



CENTRE FOR TEACHER
& EARLY YEARS EDUCATION



(Re)constructing school readiness from Chinese young children's perspectives

Interim Report
August 2021



*A drawing of kindergarten (left) and primary school (right)
by Xiao Xuan (pseudonym, 5 years 10 months old)*

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1. Introduction

This interim report presents the ongoing progress of a collaborative project between the Centre for Teacher and Early Years Education (CTEY), UCL Institute of Education and the Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University (BNU), which aims to (re)construct school readiness from Chinese children's perspectives. In this report, we first set out the context and rationale for carrying out this project (see Section 1). Then, we introduce the overarching research questions of this project, followed by a detailed account of the research design and the instruments for conducting research with young children (see Section 2). Subsequently, we report the pilot study we have conducted and present the preliminary findings (see Section 3). Finally, we outline the first round of fieldwork that has been carried out in seven early years settings of different backgrounds in Beijing (see Section 4), together with a timetable illustrating the next steps and upcoming milestones of this research project (see Section 5).

Importance of transition and critique on the conceptualisation of school readiness

Young children's transition from early childhood education and care (ECEC, e.g., preschool) to primary school education is critical for children's development and life-long learning (Perry, Dockett, & Petriwskyj, 2014). How children cope with the changes and adapt to new environments paves the foundation for their learning and well-being at primary school (Boyle, Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2018). Research shows that some children find the transition period traumatic (Yeboah, 2002), which leads to detrimental impacts on their school experiences, wellbeing and development. Therefore it is imperative for schools (incl. preschool and primary school) and families to work together to promote smooth transitions for children of all backgrounds (Petriwskyj, 2014).

The concept of school readiness is often referred to in discourses on children's transition from preschool to primary school (OECD, 2017). However, school readiness is a contestable concept (Clark, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2002), which has been constructed from different theoretical perspectives, such as idealist/nativist perspective ('readiness as a function of maturation'), empiricist/ environmental perspectives

(readiness as 'taught or learned skills'), socioemotional models (readiness as 'school liking') and social constructivist/interactionist perspectives (readiness as the interplay between children and their environments, including school, family and community) (O'Farrelly, Booth, Tatlow-Golden, & Barker, 2020, p. 4). Just as nicely put by Bingham and Whitebread (2012):

There is no agreement upon a definition of the term 'school readiness' or 'readiness for school' and its use because there is no agreement upon what young children should be prepared for; in essence, the disagreement about terminology and definition encapsulates a fundamental difference in conception of the purpose of early years education. (p.4)

Currently, the dominant discourses on school readiness are mainly underpinned by research focusing on adult stakeholders' perspectives, whereas children's own perspectives on what it means or how it feels being ready for primary school are strikingly under-researched (O'Farrelly *et al.*, 2020). The paucity of research that foregrounds children's perspectives has rendered the conceptualisation and operationalisation (*e.g.*, assessment and interventions) of school readiness more representative of adult stakeholders' agenda rather than children's needs (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012).

Children as 'experts in their own lives'

To address the aforementioned gap, this research project engages young children as co-constructors of knowledge to investigate their experiences during the transition from preschool to primary school. We regard transition as a continuous process instead of an event (Boyle *et al.*, 2018). Taking the social constructivist and interactionist perspectives, we seek to understand how young children actively engage with their surroundings to make sense of, as well as live through, the transition period. Being the '*experts in their own lives*' (Clark, 2017, p.20), children can construct knowledge and make meanings in collaboration with their significant others (and us researchers) to bring new insights into what it means to be ready for primary school education, and more importantly, for life-long learning and all-round development. Adding children's perspectives to the contestations on conceptualising school readiness has vital

theoretical implications in the field. We argue that children's perspectives can potentially challenge the dominant discourses on school readiness and contribute to building up *ready family and ready school* for smooth transitions from preschool to primary school.

Significance in China

In China, there has been a renewed emphasis on transition as an especially critical period for children's development. On 30th March 2021, as part of the efforts to develop a high-quality education system, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) published the '[Guidelines on Vigorously Promoting the Science-based Transition from Preschool to Primary School](#)', which acknowledges the current discontinuity in curriculum and pedagogy between preschool and primary school education. Together with this official document, MoE also published the [Guidance Notes on School-Readiness Education in Preschools](#) and the [Guidance Notes on School-Adaptation in Grade One in Primary Schools](#). Both guidance notes emphasise that the goal of the transition period is to promote children's holistic adaptation to primary school education, including four aspects, namely, physical and mental adaptation, life adaptation, social adaptation and learning adaptation (MoE, 2021). It is encouraged that preschools and primary schools should work together to ensure smooth transitions for all young children (*ibid*). It also requests local educational authorities to incorporate the transition-related work into the basic education curricula reforms and evaluation mechanisms, push forward closer collaboration between kindergartens and primary schools, and strengthen transition-related research and build up a team equipped with teaching researchers from the two sectors. It further requires that a number of pilot kindergartens and primary schools be selected at county/district level across the country, to start carrying out the reform from September 2021. It also plans for reforms to be rolled out nationwide from the autumn semester of 2022.

Undoubtedly, the MoE *Guidelines* have put a spotlight on young children's transition, which leads to the renewed demands for *a)* CPD from Chinese preschool and primary school teachers; and *b)* parenting support services for Chinese parents. Therefore it is high time to conduct empirical research on Chinese children's transition and utilise the research-informed evidence to develop CPD courses and parenting support services to

facilitate smooth transition. The current research project serves this purpose by foregrounding Chinese children's perspectives on school readiness.

Among the recent empirical research on school readiness in Chinese contexts, school readiness is commonly conceptualised as a set of skills, competencies and qualities that children are required to possess in order to succeed in primary schools (*e.g.*, Gan, Meng, & Xie, 2016; IP *et al.*, 2016; Xie & Li, 2018; Xia, 2020; Xia, Hackett, & Webster, 2020; Ren, Cheng, *et al.*, 2021; Ren, Tong, *et al.*, 2021). Accordingly, the following domains are often assessed as indicators of children's school readiness, including physical skills, language and reading skills, early mathematics skills, social and emotional competence, basic/general knowledge and behavioural development. These research findings lay emphasis on cultivating such skills and competencies in young children to ensure quick adaptation to formal schooling in primary schools. For example, some studies suggest that Chinese preschool and primary school teachers regard children's social and emotional competence as more important than academic skills for smooth transition (*e.g.*, An, Curby, & Xie, 2018); whilst some studies investigate how parents exert influences on children's skills and competencies pertaining to school readiness (*e.g.*, Xie & Li, 2018; Xia, 2020; Xia *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, the dominant discourse on school readiness in current Chinese research demonstrates adults' perspectives on what children are required to be capable of so as to adapt well to primary school education. There is a paucity of research on Chinese children's perspectives on school readiness, which further underlines the importance of the current research project.

Moreover, since the ratification of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in China in 1992 by the National Congress, significant changes have occurred in the way that children's rights are considered, conceptualised and enacted in China (Naftali, 2009, 2014). However, more research is needed to illuminate how to promote children's participation in all aspects that matter to them, including transitions from preschools to primary schools. This research project can contribute to the strategies that enable Chinese children's rights and participation, thereby enhancing their wellbeing (Gross-Manos, Kosher, & Ben-Arieh, 2021).

The research aims and expected outputs

Firstly, we aim to gain an understanding of Chinese young children's experiences of the transition period and their perceptions on school readiness; based on which, we then seek to (re)construct *school readiness* in the current Chinese contexts from young children's perspectives. This reconceptualisation of school readiness can inform the corresponding operationalisation (*e.g.*, assessment and interventions) and contribute to the ongoing reforms in curriculum and pedagogy to promote continuity from preschool to primary school education in China.

More importantly, we aim to translate the research findings into parenting programmes and continuing professional development (CPD) programmes to support Chinese parents, preschool and primary school teachers to create *ready family and ready school* for young children to have a smooth transition from preschool to primary school. Foregrounding young children's perspectives means more than simply listening to their voices, but also acting on what is heard and taking initiatives (Lundy, 2007). To facilitate our understanding of children's perspectives, we also include children's parents, preschool and primary school teachers in our study (see Section 2.2 for more details). It is our ultimate goal that this research project can have a sustained positive impact on the lives of Chinese children, their parents and teachers.

Positionality of the researchers

The research team consists of three Chinese academics (two females and one male) with experience in conducting research with young children, who work at UCL and BNU, respectively; and five research assistants (all females) who are undergraduate and postgraduate students majoring ECEC at BNU. All the research assistants have previous research experiences of working with young children. The fieldwork has been conducted by the research assistants under the supervision of the academics. More details about the research training and the team reflective sessions during fieldwork are presented in Section 3.3.

As researchers, we see ourselves co-constructing knowledge and co-making meanings with our participants (*incl.* young children, parents and teachers) during the research

process (England, 1994). We endeavour to be sensitive to and consistently reflect on the contexts as well as the relational dynamics between researchers and participants (Bourke, 2014), particularly with young children (Dalli & Stephenson, 2010). We emphasise the importance of reflecting on our positionality and how it may affect the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. We all keep reflective journals during the research process and all the team reflective meetings are recorded for future reference. We present our brief reflection on the pilot fieldwork and data analysis processes in Section 3.6 of this interim report. More in-depth methodological reflection will be written up as a methodological paper for knowledge-exchange with other researchers interested in children's perspectives.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research questions

This research project is guided by two main research questions:

- What are Chinese young children's experiences of transition from preschool to primary school and how do they perceive school readiness?
- How are children's experiences and perceptions situated in the immediate and broader contexts (*i.e.*, cultural, historical, political, social and economic) of contemporary China in a transformative time of globalisation?

