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# Cultural-historical study of crises in child role adjustment during transition to school within a bi-cultural context

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## ABSTRACT

There is a consensus that the crises children encounter during the transition period might impact negatively on children's learning and development. However, from cultural-historical perspective, qualitative leap in development can hardly be achieved without crises. This paper, drawing upon cultural-historical theory as the framework and by using 'role adjustment' as the unit of analysis, discusses what the crisis means for children's learning and development. Through a case study of two second generation Chinese Australian children's role adjustment in school transition, this paper finds that the crises provide both potentials and dangers depending on how the crises are managed within the child's social situation of development. It argues against the advocates for making children's transition seamless, as it is important to utilize the developmental potentials of crises instead of eliminating them. It also enriches the cultural-historical studies by exploring not only the developmental aspect but also the dark side of the crises.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

Transition to school is considered to be challenging because unsuccessful transition can bring negative consequences such as health and mental issues (Fink, Browne, Hughes, & Gibson, 2019). How to support children to have a successful transition becomes a widely discussed topic. Although it is controversial about what specific approaches should be applied, it is a consensus among the majority of empirical findings and educational practices that 'continuity' is the principle for supporting children's transition. Dunlop and Fabian (2002) suggest that 'developmental demands which children encounter need to be matched by changes which are continuous rather than abrupt' (p. 148). Neuman (2002) lists four areas of continuity, including structural continuity, pedagogical continuity, professional continuity, and continuity with the home. The above notions are based on the understanding that failure in transition is the result of 'discontinuities,' e.g. between preschool and primary school systems. From this point of view, the only way to support children is to improve the continuity and make the transition smooth.

However, increasing doubts have arisen concerning the above-discussed understanding. Dockett & Perry argue that seamless transition may 'run the risk of removing many of the challenges and changes that children are expected to encounter' (Dockett & Perry, 2013, p. 171). These 'question and doubt' voices inspire us to conceptualize 'discontinuities and continuities' from a new angle and to explore what discontinuities, challenges, and crises really mean for child development during the transition period.

In researching transition, many studies deconstruct it into separate adjustment lines, such as emotional, behaviour, academic, and social adjustment which tend to perceive transition as a mechanical accumulation of these lines. Based on the cultural-historical theory, this paper applies a different way of researching children's transition. It considers the transition as a whole structure (Vygotsky, 1998b) within which different adjustment lines are related (Fleer & Hammer, 2013a) and developing at an uneven pace (Veresov, 2004). This paper uses 'role adjustment' as the unit of analysis, which is not an independent adjustment line, but a unit within which different adjustment lines are developing unevenly and connected dialectically. In adjusting certain roles, children acquire behaviour patterns (i.e. behaviour adjustment), build emotional identification of the roles (i.e. emotional adjustment), and learn how to position themselves within a group (i.e. social adjustment) as a whole. In other words, role adjustment is a scope to gain an elaborate overview of how a child develops.

A case study of two second-generation Chinese Australian children (i.e. born in Australian, and their parents immigrated to Australian in adulthood) will be presented to show how role adjustment is used as the unit to identify children's crises during the transition period and disclose how the crises relate to their development.

### Theoretical framework: cultural-historical theory

This paper draws upon three interrelated cultural-historical concepts of 'crises,' 'social situation of development,' and 'perezhivanie' as the theoretical framework for studying children's role adjustment during the transition to school.

Vygotsky (1998b) puts that development is a process alternate between lytic and critical periods. In the lytic periods, development is evolutionary and slow, and microscopic quantitative changes (such as gaining knowledge) accumulate gradually. The critical period is marked by major and abrupt shifts during which significant changes in the relation of child and environment occur within a short time and usually take the form of a severe crisis. Critical period is often regarded as period of crises. Transition to school is one of the periods of crises in child development (Vygotsky (1998a). According to Vygotsky (1998b, p. 193), crises occur due to 'the fact that the change in the pedagogical system applied to the child does not keep up with the rapid changes in his personality.' In other words, crises are originated from the contradiction between the social requirement and the child's subjective aspects (e.g. capability, personality, inner motives, etc.). Here, contradiction, inner conflicts, and crises are different but closely related. Hedegaard (2009) claims that contradiction should be understood through practices, while crises can be only identified through the individual's perspective. Zinchenko (1996) perceives crisis to be created on the basis of long-lasting conflict. Based on their conceptions, this paper defines (1) contradiction as a gap between different aspects that objectively exist in reality, (2) inner conflict as the subjective ambivalence when the contradiction is being consciously realized, and (3) crisis as the severe and long-standing inner conflict.

