent studies have synthesized research findings from multiple stakeholders on school transition and school readiness in Mainland China. Consequently, a narrative literature provides an important perspective on the topic (Green et al., 2006; Helewa & Walker, 2000) and thus insight into the transition process in Mainland China. Further, the

review identifies critical research gaps: addressing these gaps in future research could inform policy and practice and thus improve outcomes for children.

This review is underpinned by bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which has proximal processes, described as “engines of development” at its core (p. 798). The microsystem is the most proximal environment within which a child’s family members, kindergarten- and/or primary teachers are situated (Navarro et al., 2020). Whilst other elements of the developing child’s broader ecology are important, it is upon the child and elements of the microsystem that this review of the literature focuses.

Method

In reviewing research conducted from the start of the 21st century, this paper aims to identify: (i) how children have been reported to experience school readiness; (ii) kindergarten and primary teachers’ reported beliefs and practices to support children’s school readiness and the transition process; and (iii) how parents are reported to contribute to children’s school readiness in extant literature.

Database and manual search

To avoid bias in data selection in this narrative review, a systematic method was employed to identify potential publications for inclusion (Green et al., 2006). An initial search of both English and Chinese literature was carried out using four databases: PsycArticles, Web of Science and ERIC via EBSCO for English literature, and the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) for Chinese literature. CNKI contains more than 10,000 Chinese journals with full texts. In addition, the first author conducted a manual search by checking the reference lists of the selected literature, known as snowballing approach (Wohlin, 2014), to identify omitted literature in both languages.

Search terms adopted for English language search:

(School readiness OR school transition* OR school preparedness) AND
(China OR Mainland China OR Chinese) AND

(Early childhood OR child* OR kindergarten* OR preschool*).

The search terms, 'early childhood' or 'child*' or 'kindergarten*' served to exclude literature relating to transitions from primary school to middle school and from high school to university, and thus limited the focus to transition from kindergarten to primary school.

Search terms adopted for Chinese language search:

‘幼小衔接’ OR ‘入学准备’ (translated to English as ‘transition from kindergarten to primary school’ or ‘school readiness’) AND

‘学前’ OR ‘儿童’ OR ‘幼儿园’ (translated to English as ‘early childhood’ or ‘child*’ or ‘kindergarten*’).

Literature selection

The first author carried out the screening process in close consultation with the second and third authors. The selection followed a two-pronged approach due to differences in database settings (Figure 1). For the English language search, after key terms were entered into the aforementioned databases, the following predetermined inclusion criteria were applied: (1) publications reported empirical studies; (2) studies were published in peer-reviewed journals; and (3) papers were published from 2000 to 2021. The year 2000 was determined as it was one year prior to the announcement of the *Guidance for Kindergarten Education (Trial Version)* (MOE, 2001). In a second step, titles and abstracts of identified articles were reviewed to determine whether teachers, parents or children from Mainland China had participated in the research. Articles focusing on Hong Kong SAR, Macao and Taiwan were excluded since early childhood education policies and pedagogical approaches in these regions differ from those in Mainland China (Li & Wang, 2017). Cross-regional and cross-national studies were excluded as data from Mainland China could not be isolated within their datasets. Full-text reading was implemented as a third step to ensure that articles selected were eligible for review.

Predetermined inclusion criteria applied as the first step to identify Chinese literature in CNKI included: (1) journal articles, and (2) published from the year 2000 onwards. Due to the relative recency of the peer-review process for journal articles published in Mainland China (Fu, 2019), articles were included if they met at least one of two further inclusion

criteria. A paper was deemed to be peer-reviewed if the journal had an editorial board or a panel of annual reviewers (Paltridge & Starfield, 2016). Journals that were included in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) were retained as these are considered rigorous (Institute for Chinese Social Sciences Research and Assessment, 2016). Thereafter, abstracts were examined to determine whether articles reported empirical studies. Finally, full-text reading confirmed that each article included key publication sections (review of the literature, methodology, method, findings, discussion, and conclusion) and met the previously stated criteria.