The first research question focuses on children's experiences and perspectives by engaging young children as co-constructors of knowledge and meaning-making. The second research question investigates the interplay between children and their surroundings. Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we take into consideration the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chrono-systems to explore how children interact with their immediate and broader contexts to form their perspectives on transition and school readiness.

2.2 Research design

Considering transition as a continuity and a process (Boyle, 2018), we adopt a longitudinal research design to 'track' children's transition experiences by collecting

data at two time points: during the last month of preschool (children normally aged 6 years old) and towards the end of first semester of Year 1 in primary school (children normally aged 7 years old). Informed by the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2017), during each round of fieldwork, we conduct *a*) participatory and playful activities with young children to explore their experiences and perceptions on school readiness; *b*) semi-structured interviews with their parents, preschool or primary school teachers to contextualise children's perspectives and meaning making.

2.3 Research instruments

The research instruments of this project comprise participatory and playful research activities with young children, semi-structured interview protocols and online questionnaires (to collect background information) for parents, preschool and primary school teachers. Given that all the members of the research team can use both Chinese and English, all the research instruments and the relevant materials were developed in two languages with equivalent meanings. Both versions of the research instruments were rigorously reviewed and double-checked to ensure equivalence. In addition, all the research instruments have been tested in a pilot to make sure that they enable us to 'listen to' (Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003) and contextualise the perspectives of young children. Details about the pilot are presented in Section 3 Pilot.

Participatory and playful activities with young children

We regard children as agentic individuals who play a pivotal role in making meanings and constructing new knowledge (Murray, 2017). Children express their opinions in different manners, not necessarily through verbal conversation (Jadue-Roa, Whitebread, & Gareca-Guzmán, 2018). Therefore, the following research activities are designed to enable children to express their opinions in an interactive, playful and relaxing manner. Children are empowered to freely choose which activities they would like to engage with. We respect children's autonomy, right and free will. Therefore, during the fieldwork, different children are engaged with different activities to construct meanings in collaboration with the researchers (*i.e.*, the five research assistants). The participatory and playful research activities for first round of fieldwork (*i.e.*, at preschool) are briefly introduced as follows. The conversations between

children and the researcher(s) during these activities were recorded by audio-recorders (with children's assent¹) and/or researchers' fieldnotes.

- **Preschool tour and photo-taking**

We asked children to lead a tour of their preschool to show researchers the places where they like, talk about what they do there and also point out where they want to bring to primary school (and why). The researcher would sustain a conversation with children to explore their ideas and opinions. During the tour, children could take photos of these significant places. After the tour they could talk about the photos with the researcher.

- **Making photo books**

With the photos taken during the preschool tour, children were asked to review the photos to make a photo book with a theme or themes of their choice. Children were encouraged to sort out the photos, reflect on why they take the photo and discuss the selection of photos or the themes of their photo book with the researcher. This participatory activity enables children to further express their ideas and opinions about their preschool experiences.

- **Drawing**

Children were provided with pens, colourful crayons, and blank paper. Children were asked to divide the paper into two parts, then draw on one side their preschool and on the other side their primary school. The researcher would keep a record of children's comments during the drawing process. When children indicate that they have finished drawing, the researcher would initiate a conversation with children to discuss their drawing (*e.g.*, the similarities and differences between preschool and primary school). We photographed children's drawing (with the child's permission) as data for further analysis.

- **Puppet play and story-telling**

We introduced puppets to children as one way of alleviating the power distance

¹ Children press the START button for recording both as a way of giving their assent and to build up rapport.

between adults and children². We also asked children to name the puppet and told them that the puppet is going to primary school soon. Children were encouraged to play with and speak to the puppet about primary school and life in primary school. We also asked children how they are going to help the puppet to prepare for school and/or tell a story about puppet's first day at primary school.

- Backpack for primary school

We prepared an empty backpack and asked children what they want to put in the backpack to bring to primary school; why they want to put that object in; what they would do with the object in primary school; whether they think the object is allowed in primary school; if not, what they would do without it, and so on. Children can also choose to draw what they want to put in the backpack.

The usage of a range of participatory and playful activities enables us to 'listen to' (Clark, 2017) young children who are likely to express their viewpoints in diverse ways. Depending on children's choices and the circumstances of fieldwork, the researchers can adapt the activities to suit the needs of children. Through these activities, we intend to gain an in-depth understanding of children's perspectives.

As mentioned earlier, two rounds of fieldwork are planned to 'track' children's transition. The first round of fieldwork has already been conducted³ (see Section 4 for the sampling strategy and an overview of the settings and participants), during which we aim to understand

- How do young children feel about going to primary school?
- What are children's expectations of primary school?
- What do children think is needed to be ready for primary school (*e.g.*, knowledge, ability, skill or trait)?
- What do children think they will miss about preschools?
- What do children want to take with them to primary schools?

² Other ways of alleviating the power distance including always kneeling down or sitting down when talking to children; introducing ourselves as older 'sisters' instead of 'teacher/auntie' and role-playing as the puppet in interaction with children.

³ By the time this interim report is published, all the interactive activities with children were completed.

In the second round of fieldwork (to be conducted during December 2021 to January 2022), we will make adjustment to the above research activities to focus on children's experiences at primary school, particularly their adaptation to the new environment, curriculum and pedagogy. We will conduct these participatory and playful research activities with the same children when they are about to finish their first semester in primary school, through which we seek to understand:

- How do they feel about primary school? What are their experiences?
- What do they miss about preschools?
- What is it that they have gained in preschool turns out to be helpful in primary school?
- What is it that they hadn't gained in preschool but wish they had?
- What do they think is important in primary school (e.g., knowledge, ability, skill or trait)?

Interview protocol and online questionnaire for parents

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews with children's parents is twofold: firstly, to gain a better understanding of the relevant background information about the child and the family; secondly, to investigate parents' perceptions of school readiness and their reflection on parental involvement and their interaction with the child during the transition period. During the first round of fieldwork, we asked questions such as "*What do you think your child needs to be ready for primary school? How important are these abilities/skills/traits etc.?*", "*What do you think you can do in order to help your child in this transition?*" and "*What are the barriers that you think may prevent a smooth transition for your child?*". A follow-up interview will be conducted with parents during the second round of fieldwork to understand parents' perceptions on their children's transition and explore whether they have renewed understanding of school readiness.

The online background questionnaire collects basic demographic information and family background information from the parents, for example, parent's age, education level, employment status, number of children in family and so on⁴.

⁴ By the time this interim report is published, the majority of parent interviews and online background

Interview protocol and online questionnaire for preschool and primary school teachers

For the first round of fieldwork, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the children's preschool teachers⁵. The semi-structure interview with preschool teachers explores *a) teachers' perceptions of the child's school readiness (e.g., "How is the child doing in your class? Do you have any concerns about the child's transition?"); b) their reflection on practices that support the continuity of curriculum and pedagogies for children's smooth transition (e.g., "What activities/teaching practices are helpful for child's transition? Are there any barriers to enacting the teaching practice you would like in class to support child's transition?"); and c) their CPD needs for supporting children's smooth transition (e.g., "What kind of CPD would be helpful?").*

For the second round of fieldwork, we will interview the children's primary school teachers. In a similar vein, the semi-structured interview with primary school teachers explores *a) teachers' perceptions of the child's school readiness and transition (e.g., "How is the child doing in your class? What aspects of school readiness do you think the child is doing well?"); b) their reflection on teaching practices to support smooth transition (e.g., "What do you do in class to help children adapt to primary school?") and c) their CPD needs (e.g., "What kind of CPD would be helpful?").*

The online background questionnaires for preschool and primary school teachers are similar, which collect their basic demographic and background information, such as gender, age, education level, teaching qualification, years of teaching experience, and so on.

Data collected from parents and teachers are matched with the data collected from children to help us gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research foci.

2.4 Ethical considerations

This project has obtained full ethical approval from the UCL IOE Research Ethics

questionnaires were completed, except seven scheduled ones which are still in progress.

⁵ By the time this interim report is published, all the preschool teacher interviews and online background questionnaires were completed.

Committee (Ref: REC 1478) and the BNU Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 从中国儿童的视角 (重新) 构建入学准备). We rigorously follow the ethics codes of conducting research with young children. Parental consents and teachers' consents are obtained before we meet with children. We not only seek informed assents from children to participate in this project (see the appendix for the Child Assent Form), but also obtain children's oral assents for each activity before starting. We fully respect children's autonomy and right in terms of participation, choices of activities, and withdrawal. Children's non-verbal signs of withdrawal, unwillingness, boredom and other negative emotions are paid attention to. Children's silence is respected. During the fieldwork, we endeavour to make sure that the activities are playful and enjoyable for the children. Children are empowered to exert agency during the research process and freely express their opinions. All data are anonymised with any personal identifier removed. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained throughout the research. Pseudonyms are used in data analysis, research reports, journal articles and any other academic outputs.