During the periods of crises or during the transition periods, abrupt changes not only take place in the environment, but also in child's relation with his/her environment. As Vygotsky (1998a) argues, it is 'the new unity of environmental and personal factors ... that makes the new stage of development possible' (p. 292). In relation to this argument, Vygotsky (1998b) introduces the concept 'social situation of development,' defining it as the unique relation between the child and the social reality. This relation 'represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period' (Vygotsky, 1998b, p. 198). In this sense, child development is not directly determined by environment, but dependent on the child-environment relations. In relation to the current study, the social situation of development represents the relation between the second-generation Chinese Australian child and his/her environment, which is related to his/her role adjustment during the transition period. It can be captured through observing the child's participation in different institutional practices and his/her engagement in different activities.

To study how the child is related to his/her social reality, Vygotsky uses 'perezhivanie' as the unit for analysis, and defines it as:

a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is ... being experienced ... and on the other hand, what is represented is how I ... am experiencing this, i.e. all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in a perezhivanie. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342)

Veresov et al. (2017) distinguishes the two meanings of perezhivanie: First, perezhivanie as observable and researchable psychological processes and experiences, which may relate to cognition, emotion, perception, interpretation, and understanding, etc. (named as P1); Second, perezhivanie as a theoretical tool to analyse development (named as P2). Most studies focus on P1. Although there are interesting studies which apply perezhivanie as a tool to research children's development (e.g. Hammer et al., 2017), they are much fewer. In this paper, perezhivanie is particularly used as an analytical tool to interpret children's role adjustment crises. How it works will be explained in 'Method and methodology.'

## Method and methodology

Two second-generation Chinese Australian children – Covin, Koby, their parents, kindergarten educators, and school class teachers were research participants. The children were recruited from the same child centre and attended different public primary schools in Melbourne. Covin lives with parents and brother. At the beginning of the last kindergarten term, he started Chinese school – a weekend school to learn Chinese and Math. When he started primary school, he also went to an afterschool literacy class. Koby lives with mother and sister. He had never had any formal academic learning before school.

## Procedure

The data collection began after the letter of ethical approval was received. It lasted seven months, comprising three periods. The first period lasted from the start of the last kindergarten term to the end of the term. The second period was during the holiday before school started. The third period lasted from the start of school to the end of the first term.

The main data were obtained from the observations of each focus child's engagement in different activities and practices in the kindergarten, family, and primary school. The observations during the home visits and kindergarten visits were video-recorded, and the observations during primary school visits were note-taken due to the restricted school permissions. Interviews provide additional information that cannot be gathered from observations. Interviews with each focus child were embedded in observation and presented in a relaxing and natural way in order to identify their intentions in different activities and practices. Interviews with adults took place in a casual and dialogue-based way and were guided by (but not restricted to) certain focuses (including practices for children's transition, expectations for children's learning and development, and thoughts on children difficulties and challenges during the transition). Six interviews were conducted with each focus child's parents, and one interview was respectively conducted with each child's kindergarten educator and primary school classroom teacher. All the interviews were audio-recorded, and all the interviews with the focus children and their parents were conducted in Mandarin and their words were all translated into English in this paper. In total, the data consist of 72 h of observation and 8 h of interview.

## Analysis

We consider 'role adjustment' as the unit to analyse the transition process. Three role-related aspects are analysed, including (1) what roles the child took and how the child took each role, (2) the difficulties the child encountered when taking the role, and (3) how the difficulties were managed. The

child's roles in different contexts were teased out by carefully 'reading' the data instead of being defined beforehand.