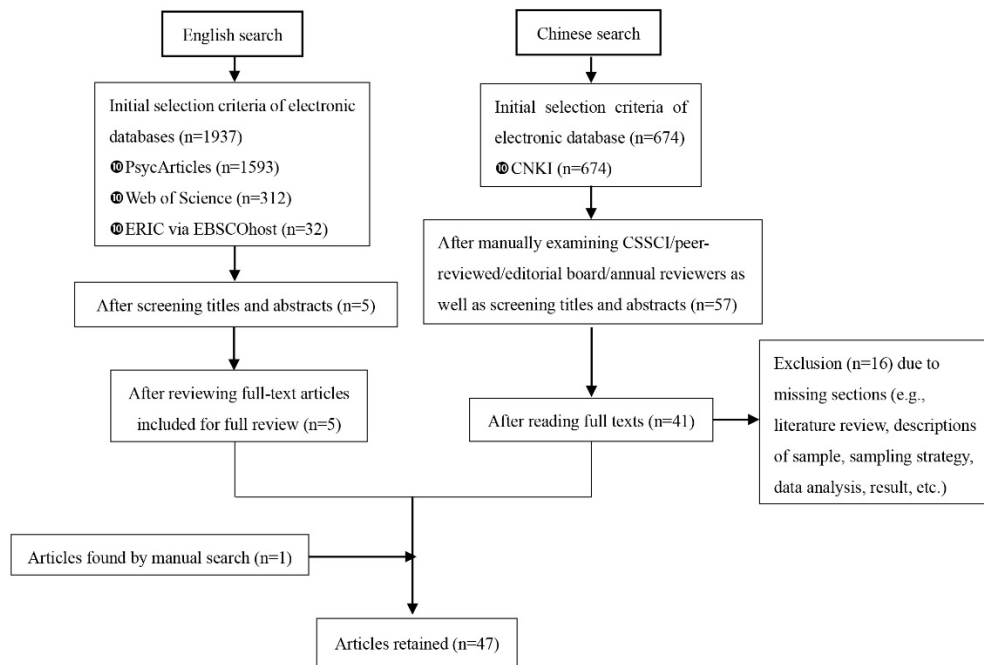


Figure 1. Article selection process

Coding and Synthesis

After undertaking the above-mentioned screening process, a total of 47 articles were eligible for inclusion and constituted the data for this review. Coded data were categorized to capture information such as (1) authors, (2) sample, (3) instruments, and (4) key findings. A detailed summary of study characteristics and key findings is available online

(<https://data.mendeley.com/datasets/ftkg2h3547/3>). Findings from the synthesis of articles are presented employing a narrative approach.

Results and Discussion

In this review, we briefly discuss reported findings relating to child characteristics before turning to parents and kindergarten-/primary teachers as elements of a child's microsystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), along with their respective priorities for children's school readiness.

Child characteristics, school readiness and the transition process

Most studies reported that children were regarded as ready to start primary school, but children's performance in domains of school readiness domains varied: children generally performed well in literacy (Liu et al., 2012; Wang, 2016), reading (Liu et al., 2012; Wang, 2016), movement (Liu et al., 2012) and auditory memory (Wang, 2016), but less well in visual representation (Wang, 2016) and oral expression (Liu et al., 2012; Wang, 2016).

Urban versus rural. Urban children demonstrated more advanced development than their counterparts from rural areas in (i) approaches to learning (Gan et al., 2016; the School Readiness of Urban and Rural Children Research Group [SRURCRG], 2008), (ii) language and literacy (Gan et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2012; Luo et al., 2012; Qian & Chen, 2011; Song & Shi, 2013; SRURCRG, 2008; Wang & Li, 2015; Zhou et al., 2010), (iii) mathematics (Gan et al., 2016; Luo et al., 2012; Qian & Chen, 2011; Song & Shi, 2013; Wang & Li, 2015; Zhang et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2010), (iv) cognitive capabilities (Song & Shi, 2013; SRURCRG, 2008; Wang & Li, 2015), (v) socio-emotional development (Gan et al., 2016; Qian & Chen, 2011; Song & Shi, 2013; Wang & Li, 2015), (vi) visual-auditory perception (Qian & Chen, 2011) and (vii) general school readiness (Lu et al., 2012). On the other hand, children from rural areas scored higher in movement and motor skills, as well as in understanding of time and space (Gan et al., 2016; SRURCRG, 2008; Song & Shi, 2013).