3. Pilot study

3.1 Pilot setting context

Taking into considerations of accessibility and logistics in a COVID-19 pandemic context, we adopted a convenience sampling strategy and approached the pilot kindergarten through our research network. We acknowledge the limitations of convenience sampling and have reflected on how the pilot setting context affected the process of fieldwork, data analysis and the interpretation of preliminary findings (see Section 3.5 and 3.6 for more details).

The pilot took place in a prestigious public kindergarten located in central Beijing. The kindergarten serves children from families of well-educated parents and privileged backgrounds. Its facilities, environment and teaching quality are highly-rated and well-regarded within the quality standard framework in China (*e.g.*, Liu, 2011). It is a relatively sizeable kindergarten with over 800 children (aged 2-6

years) and 170 teaching staffs. The kindergarten ethos is children-oriented, with an emphasis on research-informed practice. We are mindful and reflective of the specific context of this kindergarten and paid attention to the effects on fieldwork and data analysis process of the pilot.

3.2 Pilot participants

In total, seven children (three boys and four girls, age range from 70 to 81 months) volunteered to participate in the pilot and gave their written consents (by ticking the smiley face in the Child Assent Form, see appendix). We obtained formal consents from the children's parents before conducting the interactive research activities with the children. As mentioned earlier, children's oral assents were also sought for each activity before starting.

We also interviewed the children's parents (all mothers) and teachers (two female teachers). Table 3.1 demonstrates the background information of the participants. As can be seen, all the mothers are highly-educated professionals. Both kindergarten teachers have a bachelor degree of ECEC major and adequate teaching experience (5 and 10 years, respectively).

Table 3.1 Background information of the pilot participants

Child pseudonym	Gender	Age	Parent	Parent Education level	Parent Employment	Parent age	Teacher gender	Teacher age	Teacher qualification	Years of experience
Bao Bao	Boy	76 months	Mother	PhD	Professional	36-40	Female	26-30	Bachelor degree of ECEC major; Teacher qualification (Second class)	5 years
Zong Zi	Boy	77 months	Mother	PhD	Professional	36-40				
Shui Bao	Boy	75 months	Mother	PhD	Professional	36-40				
Xiao Xuan	Girl	70 months	Mother	PhD	Professional	31-35				
Du Du	Girl	71 months	Mother	PhD	Professional	36-40	Female	26-30	Bachelor degree of ECEC major; Teacher qualification (Second class)	10 years
Jiu Yue	Girl	81 months	Mother	Master	Professional	31-35				
Qi Qi	Girl	80 months	Mother	PhD	Professional	41-45				

3.3 Fieldwork procedure

The pilot fieldwork was carried out by the research assistants who visited the kindergarten for a week. All the research assistants were fully engaged with the design and development of this research project from beginning. Before the pilot, we all attended the research method training delivered by Dr. Alison Clark, who has helped us gain a better understanding of the Mosaic approach. Dr. Alison Clark also offered invaluable advice on the refinement of research instruments, important issues regarding fieldwork, procedure of data analysis, and useful reflective practices in research.

During the pilot fieldwork, we held daily reflection meetings to discuss and reflect on the process of data collection and the relevant issues. The first day in kindergarten was used to observe the environment and activities, as well as to get familiar with the children. By introducing the research activities to the children (orally with the research information sheet for children, see Appendix) and their parents (through the research information sheet for parents), we obtained informed consents to participating from seven children and their parents (see Table 3.1). During the following days, we conducted the aforementioned participatory playful activities with the children. Depending on children's preferences and choices, different activities were carried out (see Appendix for the Mosaic table of each child). Meanwhile, children's teachers were interviewed at the kindergarten and their parents were interviewed through telephone calls. We also kept fieldnotes and reflective journals to document the whole fieldwork process.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis is an iterative process with a focus on children's perspectives (Jadue-Roa et al., 2018). The recordings of conversations with children were transcribed verbatim. Together with the researchers' fieldnotes (in the cases that children did not want to be recorded), they form the narrative data of children participants. In addition, children's photos and drawings were recorded electronically as visual data, which were used to facilitate the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun &

Clarke, 2019) on children's narrative data at this initial stage of data analysis⁶. Meanwhile, the recordings of parent and preschool teacher interviews were transcribed verbatim, which were regarded as supplementary data to enable us better contextualise children's perspectives.

To begin with, we treated each child as a case and coded all the data relevant to the child (*incl.* child's narrative and visual data, their parent's and preschool teacher's interview data) to generate a mosaic table of initial codes (Clark, 2017). The three academics coded the pilot data separately before the initial codes were compared and discussed to reach a consensus among the research team. Subsequently, we organised the initial codes into themes to generate an initial analytic framework which represents the pattern emerged from the pilot data.

To further examine and refine the analytic framework, five research assistants applied the analytic framework to analyse the pilot data for the second time. The mosaic table of themes for each child (see the Appendix) was again compared and discussed to reach a consensus among the research team. Based on this process, the themes and codes in the analytic framework were further refined accordingly.

We are conscious of the specificities of the pilot context. As the main fieldwork has been conducted in seven different settings of diverse backgrounds (see Section 4 for details), we anticipate that novel codes and themes would emerge from the data. Therefore, the initial thematic framework will be continuously modified and refined through the ongoing data analysis. We will also calculate the inter-coder reliability for the data analysis of the main fieldwork.

3.5 Preliminary findings

This section presents the preliminary findings of the pilot. As mentioned earlier, the pilot data were collected in a prestigious public kindergarten located in central Beijing. All the children participants were from middle-class families with highly-educated parents. According to the parents' and teachers' interviews, these

⁶ We plan to conduct further analysis on children's visual data. Due to the time constraint, the process of visual data analysis is not included in this interim report.

children participants are relatively extrovert and communicative among their peers. Therefore, we underscore that readers should be mindful of the pilot context when interpreting the findings demonstrated in the following sections.

All the names mentioned in the quotes are pseudonyms. For ethical considerations, we cover identifiable information with cartoons or stickers in the pictures shown in this report.

3.5.1 Children's perceptions on kindergarten

We explored children's perceptions on their kindergarten through children's guided tour, photo taking and picture-book making. All the pilot children expressed their fondness of the outdoor environment of the kindergarten, particularly the playground (e.g., Figure 3.5.1 Du Du's picture book and Figure 3.5.2 Jiu Yue's picture book) and the vegetable garden where they grew their own vegetables (e.g., "our class takes care of the cucumber" [Zong Zi]).



Figure 3.5.1 Du Du's picture book showing the slides in playground



Figure 3.5.2 Jiu Yue's picture book showing the playground and vegetable garden

All the children also considered their friends at the kindergarten as very important, for example, Qiqi expressed that she wanted to be with her best friends from the kindergarten when they go to primary school (*"I shall meet my best friends. My best friends are Yiyi and Yuanyuan (pseudonyms)."*); Xiao Xuan and Zong Zi both took a lot of photos of their friends and chose to include these photos in their picture books because *"they are good-looking"* [Xiao Xuan] (photos are not shown here due to ethical consideration); and Bao Bao indicated that he wanted to bring his friends and classmates to primary school because *"I like them"*. Meanwhile, Du Du, Shui Bao and Zong Zi indicated that they had very good relationships with their kindergarten teachers (*"the one I would miss the most is my teacher, but I definitely can't bring a*

teacher to primary school" [Du Du]; "because he [the puppet] actively interacts with the teacher in kindergarten, so he wants to try again in primary school, to actively interact with the teacher" [Shui Bao]). It is evident that the relationships with significant others at kindergarten are imperative for the children in our pilot.

Besides, all seven children expressed positive attitudes and emotions towards their experiences at the kindergarten. We are mindful that this is hardly representative of all the children at the kindergarten. As mentioned earlier, according to the parents' and teachers' interviews, these children participants are relatively extrovert and communicative among their peers. They volunteered to participate in the study and their willingness to share their experiences with us may have suggested that their experiences at kindergarten were likely to be positive. The children described enjoying a variety of activities, such as play (*incl. outdoor free play, role play, etc.; e.g., "Once I role played with Haohao and three other children on the slide, we played again and again, so happy!"*[Qi Qi]), crafting (*e.g., "I think crafting is very important, will do crafting at primary school as well"*[Bao Bao]), gardening (*e.g., Figure 3.5.3 Xiao Xuan's photo-taking of the gardening activity*), reading picture books (*e.g., "I like reading books [refer to picture books], my kindergarten library card is full [of borrowing records]"* [Du Du]), sports (*"I play football [at kindergarten], although the PE teacher is on holiday this week"* [Shui Bao]) and so on. Some children also expressed a sense of belonging through highlighting the images of their own work exhibited at the kindergarten (*e.g., Qi Qi and Bao Bao, see Figure 3.5.4 Bao Bao's picture book for an example*); and a sense of mastery through sharing experience of helping teachers with chores (*e.g., "just like now I always help teachers at the kindergarten"* [Jiu Yue]).