Perezhivanie is applied as an analytic tool to identify children's crises in their role adjustment. Scholars use 'refracting prism' as the metaphor to claim that children are influenced by the environment in which they are situated through their prism of perezhivanie (Veresov & Fleer, 2016). Depicting a child's 'prism' is to depict his/her subjective world. Figure 1 is built as a guiding model for interpreting perezhivanie. The interpretation starts with the analysis of the child's engagement in the activities and practices which are observable. The child's actions and reactions, language use, and facial expressions, etc. which reflect the child's intentions, demands, patterns of thinking and behaviour, and competency are teased out and interpreted, based on which the invisible subjective aspects could be indicated. In this sense, the child's 'prism' could be depicted. Then, researchers look back to the evidence at reflectable and observable level to explain how the environment is 'refracted' through the 'prism.'

## Findings

In this section, each child's role adjustment trajectory over the period of the transition to school is presented. The trajectory is divided into periods according to the abrupt change in the child's social situation of development (Ma, 2018). Covin's role adjustment is divided into three periods and Koby's is divided into two. The institutional practices are discussed from the family and school perspective, and each child's experienced crises are discussed by interpreting his perezhivanie from child perspective.

### *Covin's crises in role adjustment during transition to school*

In the kindergarten period before Chinese school, Covin's dominant institutions were kindergarten and family, and his main role was *player* and *self-carer*. From the family perspective, his father was busy with work, and mother was busy with caring for Covin's younger brother. Covin was positioned as a *self-carer*, and was allowed to play freely at home. From the kindergarten perspective, children were expected to be the *activity leader* (i.e. to initiate and engaged in the activities based on their interests), and a *learner* learning through activities. From child perspective, the consistency between kindergarten and family practices made Covin easy to shift roles through transition between two institutions. Parents' lack of time to accompany Covin pushed him to play alone, through which he developed capabilities in directing activities. Due to fewer restrictions, personal interests became Covin's main drives in play. These developing capabilities and inner drives supported Covin to be an *activity initiator and leader* in kindergarten (Figure 2).

**Example in kindergarten:** Covin ran about the playground with holding a ball. He stopped near the basin where Jason was playing water. Covin joined. Covin held a bowl and required Jason to pour water through

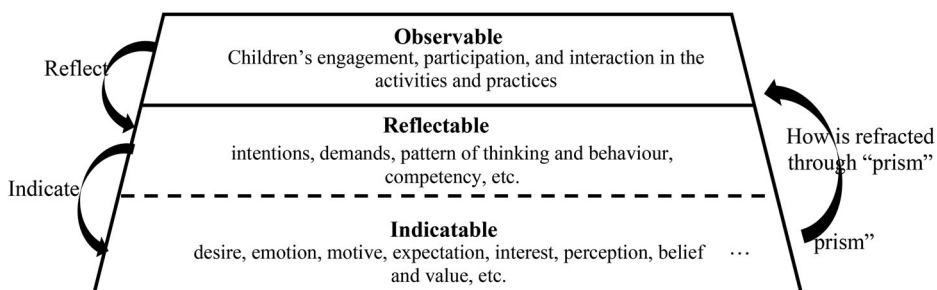


Figure 1. Interpret perezhivanie.