The urban-rural differences in child school readiness were explained by Gan et al., (2016)

and SRURCRG (2008). Due to limited educational resources in rural areas, rural children tend to receive less early childhood education from educational institutes than their urban peers. Lower investment in education has led to insufficient teacher professional development, which directly impacted teacher-child interactions and thus influenced the educational outcomes of young children. Further, research suggests that parents from rural areas tended to place less emphasis on and demonstrate less knowledge of the importance of the home learning environment. However, in general, rural children had access to larger play spaces, which was conducive to the development of gross motor skills.

Girls versus boys. Girls' school readiness in general was reported to exceed that of boys (Guo & Gai, 2015; Lu et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2019; Wu & Xu, 2020; Xia & Wen, 2019). Differences were partly attributed to gender-based differences, especially in language development (Gurian, 2009) and motor skills (Fang & Fang, 2005), and also because when it came to learning activities, parents of daughters demonstrated more frequent engagement with their children than parents of sons (Liu & Li, 2015). Gender differences and strategies to bridge the gap need further research exploration and elaboration in future research.

Ethnic majority versus ethnic minority. Han children outperformed ethnic minority children in (i) mathematics (Hu et al., 2015), (ii) approaches to learning (Zhang et al., 2010), (iii) cognition and general knowledge (Zhang et al., 2010), and (iv) language and socio-emotional development (Zhang et al., 2010). Zhou et al. (2015) found that comprehensive semantics level and expressive semantic level of Chinese were significantly associated with cognitive school readiness among Uyghur children. However, Mandarin was used when assessing children, regardless of children's first language (Hu et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2015) and consequently, Mandarin proficiency was acknowledged to explain differences in measures of school readiness. Other factors deemed to influence the outcomes of ethnic minority children included lower family SES and lower parent education of (Zhang et al., 2010).

Migrant versus non-migrant. Migrant children out-performed non-migrant children in (i) behavioral performance, (ii) motor skills and movement (He, 2013), (iii) some cognition-related domains, which included adding and subtracting numbers (Shi & Ye, 2016), and (iv) awareness of Chinese character structure (Zou et al., 2015). However, non-migrant children significantly outperformed their migrant counterparts in (i) approaches to learning, (ii)

language and literacy, and (iii) socio-emotional development (He, 2013). In addition, they also outperformed migrant children on (i) knowledge of science and society, (ii) drawing, (iii) reading and comprehension, (iii) spatial thinking, and (iv) sequencing and patterning (Shi & Ye, 2016).

Yang (2015) found that left-behind children lacked adequate readiness in approaches to learning, general knowledge, socio-emotional development, and motor skills than their non-left-behind counterparts. Despite MOE's recent focus on supporting school readiness and the transition process (MOE, 2001, 2012; The State Council, 2010), six years later, left-behind children were still achieving lower school readiness scores than non-left-behind counterparts (Kang et al., 2021). Further, the length of time that these children were left behind was negatively correlated with their readiness for school (Kang et al., 2021).

Child perspectives on school readiness and the transition to school

Children's self-reported perspectives were largely missing in the literature: very few studies addressed children's perspectives on starting school. However, these studies reported that the prospect of starting school can cause anxiety in children who do not know what school life will be like (Liu et al., 2020; Wang & Liu, 2018; Wong, 2003). This highlights the importance of teachers and parents being aware of children's uncertainty and supporting them through the transition process (Wong, 2003). However, the paucity of studies that addresses children's perspectives on school readiness and the transition process, indicates an urgent need for research that elicits the authentic concerns and priorities of children who are the individuals making the transition.