Children's general positive experiences in the pilot kindergarten coincide with the teachers' description of their practice that they enabled children to learn through play, exploring and experiencing (*e.g., "we incorporate basic knowledge in games [guided play], to encourage children to learn the knowledge through experiencing it"* [Ms. Tian, five year of experience]; *"we use nursery rhymes and games [guided play] to teach children about time"* [Ms. Yu, ten years of experience]). This has represents the ethos of the pilot kindergarten. Nonetheless, both teachers acknowledged that children

needed to make considerable adaptation to more formal learning in primary school (e.g., "[they] need to transit from play-based life to learning-oriented life and make the changes [in primary school]" [Ms. Yu, ten years of experience]), which concurs with children's awareness of the differences between preschool and primary school (as elaborated below).



Figure 3.5.3 Xiao Xuan's photo-taking of the gardening activity

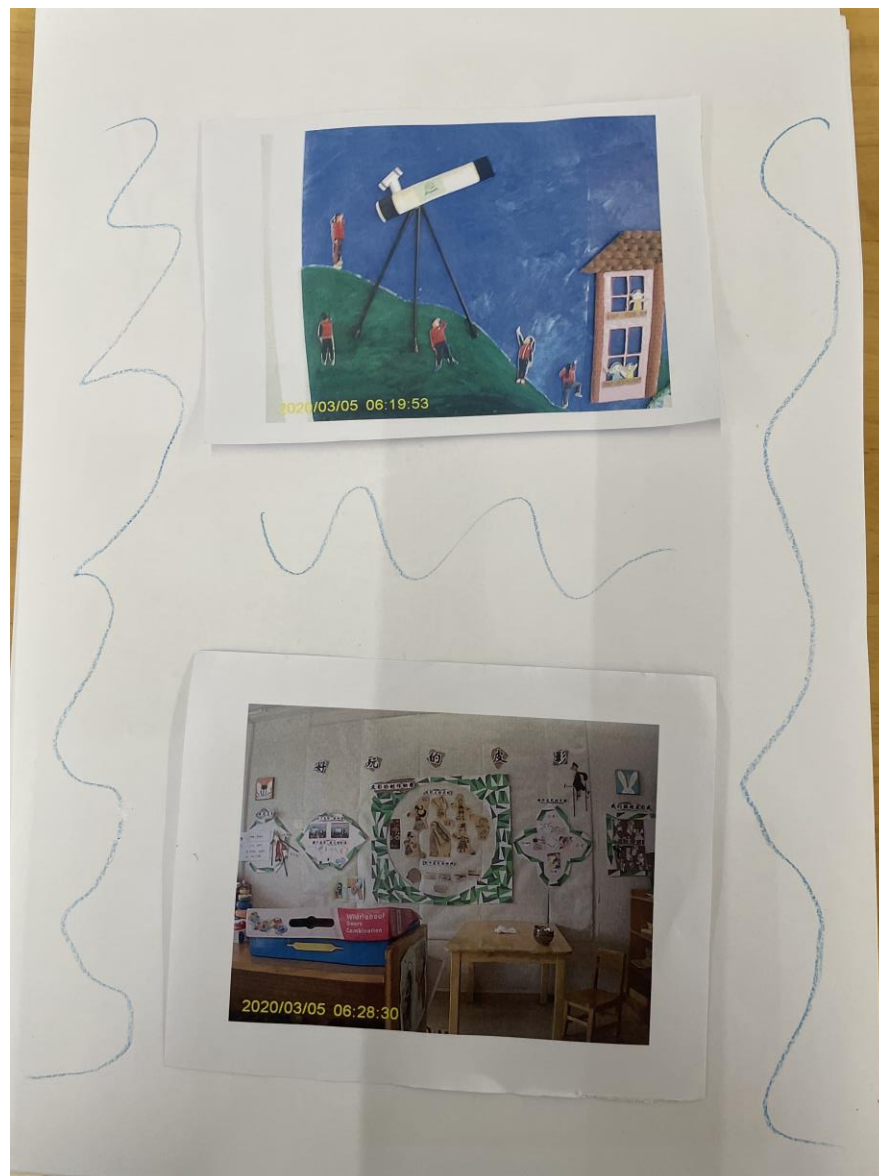


Figure 3.5.4 Bao Bao's picture book

3.5.2 Children's awareness of the differences between preschool and primary school

The children in pilot were very aware of the differences between preschool and primary school. Their perceived differences can be summarised as different environment, different timetable and routine, discontinuity in curriculum and pedagogy, and different roles of teachers. Children's perceptions of the differences are demonstrated below.

Different environment

All the children told us that primary schools would have very different environment from their kindergarten. This is evident in children's drawings of preschool and primary school (See Figure 3.5.5-3.5.9).

In terms of outdoor environment, while the children highlighted playground facilities and gardens at kindergarten (see Section 3.5.1), children mainly talked about sport courts and areas for PE class in primary schools, for example, Shui Bao described his drawing (see Figure 3.5.6) "*this is the primary school gate, this is people playing football, this is the basketball court, and this is the main building of primary school*". Similarly, Jiu Yue's drawing also demonstrates contrasting outdoor environment between kindergarten and primary school in her mind (see Figure 3.5.7).

As for indoor environment, Du Du described primary school classroom as "I think in primary school, every student will have a desk. Then the teacher will stand at a presentation podium. There will be white chalk on the podium. There will be a blackboard. The teacher will probably wear glasses" (see Figure 3.5.7). Qi Qi also drew a similar scene of her imagined primary school classroom (see Figure 3.5.8). It is worth mentioning that Du Du, Qi Qi and Jiu Yue did the drawing activity together. We regard them co-constructing the knowledge and making meaning together with the researcher during the drawing process.

Another theme emerged from the data is related to children's worry and concerns about the unfamiliar environment of primary school, which is evident in Shui Bao's story-telling about first day at primary school, saying that "*[the puppet] will not be able to find the classroom, and not able to find the toilet*". In a similar vein, five of the seven children (Bao Bao, Shui Bao, Du Du, Qi Qi and Jiu Yue) mentioned that the toilets would be different at primary school in that "*toilets at primary school separate boys and girls, whilst at kindergarten there is only one toilet, doesn't separate boys and girls*" [Jiu Yue]. Bao Bao even took a photo of the toilets located on the kindergarten playground (see Figure 3.5.10), acknowledging that "*there probably is no toilet [located on primary school playground]*".



Figure 3.5.5 Xiao Xuan's drawing of kindergarten (left) and primary school (right)

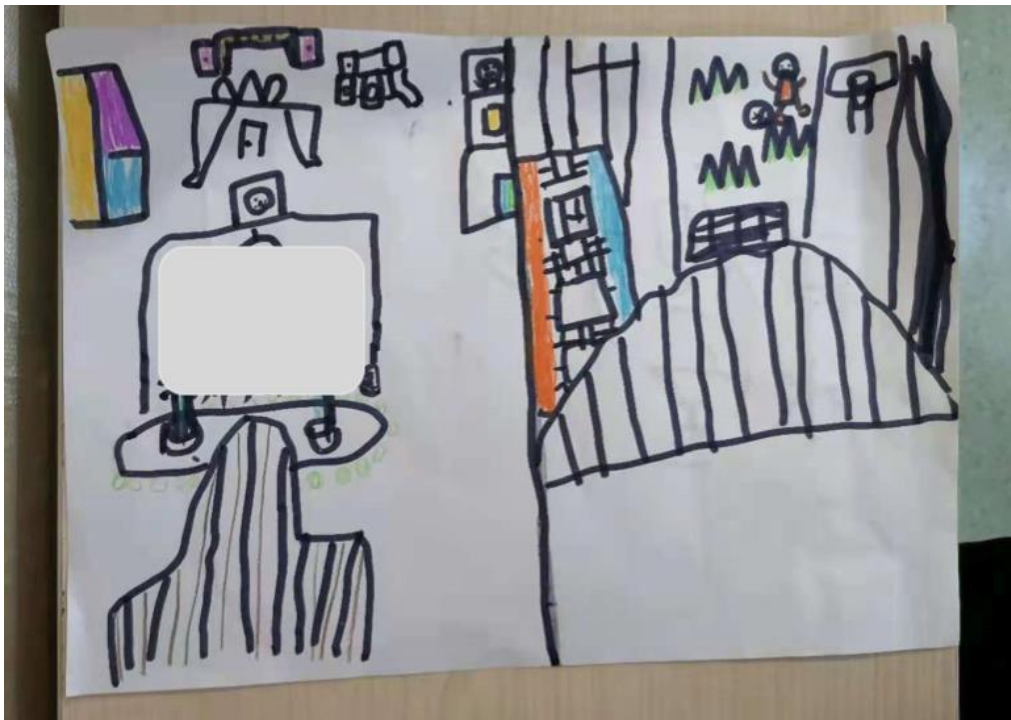


Figure 3.5.6 Shui Bao's drawing of kindergarten (left) and primary school (right)