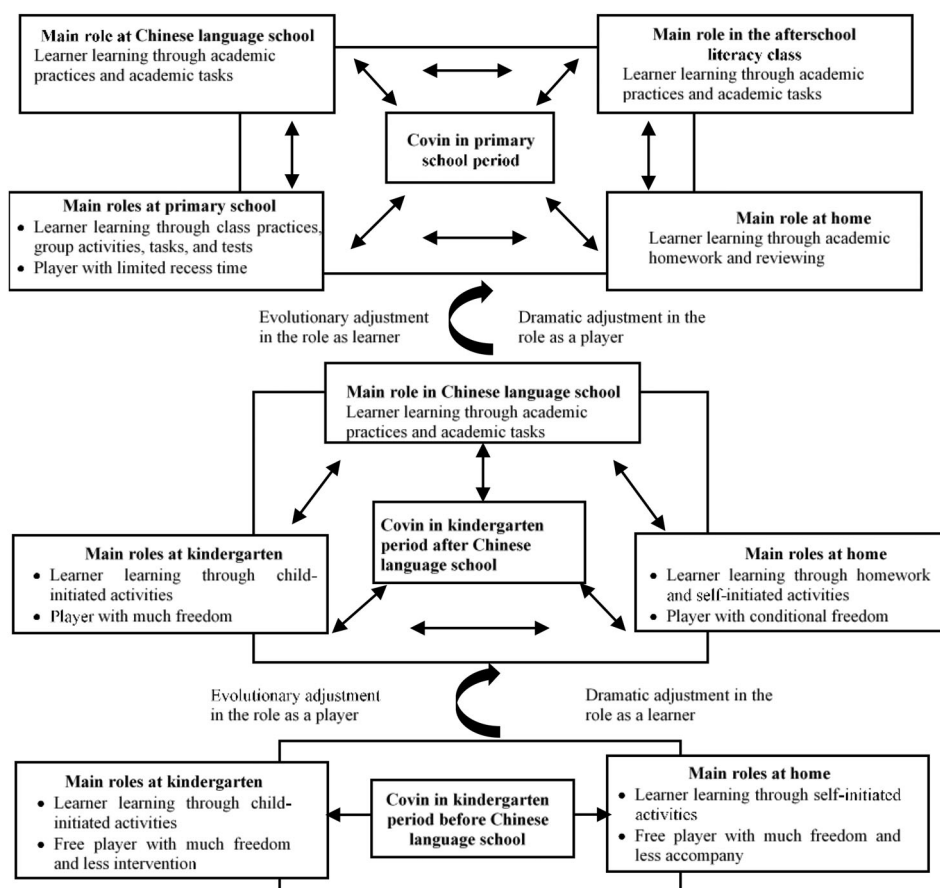


**Figure 2.** Covin's role adjustment trajectory.

the pipe into the bowl. Jason followed his requirements and played several turns. Jason was attracted by the ball, then sat on it. Jason threw the ball to Covin. Covin did not respond and continued pouring. Jason came back to Covin. Covin held the pipe and Jason used the bowl to pour water into the pipe. After several turns, Covin stopped playing, held the ball, and walked away. He walked to Jacky and said: 'Hit me. Kick the ball.' Jacky kicked. Covin put down the ball indicating that it's Jacky's turn to hold. Jacky held and Covin kicked. They played several turns until educator let them play in shade area.

In this example, he initiated activities 'pouring water' and 'kicking ball,' and set the rules. Personal interest, as his major drive for activity, can be shown. He was not distracted when he was engaged, but he stopped the activity when he lost interest. Normally, the activity would be stopped when he quitted, which indicated his *leader's* role in activities.

Starting Chinese school marked the first abrupt change in Covin's social situation of development, signifying the adjustment in his role as a *learner* and as a *player*. From the school perspective, although his main roles in the kindergarten remained similar, he was required to adopt a new role as an academic learner. He had three Chinese classes and Math classes, respectively on Saturdays. Each class lasted for 45 min. Children were required to sit appropriately, listen carefully and finish academic tasks in class, and complete homework after class. From the family perspective, Covin's role as a *player* was changed from one with maximum freedom to one with conditional freedom – he was allowed to play freely only when he finished homework. From child's perspective, his desires to do interesting things were conflicting with the new requirements. This conflict caused

his crisis in adjusting the role as a learner, which was managed under the family support. Since personal interest was his major drive for engaging in an activity, and he had no interest in doing homework, he lacked concentration when doing homework. Mother did not expect too much on Covin's learning outcome, until she found some immigrant Chinese children worked harder than Covin. Then, she supervised Covin when he was doing homework, and took toys out of his room. Covin did not rebel to the new family practices, but showed dissatisfaction.