Teachers' school readiness priorities and practices

The first year of primary school is the start of the nine-year compulsory education system in Mainland China (Ministry of Justice of the People's Republic of China, 1986; 2018). Both kindergarten and primary teachers perceived children's social-emotional development and approaches to learning to be the most important school readiness characteristics (An et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2005; Zhang & He, 2020). Other important school

readiness domains included cognition and general knowledge, language development, and physical well-being and motor skills (Sun et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2005).

In primary school, teachers place more emphasis on children's compliance with teacher authority, behavior, self-help skills, peer interactions, and self-expression than kindergarten teachers (Yang et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2005). Primary teachers had much higher expectations of children's academic achievements and behaviors and were more anxious about children's school transition than kindergarten teachers (Yu et al., 2019), reporting that children's self-help skills, learning skills and peer interaction skills were not as good as expected (Zhang et al., 2005).

Children who had received more ECE demonstrated more positive social behaviors in the first semester of primary school (Li et al., 2013; Wang & Li, 2015). Zhang et al. (2014) suggested that children from public kindergartens outperformed those from private kindergartens, and children from kindergartens affiliated to primary schools achieved the lowest scores in school readiness.

The term, 'approaches to learning', includes a range of predispositions for early development and learning (Kagan et al., 1995). Here, kindergarten teachers reported that children were weak in learning interest, reflection, and attention; further, low scores were reported for children's self-regulation (Sun et al., 2006). Both kindergarten teachers and primary teachers were concerned that difficulties in approaches to learning and socio-emotional development may hinder children's school success (An et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2006; Zhang et al., 2005).

Parental school readiness priorities and practices

The review of the literature indicates that parents prioritized knowledge acquisition as a child school readiness characteristic, yet believed that there was no need to commence preparation for children's transition to school until children were in K3, whereas kindergarten teachers reported that transition started upon children entering kindergarten in K1 (Wei, 2017; Zeng & Xie, 2016b; Zhang & He, 2020). Interestingly, despite this difference, parents attached greater importance to school readiness than both kindergarten *and* primary teachers (Yang et al., 2006). In migrant families, parents regarded school readiness to be characterized

by holistic development, but nonetheless attached more value to academic skills within developmental domains (Zeng & Xie, 2016b).

Family SES (i.e., education level, household income and occupational status) was positively correlated with parents' perceptions and practices in relation to school readiness (Gao, 2014; Guo & Zhang, 2019; Liu & Li, 2015) and child outcomes in school readiness assessments (Ren et al., 2021; Song et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2010; Wu & Xu, 2020; Xia & Wen, 2019; Xiao et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). SES played a greater role in school readiness for left-behind children than non-left-behind children (Kang et al., 2021). More specifically, family SES was reported to influence the home literacy environment and children's language capabilities (Guo & Zhang, 2019). Xia (2020b) specified that SES was positively correlated with children's language, cognitive development, communication, and general knowledge, but was not correlated with social competence and emotional development.

Parents were likely to participate in activities relating to their child's language learning, cognitive development, and general knowledge, but seldom participated in activities that encouraged social development (Wei, 2017; Zeng & Xie, 2016a, 2016b). Further, parents were more likely to participate in home-based activities than school-based activities (e.g., by attending school open-days, parent-teacher conferences or a class event, or co-teaching with primary teachers) (Liu & Li, 2015), and as a result, home-based activities were more significant predictors of school readiness than school-based activities and home-school communication (Xia & Wen, 2019) and parents of daughters demonstrated more frequent engagement in learning activities than those with sons (Liu & Li, 2015).

Two papers focused on parenting styles: one explored the relationship between parenting styles and child school readiness outcomes, and the other focused specifically on paternal parenting. Drawing on Baumrind's (1967) categorization of parenting styles, Xia (2020a) argues that authoritative parents respond to children's needs with warmth and support and expect their children to be mature and self-regulated, whilst authoritarian parents exert direct control over children, value adult authority and are less supportive in parent-child interaction. Permissive parents rely on children to make decisions rather than setting high expectations for children's behavior and enforcing rules. Xia (2020a) found that authoritative parenting was positively associated with communication, language and cognitive development, social

competence, and emotional development whereas authoritarian parenting was negatively associated with social competence and emotional development and permissive parenting was negatively associated with social competence. In terms of paternal parenting, Ren et al. (2020) reported no statistical relationship between fathers' parenting and child school readiness, and fathers' parenting practices did not mediate the relations between co-parenting and child school readiness outcomes.