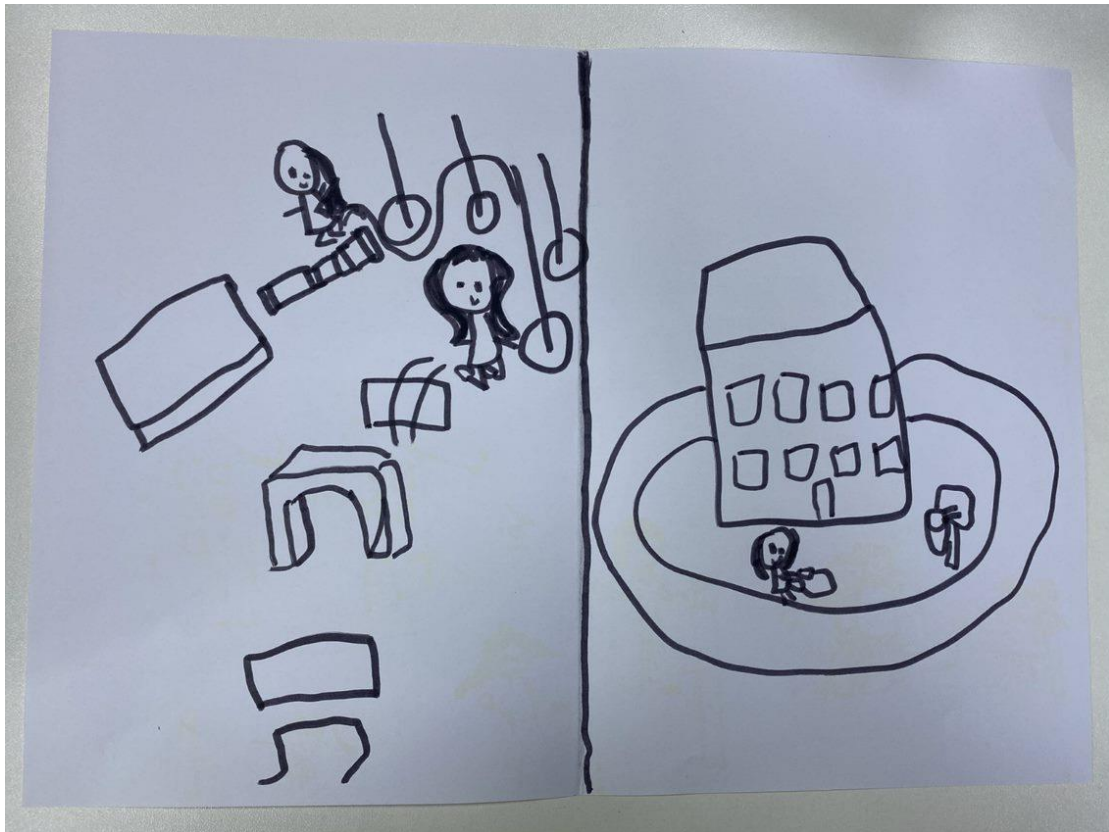


Figure 3.5.7 Jiu Yue's drawing of kindergarten (left) and primary school (right)



Figure 3.5.8 Du Du's drawing of kindergarten (left) and primary school (right)



Figure 3.5.9 Qi Qi's drawing of kindergarten (left) and primary school (right)



Figure 3.5.10 Bao Bao's picture book including a photo of toilets

Different timetable and routine

Five of the children (Bao Bao, Xiao Xuan, Du Du, Qi Qi and Jiu Yue) mentioned that the timetable and routine in primary school would be very different from

kindergarten. For example, Jiu Yue pointed out "*primary school dosen't have nap time*". In his story-telling, Bao Bao vividly described the difficulties in adapting to primary school timetable that only on the third day did the puppet manage to get to the classroom on time, thereby avoiding being scolded by the teacher. Qi Qi told the researcher that "*a primary school student has six lessons [each day]. They need to listen carefully to each lesson, no matter whether they like it or not.*" Likewise, Du Du said that "*I think when I become a primary school student, I will be very tired everyday, because I need to have 18 lessons every day*". Children's perceptions of the different timetable and routine in primary school match the data collected from parent and teacher interviews, during which they mentioned teaching children about the "*tighter*" [Xiao Xuan's mother] and "*less flexible*" [Ms. Yu, ten years of experience] timetable and routine in primary school.

Discontinuity in curriculum and pedagogy

All the children recognised that primary school focuses on academic and formal learning. Children mentioned that they needed to learn to "*write Chinese characters, English and essay*" (Bao Bao), "*use Pinyin*" (Shui Bao), "*do mathematics*" (Qi Qi and Jiu Yue), "*do calculation*" (Xiao Xuan), "*gain more knowledge*" (Du Du) and so on. When asked about what to bring to primary school, the children (except Zong Zi) all mentioned textbooks, stationary and homework.

Moreover, while the children talked a lot about play in kindergarten, they acknowledged that they would play much less in primary school. This is evident in the following quotes:

"Kindergarten has a lot of fun games, [you] seldom play in primary school" [Qi Qi]

"[the puppets] like kindergarten better, because they live a happy life in kindergarten, but they have to have six lessons in primary school...I still don't want to go to primary school. It is better to stay in kindergarten, you can play here. The majority time in primary school is spent on learning. You can't play, you have to be in the classroom to have lessons." [Jiu Yue]

Even for outdoor activities in primary school, Qi Qi and Jiu Yue talked about having PE class and doing sports, instead of free play ("*because primary school is all about learning*"[Qi Qi]). Likewise, Du Du told the researcher that "*I think it would be a bit boring in primary school because there are too many lessons. Normally the play time is only after a 40-minute lesson*". Also can be seen in Qi Qi's and Du Du's drawings (Figure 3.5.9 and 3.5.8), they seemed to perceive a teacher-led didactic teaching style at primary school, in contrast to the play-based pedagogy that they had experienced at kindergarten ("*our kindergarten teachers are fun teachers, primary school teachers only tell you some knowledge*" [Qi Qi]). Children's perceptions on the different pedagogical approaches are related to their understanding of the different roles of preschool and primary school teachers (as described below).

Different roles of teachers

As mentioned earlier, the children in our pilot seemed to have very good relationships with their kindergarten teachers. In contrast, children's description of primary school teachers seemed to be more authoritarian in that they exert stricter discipline and control (Bao Bao, Shui Bao, Xiao Xuan and Qi Qi all described being disciplined, scolded or punished by primary school teachers in their story-telling), which is also related to children's perceptions of stricter regulation ("*[I have] more freedom at kindergarten. Because sometimes I can't resist talking to my good friends, so I really don't like this regulation [that students' can't talk to each other during a 40min lesson]*" [Du Du]) and tighter timetable ("*[the puppet] can't be late, late for one minute, stand for penalty, 5 minutes late, call the parents, 3 minutes late, go to the principal's office, late for 10 to 20 minutes, parents go the principal's office*" [Qi Qi]).

While kindergarten teachers also take responsibility to care children in addition to educating, the children perceived that primary school teachers are mainly associated with teaching knowledge ("*when you communicate with the [primary school] teacher, normally it's about you don't know how to answer this question, what does this question mean, it's all about learning.*" [Du Du]). Therefore they would need to take care of themselves ("*Wipe your bottom in the toilet [by yourself]*" [Shui Bao]; "*Don't fall asleep when eating lunch!*" [Xiao Xuan]). The role of primary school teacher as a teaching-related authority is also evident in Du Du's and Qi Qi's drawings (see Figure

3.5.8 and Figure 3.5.9).

Information resources

When asked about how they got to know about primary school, the children mentioned they mainly learnt from teachers (through activities aimed at transition), parents and older children (siblings or friends). Shui Bao also mentioned that he passed by a primary school everyday on his way to the kindergarten, which shapes his knowledge about primary schools.

3.5.3 Children's perspectives on transition

Mixed emotions towards transition

In the face of the aforementioned perceived differences between preschool and primary school, the children expressed mixed emotions towards transiting to primary school. For example, Du Du told the researcher that "*I feel reluctant to leave the kindergarten*", but at the same time expressing that "*I hope to learn more knowledge at primary school [...and] to find out what is different from kindergarten*". In her story-telling, Xiao Xuan told the researcher that her puppet would be nervous about going to primary school because "*will have lessons, will find it very difficult*". In contrast, Bao Bao described that his puppet didn't feel nervous but struggled a lot during the first few days at primary school. It was not until he saved a bird and therefore received praise from the teacher that he started liking primary school. When the researcher asked Jiu Yue what she was drawing in the brain of her poppet, Jiu Yue answered: "*Happy and Sad*"; she further explained that "*It's Lisa's [puppet name] first day at primary school, she is happy and sad at the same time, because she doesn't know what is going to happen [...] she has to take the lesson she likes as well as the lessons she doesn't like, so she is sometimes happy and sometimes sad*". Likewise, Qi Qi also shared such mixed emotions and added that "*making new friends [at primary school]*" is something that she would feel happy about.

Children's mixed emotions towards transiting to primary school are manifested in that, on the one hand, they felt sad about leaving the kindergarten, a familiar environment where they had positive experiences, especially the good relationships

with friends and teachers. They also expressed worry and concern about adapting to the unfamiliar environment, tighter timetable, stricter rules/regulation, harder learning requirements and teachers whom they perceived as more authoritarian and academic-oriented. On the other hand, they had expectations about learning new things, making new friends and just as Jiu Yue put it "*I feel very happy, because going to school means I have grown up, I can do more adult things*".

What is important for smooth transition

When talking about smooth transition, the children of our pilot mentioned a variety of aspects which they considered as important, including positive social relationships, independent life skills, self-regulation skills, knowledge, teachers' and parents' approval.