**Example at home:** Mother led researcher to Covin's room and said: 'The teacher comes. She is to supervise your homework. If you do not pay attention, she will never like you.' Researcher sat beside Covin. Covin glimpsed at researcher and continued writing. Covin wrote for a while and stopped. He sighed, pouted, and looked at the characters he had written. Researcher: 'How much homework?' He sighed, turned over the pages, and pointed: 'This, this, this, and this.' Researcher: 'You have to finish them today or by this week?' Covin kept turning over the pages and raised tone: 'Of course today!' He handed on his chin, pouted and looked around. Researcher: 'What if you do not finish?' Covin looked at researcher and quickly held the pencil: 'Ah, it would be awful. Mum requires me to finish, and teacher will check.' Covin continued to write.

From this extract, we assume that teachers and parents were considered to be an authority in Covin's family. E.g. mother called the researcher a teacher, because through such positioning, Covin dared not make trouble. It can be further assumed that it is through similar daily communication at home, Covin developed the perception that teachers and parents are authority and disobeying their requirements are wrong. This can be indicated by his words 'my mum requires me to finish, and teacher will check it.' Meanwhile, negative emotions towards academic learning can be indicated through 'two deep sighs,' 'pouted mouth,' 'raised tone,' and the word 'awful.' Despite these emotions, he kept doing what he was required to do. Through the process of struggling with his desires to play and his parents' requirements, he gradually got used to being an *academic learner*, at least became accustomed to spend a certain amount of time to learn.

The second abrupt change in Covin's social situation of development occurred when he started school, signifying the adjustment in his role as a player and as a learner. The primary school, the family, the Chinese school, and the afterschool literacy class became Covin's dominant institutions. His free time was decreased from over 6 h in kindergarten to less than 2 h in school. As Covin started school, he upgraded to a new grade in Chinese school and also went to an afterschool literacy class every Monday and Tuesday. Accordingly, his free time was more decreased at home.

From the child perspective, Covin's role as an *academic learner* became dominant, while role as a *free player* became peripheral both at school and at home. Although workload increased, Covin had no apparent difficulties in academic learning. He was able to concentrate on the learning task for a long time and was able to meet the academic requirements. But he showed a passive attitude to academic learning.

**Example 1 in primary school:** The teacher asked students to do an independent task of 'making four lines of patterns,' and she encouraged children to make more lines and make each line more complex. Once Covin received the task paper, he started immediately. The teacher was helping Robin with his task. All the children except Covin in Covin's table looked at Robin's table. Covin was focusing on his task without being distracted. Covin was the first one in the class who finished the task and he did not challenge himself to make more lines as the teacher encouraged. He showed the finished task to the teacher. The teacher let him wait. Covin went back to his seat and looked around. At his time, Kingsley raised his hand and said he wanted to go to the toilet. Covin raised hand. The teacher let Covin accompany Kingsley. Covin quickly stood up and said in a low voice 'Yeah!' Then he accompanied Kingsley to the toilet, which was outside the classroom.

On the one hand, Covin was capable of meeting the academic requirements due to his learning habits, long attention span, and independence developed through his previous learning experience. This is consistent with the argument of Bodrova and Leong (2005) that certain underlying competencies developed earlier make it easier for children to face the new challenges. On the other hand, some indicators in this example suggest Covin's lack of passion on academic leaning. He was able to make more pattern lines, but he only chose to meet the basic requirements. By connecting the evidence that he did the task as quickly as he could and the evidence that he immediately

raised hand when he finished the task and showed excitement as he was approved to accompany Kingsley, we reasonably assume that (1) he was unwilling to stay in classroom for a long time, (2) he had strong desires to have free time, (3) he used 'completing the task as quickly as possible' as a way to gain free time.

Covin experienced crises in being a *player*. Unlike his previous role as an *activity initiator and leader*, Covin became a '*violent*' *player*. During the recess time, Covin mostly ran, shouted, and pushed others. Class teacher considered Covin to have behaviour challenges. Mother complained that Covin became 'crazy.'