Finally, Wang & Zhang (2020) report on a case study that explored parental support for a child with severe visual impairment and noted that parental understanding of and active participation in inclusive education could be conducive to enhancing a child's self-care abilities, social-emotional skills, and approaches to learning. A focus on the school readiness characteristics and transition processes for children with additional needs appears to be another significant gap in the literature.

Limitations

This work appears to be the first to systematically identify empirical studies about school readiness and transitions to school in Mainland China. In so doing, some limitations should be acknowledged.

First, in some instances, it is unclear whether all articles published in Chinese journals underwent a rigorous review process prior to publication. Consequently, the quality of the designed studies and research integrity cannot be guaranteed. For example, two papers appeared to report the same data and conclusions, but with different groups of authors and publication dates. Here, the earlier publication was included for review while the second was excluded.

Second, even though studies investigating the same or similar variables have been generalized under one theme, it is suggested that synthesized findings should be treated with caution. The definitions of a concept may vary across studies, and the findings of an included study may be context-specific. For instance, articles examining urban-rural differences with regard to school readiness in Mainland China seldom explain how 'rural' and 'urban' were defined, and the extent to which classifications of urban/rural was consistent across all

articles is unclear. In this review, areas classified either as ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ were grouped for analysis and discussion regardless of cross-regional disparities.

Third, descriptions of research design in many papers were incomplete and consequently such articles were excluded from the review. To include as much relevant literature as possible, where journal articles met the basic selection criteria and the paucity of information did not materially impact on our understanding of the studies, such articles were retained for review.

Last but not least, the majority of reviewed articles shed light on children’s school readiness from multiple perspectives of others – not from the perspective of the children themselves. Indeed, very little research in China has investigated how children experience the transition to school, and similarly, little research has paid attention to the practices and beliefs of their primary caregivers and teachers in supporting the transition process. This highlights a significant gap in extant literature that may not have been apparent without this systematic review of the literature.

Implications and Conclusions

Employing a narrative review approach, the study presents up-to-date evidence on school readiness and school transition from aspects of children, parents, kindergarten teachers, and primary school teachers. Understanding children’s perceptions of school readiness and the transition process, as well as the perceptions of their parents, and kindergarten and primary teachers – as influential elements of a child’s microsystem – is essential (Chan, 2012) as this process impacts of tens of millions of children each year. Parents prioritize their children’s academic achievement and wish to see their children experiencing academic success from school commencement, yet social-emotional development and approaches to learning were both reported by kindergarten and primary teachers to be critical characteristics of children’s school readiness (An et al., 2018). Further, the alignment of priorities and practices of parents, kindergarten teachers, and primary school teachers, all of whom work closely with young children during the transition process, have yet to be investigated in one study. Whether their perceptions of school readiness and school transition are aligned, and if not, what the gaps

may be, remains unknown. Resolving this uncertainty could inform transition practices and better equip children to achieve this significant milestone.

The study also offers clues on additional research directions. The Chinese Government is supporting access to ECE education for children with special educational needs and enacting policies and regulations intended to increase the number of children with additional needs who are included in mainstream ECE services. Although several reviewed studies attended to school readiness of children with additional needs, there is minimal research on school readiness and transitions to school that has focused on this population.

Finally, this narrative literature review has revealed that little is known about children's own priorities despite being the people most impacted by this process (Liu et al., 2020). To date, research has largely focused on determining school readiness-related characteristics and transition priorities from the perspective of adults, rather than the perspective of the individuals making this transition – the children themselves. Whether, and how, children's perceptions evolve or shift during the transition period is also an important matter for investigation in order to inform policy and practice to support this critical phase in the life of every child.

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