First and foremost, the children regarded having positive relationships with peers and teachers at primary school as essential (e.g., "*to have good relationships with teachers and classmates*" [Qi Qi]). The children not only expressed their wishes to go to the same primary school as their current friends (e.g., Bao Bao and Jiu Yue), but also laid emphasis on making new friends and having positive interaction with primary school teachers (e.g., Qi Qi and Shui Bao). This highlights the social aspect of schooling, which has profound influence on children's experiences at primary schools.

Secondly, the children pointed out the importance of being able to care for themselves in terms of using toilet (e.g., Shui Bao), eating and drinking (e.g., "*she [the puppet] needs to bring her water bottle, her lunch box. If she doesn't have her lunch box, how could she have lunch?*" [Jiu Yue]), organising their own belongings (e.g., Bao Bao), not having nap at primary school (e.g., Xiao Xuan) and so on. In children's mind, these life skills are necessary for positive experiences at primary school.

As mentioned earlier, the children perceived primary school as academic-oriented and learning-focused. Therefore, they highlighted that they needed to have self-regulation skills in order to thrive at primary school ("*They [primary school students] need to listen carefully to each lesson, no matter whether they like it or not.*" [Qi Qi]). This is also related to children's perceptions of stricter rules and regulations at primary school

(as demonstrated earlier). In general, the children recognised that they needed to follow the rules, have good time management, be self-organised and stay focused on tasks that may be "boring" (Du Du) to them. Meanwhile, the children also acknowledged that having certain knowledge is necessary for performing well at primary school ("*This is knowledge about science, it should be useful at primary school*") [Bao Bao]; "*He [the puppet] can recite the Pinyin alphabet table in advance [before going to primary school].*" [Shui Bao]). The children believed that self-regulation skills and a good knowledge would enable them to obtain approval and praise from parents and primary school teachers, which they actively sought for. For example, in Bao Bao's story-telling, the puppet was praised and rewarded by the primary school teacher when he managed to be at the class on time, bring with him all the required textbooks and stationaries, and get all the questions right.

The children's perceptions of what is important for transition concur with the interview data collected from their teachers and parents, who also emphasised the importance of social skills, life skills, self-regulation and basic knowledge, with acknowledgement of the discontinuity in environment, curriculum and pedagogy between preschool and primary school. The children's perceptions are inevitably influenced by their teachers and parents. By comparing children's data with their parents' and teachers', it is evident that the children internalised what they learnt from the adults, either through specifically-designed transition activities or subtle influences in everyday life. Nonetheless, the children were able to express their own minds, such as,

"My mother told me that before going to primary school, I need to practise things that I will do at primary school, for example, mathematics, writing Chinese characters. I have started practising already, and also English, I am practising them all. [But] I still don't want to go to primary school. It is better to stay in kindergarten, you can play here." [Jiu Yue]

3.5.4 Parents' conflicting perceptions on school readiness

While this project focuses on children's perspectives, the interview data collected from parents enabled us to gain a better understanding of the family contexts in which

children were situated. As mentioned earlier, the data of parents' interview generally concur with the data collected from the children, with regard to the perceived discontinuity between preschool and primary school; and what is important for children to have a smooth transition.

One striking theme emerged from the parent interview data is that all the mothers of pilot expressed their conflicting perceptions on school readiness, which caused them great anxiety and pressure (e.g., "[Sigh], all the parents are very anxious, we all want our children to move forward" [Xiao Xuan's mother]). On the one hand, they acknowledged that children's positive attitudes towards school, social skills, emotional wellbeing, self-regulation and positive self-beliefs (e.g., confidence) are more important than mastering certain academic knowledge and skills (e.g., using Pinyin, recognising Chinese characters, etc.) during transition. On the other hand, they felt pressured by and worried about the perceived fierce competition their children would face in terms of academic achievement and holistic development at primary school. For example, as Qi Qi's mother put it,

"Actually, I feel very self-conflicting. Sometimes, for example, I feel that more anxiety comes from the outside world. In fact, I think the word involution [内卷] is actually very hot now. Personally, I'm not really worried about her [Qi Qi's] learning abilities or something. But in fact, take Pinyin for example, many children around her are much better [than Qi Qi]. I know that around 20% or 30% children at their kindergarten class have learnt Pinyin through Spark Thinking [an extra-curriculum training aimed at transition]. But I was wondering if the [primary school] teacher would teach so quickly that she couldn't master it because she didn't learn it beforehand. In fact, I have this concern and I have struggled with it for a long time. In fact, if all the children are on the same starting line, she wouldn't have any problems. But if everyone else, or 70% of them already know it, I am worried about whether she can learn it, right?"

Parents' conflicting perceptions on school readiness represents the dilemma that they face, which is largely due to the current discontinuity between preschool and primary school. Parents' anxiety and concerns may have influenced children's mixed emotions

towards transition (as demonstrated earlier).

3.5.5 Kindergarten teachers' CPD needs

We only interviewed two kindergarten teachers in the pilot. Both teachers expressed their needs for CPD on facilitating children's transition to primary school. On the one hand, they are constrained by the ['de-schoolification' policy](#) (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018) which states that it is not allowed to formally teach any academic subjects in preschools. On the other hand, they face the pressure from parents who are anxious about getting their children prepared for the considerable academic demands in primary school. Given this dilemma, the two teachers indicated that they endeavoured to design activities to allow children learn through play and experiencing (as demonstrated earlier). Yet, they indicated that that it would be helpful to have the opportunities to collaborate with primary school teachers to facilitate children through transition (*"For example, to ask those experienced primary school teachers with professional skills to join our kindergarten teachers to share what are the biggest difficulties or challenges that first grade students face, and then provide us with training."* [Ms. Yu, ten years of experience]). Both teachers of the pilot underscored that it was imperative for preschool teachers, parents and primary school teachers to work together (*i.e.*, to establish pre- and primary-school partnership and teacher-parent partnership) to promote smooth transition for children.

3.6 Reflection

By conducting a pilot study, we were able to further refine the research instruments as well as reconsider very detailed issues related to fieldwork. For example, we gained more experience of co-researching with young children through flexibly adjusting the participatory research activities to meet the needs of different children. The pilot fieldwork also enabled us to further reflect on the power relationship between the researcher and young children, not only for ethical considerations (Harcourt, Perry, & Waller, 2011), but also to maintain authenticity in children's voices (Dalli & Stephenson, 2010). Furthermore, the analysis of the pilot data allowed us to test our analysis strategies, thereby making further refinement. The initial analytic framework with themes and codes will inform the subsequent data analysis.

We have been very conscious and reflective of the specific context of the pilot. We expected that it was not unlikely to encounter new issues when conducting fieldwork in different settings. To ensure that any issues emerged would be discussed and resolved timely, we held multiple reflection meetings during each week of the fieldwork. We recorded these reflection meetings, which are useful resources for methodological reflections⁷. The pilot study has paved a solid foundation of the following fieldwork taken place in seven early years settings of diverse backgrounds (as demonstrated in the following section).

4. Fieldwork Round One

Sampling strategy of fieldwork round one

This project adopts a purposive sampling strategy. We purposely approached preschools and early years (EY) institutions of diverse backgrounds (*e.g.*, public or private⁸, rural or urban, size, general family SES, *etc.*) in Beijing area (China) in order to maximise the possibility of recruiting participants of diverse characteristics. For the first round of fieldwork, seven early years settings agreed to take part in our research. The overview of these settings, which have very different backgrounds, are presented below. In total, 47 children (21 boys and 26 girls, age range 59 -81 months), 37⁹ parents or children's primary caretakers (28 mothers, 5 fathers, 2 grandmothers, 1 grandfather and 1 carer) and 8 teachers (all females) participated in the research activities. The demographic information of participants is illustrated in Table 4.1 to 4.7.

Setting 1

Setting 1 is a public kindergarten located in the suburb of Beijing. It is an affiliated kindergarten to a primary school, which enrolls local children living nearby. The

⁷ We intend to write up our methodological reflections for researchers who are interested in co-researching with young children.

⁸ In terms of the ownership, Chinese preschools can be categorised into four types: public kindergartens which receive government funding and are non-profit; non-profit private kindergartens which also receive some government funding; for-profit private kindergartens and international kindergartens which implement international ECEC curriculum and pedagogy.

⁹ By the time this interim report is published, seven scheduled parent interviews are still in progress. We are still in contact with another three parents to schedule an appointment for interview.

kindergarten and primary school are managed by an integrated school leadership. The kindergarten has 6 classes (2 classes for each year group) with over 130 children (aged 3-6) enrolled. There are around 50 staff members working at the kindergarten, including 18 teachers (with teaching qualifications).

The kindergarten and primary school share one large campus. Thus, children at the kindergarten can observe the environment and activities of the primary school at any time. The kindergarten area comprises of a two-floor building and a outdoor playground. The environment of the kindergarten is designed to highlight nature and children's fun. The classroom has dedicated areas and resources for art, construction, and science, as well as teaching facilities for teacher-guided group activities. The kindergarten emphasises the importance of cultivating children's sense of responsibility, aiming to "*establish responsibility in heart and encourage responsibility in action*".

Setting 1 Participants

Seven children (3 boys and 4 girls, age range from 70 to 77 months) participated in the research activities. We also interviewed their parents (5 mothers and 2 fathers) and kindergarten teacher (one female teacher). Table 4.1 demonstrates the background information of the participants.