**Example 2 in primary school:** Once recess time started, Covin ran out rapidly with a shouting. Covin, Henry, and Bob ran after each other. Rebecca was playing alone. Covin called 'Rebecca,' made faces, raised fist to Rebecca, and then ran away. Rebecca followed him slowly. When Covin saw Rebecca, he shouted, ran, and kept looking back. Rebecca was not following. Covin stopped and walked back to Rebecca, made faces, and pushed him. Rebecca ran to Covin and Covin ran away. Rebecca lied on the floor. Covin walked to Rebecca and kicked him.

The example shows an activity Covin often engaged in at school. Covin's actions 'made faces,' 'raised fist,' 'pushed,' and 'kicked' were rarely seen in his kindergarten play. The activity was full of chasing, running, and provocation with limited rules and directions, which was also different from which in kindergarten. He often received 'crying face'<sup>1</sup> due to his challenging behaviours. From a cultural-historical perspective, play is featured by children's mutual construction of rules, roles, plot, and symbolic actions, etc., in imaginary situations (Vygotsky, 1967). In this sense, compared to Covin's kindergarten activities, most of his activities at school could not be defined as play in a strict sense – while most activities in which Covin engaged at kindergarten involved clear rules, roles, and imaginary situation, most activities in which he engaged at school were rough and without direction and rules.

### *Koby's crises in role adjustment during transition to school*

In the kindergarten period, the family and the kindergarten were Koby's dominant institutions. His main role was *player* and *care-recipient*. From the kindergarten perspective, Koby and Covin shared a similar social situation. From the family perspective, Koby was positioned as a *care-recipient* and a *central member*, being cared for by other family members. Mother always met his demands as if he was a '*little king*.' As she said, 'If he wants something, I will buy it for him as long as it is not bad or too expensive.' Mother did not require Koby to start academic learning before school. From child perspective, Koby's position at home was different to that in kindergarten (Figure 3).

**Example at home:** Koby was excited when researcher came. He took the Legos container: 'Can you make a car with me?' Researcher: 'Sure.' Koby: 'I tell you what we are going to make.' Koby connected Legos: 'The car we are

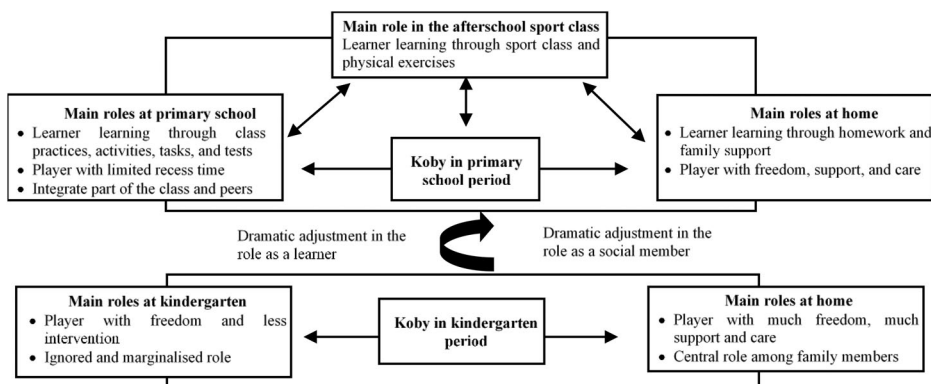


**Figure 3.** Koby's role adjustment trajectory.

making is like this, and this.' He quickly finished: 'This is your car.' Researcher: 'My car?' Koby: 'Yes. Do you know what my car is like?' He built another car: 'It's a crane.' Researcher: 'What does it list?' Koby: 'Car.' He gave them to researcher: 'You connect them.' Researcher followed his instructions. Koby took them down and made a new car, while saying: 'This way, this way, and that way.' Koby picked up two Legos: 'This is you, and this is me.' He put them in the new car.