Setting 2

Setting 2 is a public kindergarten located in a beautiful and quiet urban park in Beijing. It provides care and education services for local children. It has around 480 children (ages 3-6) and about 75 teachers who have good professional qualifications.

The kindergarten benefits from the natural environment of the park. It is equipped with a variety of outdoor facilities which enable children to have diverse outdoor activities. It also has cutting-edge technology equipment (such as the interactive white board) which facilitates teaching. The classroom has specific performance area, art crafting area, role-play area, thinker toy area, patchwork area and so on. There is also an indoor space shared by all the children in the kindergarten. The ethos of

kindergarten is child-centred, with an emphasis on cultivating children's social skills. It aims to create an atmosphere of "*happy learning, happy group, happy life*" for the children at the kindergarten. To promote transition, the teachers at this kindergarten have set up a series of activities and related courses featuring the connection between kindergarten and primary school.

Setting 2 Participants

Eight children (5 boys and 3 girls, age range from 71 to 79 months) participated in the research activities. We also interviewed their parents (6 mothers and 2 fathers) and kindergarten teacher (one female teacher). Table 4.2 demonstrates the background information of the participants. One parent (Ran Ran's mother) has not yet filled in the parent online questionnaire by the time this interim report is published.

Setting 3

Setting 3 is a public kindergarten located in the suburb of Beijing, which is surrounded by mountains. It is an affiliated kindergarten to a primary school, which is managed by an integrated school leadership. The primary school has an over-century long history and rich cultural heritage. Accordingly, the kindergarten follows the school tradition and sets the goal of building a modern kindergarten that is "*elegant, beautiful and artistic*". It aims to raise confident children who are educated, sensible and well-mannered with good moral character and proper behavior. It has around 100 children (3-6 years) and 22 staff members, 12 of whom have teaching qualifications.

The kindergarten has a large outdoor space with many small pieces of play facilities. However, there is only one large combination slide. In terms of indoor environment, the kindergarten has plenty of materials and resources. The classroom is divided into several areas, such as a construction area, an art area, and a reading area. The walls are full of art works, as well as many children's own works. Some displayed works show themes related to school readiness, such as "*Goodbye to kindergarten*", "*The elementary school in my heart*", and "*Ten minutes of recess*".

Setting 3 Participants

Five children (2 boys and 3 girls, age range from 76 to 80 months) participated in the research activities. We also interviewed four parents (all mothers) and the head teacher (one female teacher). Table 4.3 demonstrates the background information of the participants. Two parents have not yet filled in the parent online questionnaire by the time this interim report is published.

Setting 4

Setting 4 is part of a private international education school for local Chinese students, offering early childhood education (ECE), primary, middle and high school international education programs. The school fuses the Chinese National Curriculum of Primary and Secondary Education with international education resources to form the core and fundamentals of the school curriculum. The fieldwork was conducted in the department of early childhood education (ECE) of the school. It provides bilingual (*i.e.*, Chinese and English) early childhood education for children aged two to six years old. It emphasises on developing the whole child as a person as well as a learner. There are four classes, with about 80 children and 9 teachers in total. Each class is co-taught by a western teacher (native English speaker) and a Chinese teacher. The ECE department adopts an emergent model, which focuses on cultivating children's understanding and skills with regards to English and Chinese literacy, mathematics, creativity and knowledge of cultural diversity through demonstrating the beauty of the world around them.

The outdoor playground has only one large combination slide and some climbing frames. There is no cover for rain or shade from the sun. However, the school has a large indoor gymnasium that is open to the whole school, which has various sport courts (*e.g.*, basketball, badminton, *etc.*). Children often go to the gymnasium in the summer. The indoor space for ECE class is relatively large, but there are limited materials and resources within children's sight and reach. In addition, there is a music classroom, a swimming pool, and an auditorium where children take violin lessons, swimming lessons, and more. The tuition fee of this school is relatively high. Therefore the children attending this ECE setting are mainly from high-income

families.

Setting 4 Participants

Six children (1 boy and 5 girls, age range from 70 to 81 months) participated in the research activities. We also interviewed one parent (mother) and the head teacher (one female teacher). Table 4.4 demonstrates the background information of the participants. Four parents have not yet filled in the parent online questionnaire by the time this interim report is published.

Setting 5

Located in a central district of Beijing, setting 5 is part of a private international school for children of foreign personnel, which provides international education services for foreign students aged 2-18. This school covers kindergarten to high school, having more than 800 students from 43 countries and around hundred teachers from 30 countries. The school is committed to cultivating global citizens with good ethics and understands the importance of helping others to shape a better world.

The fieldwork was conducted in the ECE department, which is located in a two-story building at the corner of the campus. It provides service for the children aged between 2 and 5 years old. There are four two-year-old (K2) classes on the first floor and two four-year-old (K4) classes on the second floor, including around 100 children, 12 teachers and 6 carers. Between the two K4 classrooms, there is a place called learning community where children of both K4 classes can play together every day. There is a small area downstairs dedicated to ECE activities. It has relatively rich materials, including slides, a sand pool and various toys.

The atmosphere in this ECE setting is very relaxed. The teachers implement play-based pedagogy and children have a lot of free play time. In the meantime, K4 children take some transition lessons such as English phonics, group story-telling, library visits to help children prepare for Year 1. Also, afternoon nap is removed from K4 class in order to help children adapt to the routine of primary school.

Setting 5 Participants

Nine children (3 boys and 6 girls, age range from 59 to 71 months) participated in the research activities. We also interviewed five parents (all mothers) and two teachers (both females). Table 4.5 shows the background information of the participants. Four parents have not yet filled in the parent online questionnaire by the time this interim report is published.

Setting 6

Setting 6 is a private kindergarten located in northwest Beijing that established in 2019. It has over ten years of Montessori international early education experiences. Adhering to the goal of "*making early childhood education great*", the kindergarten applies the Montessori education philosophy to provide children with high-quality resources and to establish partnership with families. At this kindergarten, children aged 3-5 years attend the mixed-age class, while children aged 5-6 years old attend the transition class to prepare children for primary school. The fieldwork was conducted in the transition class, which has one lead teacher, two class teachers and one assistant to teach and care 8 children. The majority of children attending this kindergarten are from middle-class family with entrepreneur background who has migrated from other provinces of China to Beijing.

Setting 6 Participants

Eight children (5 boys and 3 girls, age range from 71 months to 78 months with one boy who is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder) participated in the research activities. Children's primary caregivers (3 mothers, 1 father, 2 grandmothers, 1 grandfather and 1 carer) were interviewed to provide contextual information about children's transition and school readiness. In addition, the head teacher was also interviewed to provide contextual information about the kindergarten and the children. Table 4.6 demonstrates the background information of the participants.

Setting 7

Setting 7 is a private educational institute (i.e., shadow education) for children aged 2-12, which was established in 2005. Currently, this educational institute has 8

campuses in Beijing and nearly 300 branch schools in China. The fieldwork was conducted in the full-time transition class of its southwest campus in Beijing, which is a two-storey commercial building located in a middle-class community area¹⁰. The transition class is specifically designed for children aged 5-6 years old to prepare them for primary school (*i.e.*, school readiness intervention). There are 3 transition classes with 20 children in each classroom at this campus. Each class has one class teacher, while several other teachers would rotate to teach different subjects at each class. Children who attend this transition class are mostly from the middle-class families who live in or close to the community.

Setting 7 Participants

Four children (2 boys and 2 girls, age range from 72 months to 80 months) and their mothers participated in the research activities and interviews, respectively (see Table 4.7 for demographic information). Meanwhile, the class teacher of the four children was also interviewed.

¹⁰ This community consists of six blocks of high-rise apartment buildings with about 1050 residents. There are commercial shops on ground floor and children's playground.

Table 4.1 Background information of the participants of setting 1

Child pseudonym	Gender	Age	Parent	Parent Education level	Parent Employment	Parent age	Teacher gender	Teacher age	Teacher qualification	Years of experience
Wen Wen	Girl	76 months	Mother	Middle school	Saleswoman	36-40	Female	31-35	Bachelor degree of ECEC major; Teacher qualification (Second class)	10 years
Dou Dou	Boy	77 months	Mother	Bachelor	Administrative clerk	36-40				
Xing Xing	Boy	75 months	Mother	Middle school	Salesclerk	36-40				
Long Long	Boy	70 months	Mother	Middle school	Full-time mom	41-45				
Biu Biu	Girl	77 months	Father	Bachelor	Teacher	36-40				
Apple	Girl	77 months	Father	High school	Freelance work	31-35				
Xin Xin	Girl	77 months	Mother	High school	Saleswoman	36-40				

Table 4.2 Background information of the participants of setting 2

Child pseudonym	Gender	Age	Parent	Parent Education level	Parent Employment	Parent age	Teacher gender	Teacher age	Teacher qualification	Years of experience
Dou Ya	Boy	71 months	Mother	Bachelor	Project manager	36-40	Female	26-30	Bachelor degree of ECEC major; Teacher qualification (Second class)	5 years
Yi Yi	Girl	78 months	Mother	Bachelor	Finance officer	36-40				
Yao Yao	Girl	79 months	Mother	Bachelor	Doctor	36-40				
Zhuang Zhuang	Boy	79 months	Mother	High school	Enterprise staff	31-35				
Ma Ma	Boy	75 months	Father	Bachelor	Finance officer	31-35				
Yang Yang	Boy	74 months	Father	High school	Community worker	31-35				
Xiao Mo Gu	Girl	73 months	Mother	High school	Culture Company boss	31-35				

Ran Ran	Boy	78 months	Mother	—	—	—	—	—	—
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Table 4.3 Background information of the participants of setting 3

Child pseudonym	Gender	Age	Parent	Parent Education level	Parent Employment	Parent age	Teacher gender	Teacher age	Teacher qualification	Years of experience
Xiaoxiao	Girl	80 months	Mother	High school	Saleswoman	36-40	Female	26-30	Bachelor degree of ECEC major; Teacher qualification (Second class)	9 years
Chengcheng	Boy	76 months	Mother	High school	Individual Businesses	36-40				
Rongrong	Girl	78 months	—	—	—	—				
Xiaozi	Girl	80 months	—	—	—	—				
Haohao	Boy	78 months	Mother	Master degree	Hardware R&D	36-40				

Table 4.4 Background information of the participants of setting 4

Child pseudonym	Gender	Age	Parent	Parent Education level	Parent Employment	Parent age	Teacher gender	Teacher age	Teacher qualification	Years of experience
Alex	Boy	81 months	Mother	Bachelor degree	Part-time job (company financial supervision)	36-40	Female	31-35	Master degree of humanities	9 years
Bella	Girl	80 months	—	—	—	—				
Henta	Girl	70 months	Mother	Master degree	Full-time parent	36-40				
Mimi	Girl	76 months	—	—	—	—				
Sophia	Girl	80 months	—	—	—	—				
Summer	Girl	70 months	—	—	—	—				

Table 4.5 Background information of the participants of setting 5

Child pseudonym	Gender	Age	Parent	Parent Education level	Parent Employment	Parent age	Teacher gender	Teacher age	Teacher qualification	Years of experience
Olivia	Girl	60 months	Mother	—	—	—				
Charlie	Boy	65 months	Mother	—	—	—				
Jaja	Girl	63 months	Mother	Bachelor degree	Teacher	36-40	Female	36-40	Bachelor degree of TCSL; Teacher qualification (Third class)	11 years
Eunice	Girl	67 months	Mother	Master degree	Not stated	41-45				
Yi	Girl	62 months	Mother	Bachelor degree	Businesswoman	41-45				
Edward	Boy	59 months	Mother	—	—	—	Female	26-30	Master degree of ECEC major; Teacher	10 years
Zoe	Girl	71 months	Mother	—	—	—				

Meimei	Girl	65 months	Mother	High school	Full-time parent	41-45	qualification (Third class)
Harris	Boy	71 months	Mother	Bachelor degree	Full-time parent	26-30	

Table 4.6 Background information of the participants of setting 6

Child pseudonym	Gender	Age	Parent	Parent Education level	Parent Employment	Parent age	Teacher gender	Teacher age	Teacher qualification	Years of experience
Jin Yu	Girl	72 months	Mother	Master degree	Management field	41-45	Female	26-30	Bachelor degree of ECEC major; Teacher qualification (First class)	8 years
Tian Tian	Girl	77 months	Mother	Master degree	Information Technology	36-40				
Jing Jing	Boy	75 months	Father	Bachelor degree	Not stated	36-40				
Hao Hao	Boy	74 months	Mother/ Grand mother	Bachelor degree	Not stated	41-45				

Le Le	Boy	72 months	Mother	Bachelor	Educational Field	31-35			
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Table 4.6 Background information of the participants of setting 6

Child pseudonym	Gender	Age	Parent	Parent Education level	Parent Employment	Parent age	Teacher gender	Teacher age	Teacher qualification	Years of experience
Xiao Man	Boy	72 months	Mother	Master	Security field	36-40	Female	31-35	Bachelor degree of ECEC major	13 years
Niu Niu	Girl	78 months	Mother	High school	Not stated	31-35				
Liu Liu	Boy	82 months	Mother	Bachelor	Not stated	>45				
Ni Ni	Girl	72 months	Mother	Bachelor	Medical Field	31-35				

5. Next steps and milestones

The next steps and milestones of this research project are demonstrated in the following table (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Next steps and milestones of the project

Timeline	Tasks	Expected research outputs
Sep-Oct 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis of fieldwork round one • Write up methodological reflections based on our reflective journals and the recordings of reflective meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refined analytic framework • Methodological paper
Nov-Dec 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing-up of fieldwork round one • Pilot for data collection at primary school stage • Contact parents and primary school teachers to prepare for fieldwork round two 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report of findings <i>I</i> • Online research seminar (TBC)
Jan 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fieldwork round two at primary schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journal article about fieldwork round one
Feb-May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis of fieldwork round two • Writing-up of fieldwork round two • Research proposal for further investigation and grant application 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report of findings <i>II</i> • External funding application • Online research seminar (TBC)
Jun-Aug 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing-up the whole project • Develop CPD programmes about transition for preschool and primary school teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final report • Journal articles • CPD programmes

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7. Appendix

Example of children's mosaic table (Bao Bao's Mosaic table)

Themes	Codes	Puppet+ Story telling	Child activities (Narratives) and evidences	Picture book	Evidence	Picture book	Visual materials and evidences	Parent interview and evidences	Teacher interview and evidences
Outdoor environment	Achievements								
	Playground and facilities								
	Natural environment								
Living facilities									
Others									
Indoor environment	Play station and resources								
	Building space and resources								
	Art-related group and resources								
Exhibition boards									
Living facilities									
Others									
Personal objects	objects children bring in								
	objects created by children themselves								
	Children's identifiers								
Others									
Pedagogy and activities	Learning through play								
	Experiential learning								
	Art class and creative making								
Others	Regulation and discipline								
	Rewarding								
	Others								
Routine and timetable	Living routine								
	Time spent on different activities								
	Others								
Significant others	Charmates and friends								
	Teachers								
	Child carer (保育员)								
Others									
Emotions	Positive emotions								
	Negative emotions								
	Others								
Self-beliefs	Confidence								
	Autonomy								
	Others								

Themes	Codes	and evidences Picture book	Evidence	Visual materials and evidences Picture book	Evidence	Parent interview and evidences Parent interview	Evidence	Teacher interview and evidences Teacher interview	Evidence
Children's perception on transition/school readiness:	What is important for smooth transition	Friendship					✓	✓	
		Life skills	✓					✓	
		Knowledge		研究者：重这张图（第二张）？ 宝宝：这是关于“科学”的知识，小学应该会用到吧。 研究者：哦，你觉得上小学用得到这些科学知识，所以要带去小学，是吗？ 宝宝：嗯。				✓	
		Learning at school						✓	
		Self-beliefs						✓	
		Parental expectation							
		Teacher feedback/appraisal							
		Material preparation							
		Familiarity with the environment							
		Others							
Influence (where they learn about primary school)	Teachers						✓	✓	
	Parents								
	Siblings								
	Friends						✓		
	Transition activities								
	Surroundings						✓	✓	
	Others								

(Re)constructing school readiness from Chinese young children's perspectives

Children's information sheet and consent form

The researchers will use this information sheet to explain to children about the purpose of this research and the activities they will be involved. The researchers will emphasise that children can freely choose whether to take part or not; and that they can freely choose to discontinue any activity at any time without any reason. The researchers will use very simple language that is easier for children to understand, as well as answer any questions children have.

Who are we?

We are researchers in two universities who are interested in understanding what children think.



To protect us from Covid-19 virus, we all need to follow the rules of your kindergarten. We will sometimes need to wear masks and keep social distance when we are playing with you.



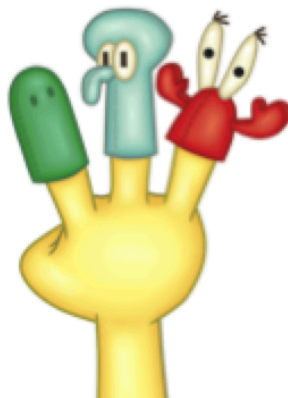
What do we want to know?

We would like to know about what you think about going to primary school.



What will you do?

We would ask you to draw pictures, take photos, talk to us, take us on a tour of your preschool, play with puppets, tell stories, and or prepare a backpack for primary school. You can freely choose which activity you would (not) like to do.



Who will see your data?



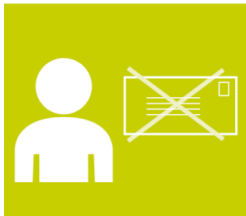
We follow the rules of **Data Protection Law**.

We will keep the **information** about you and your data **safe, protected** and **locked**. We sometimes call the information we collect 'data'.

Only the researchers will see this **data**.

At the end of the research, we will share our research results with you.


Afterwards, we will **take out** your **name** and **personal details** from your data (address, email address, telephone number).



No one outside the research team will know **who you are** from the data.



The project data will be **stored safely** for **future research**.
(no names, no personal details)

It is OK  to change your mind at any time.

Do you have any questions?



After explaining to the children about the research and answering any of their questions, the researcher will ask the children to tick the box to indicate whether they would like to participate or not.

Do you like to take part?

I am happy to take part
in this project



I am not happy to take
part in this project



To be completed by researcher:

Date:

Participant number (child's pseudonym):