In the example at home, Koby invited the researcher to the activity, assigned her a role, and explained how to play. During the activity, his intention was constantly changing. Once his intention changed, he directed the researcher to follow. These reflect his desires to be an *activity director*. His excitement, when the researcher came, indicates his desires to interact with others. These desires were shown but not satisfied in kindergarten.

**Example in kindergarten:** Koby was sitting on the carpet looking around. Rudy and Niven came and planned to play blocks. Koby stood up, helped them pick blocks from shelf, and asked: 'can I play with you?' Rudy: 'yes.' Koby cheered. Peterson also wanted to join. Later, Niven and Rudy decided to play Legos instead. Peterson held a block and wanted to draw back their attention to blocks, but they did not see it. Peterson walked away and played blocks alone. Koby then helped Rudy and Niven find Lego pieces. Niven and Rudy played together. Koby sat beside, watching their playing. He tried to join by showing them Lego pieces, but no one responded. Then Koby started to play Legos alone, while paying attention to other children's activities.

In the example at kindergarten, he was an *active activity searcher and participant*. He intended to participate by helping others, indicating his desires to integrate into peers. Meanwhile, he was a *passive follower*. It firstly indicates that he gained pleasure through interaction instead of the activity itself. However, he faced difficulties in meeting these desires because he was often ignored by his peers, which made him upset.

Koby's social situation of development abruptly changed when he started school, representing the adjustment in his role as a *learner* and as a *social member*. From the school perspective, the children's role as a *free player* became non-dominant and role as a *learner* learning through class practices became dominant. Children who behaved well would be assigned the role as a *class helper* (e.g. distribute task paper). Teacher used it as a way to improve children's sense of responsibilities. This means that Koby no longer needed to worry about being ignored because teacher directed the practices, arranged children's partners, and supported them to be engaged. From the family perspective, his mother was satisfied with the school practices, and thought there was no need to conduct extra-academic practice at home at the beginning. It was until Koby faced crises in academic learning that his mother started to help. Mother did not speak English so she was unable to teach, but she conducted a practice 'learning words together' – they learnt new words together and competed that who learned the words quicker and correct. Mother, with the help of Koby's sister, also asked for the school's support for Koby's literacy learning and English speaking.

From child perspective, Koby was an *active learner* in class. When teacher required children to do group activity, Koby always sat in the front. Once teacher posed a question, he always raised hand quickly even if he did not know the answer. He was also eager to be a *class helper*. Besides, since each four children were arranged around a table, Koby established friendship with two girls in his table. These all indicate Koby's desires to be accepted and being part of the group. These desires, which were unsatisfied in kindergarten, were now satisfied due to the teacher's guidance and fixed seats. As he gradually integrated into the group, his assertiveness which was only shown at home now appeared at school. His desires to be a *leading role* and being *the first* or being *superior* to peers became stronger.

**Example in school:** Teacher: 'Put hand up, if you'd like to take the tub to the office.' Koby raised hand quickly and straight. Teacher chose Koby and Park. Koby had a big smile. Koby took the tub by himself. Park followed. Koby gave the tub to the staff in the office. Staff took it and let them wait. Koby stood by the office table. Park ran. Koby let him stop. Park came back. Koby looked at researcher and said: 'the teacher is my friend.' Park looked at researcher with a surprise. The staff came to them: 'What class are you in.' Koby responded quickly. Staff gave them the form. Koby 'robbed' it and held it in his hand. Once the staff let them back, Park ran. Koby walked after

Park: 'Walk. You are walking. (You should walk.)' Park did not listen and ran to the class. Koby walked to the class and handed the form to teacher.

In the example, Koby's desires in being a *class helper* are reflected from actions 'raised hand quickly and straight' and 'big smile.' His desires to be a *leading role* is indicated in actions 'took tub by himself,' 'let Park stop,' 'robbed the form,' and 'let Park walk.' He introduced the researcher ('teacher')<sup>2</sup> to Park as a way of showing off, indicating his desires to be accepted and placed in a high social status among peers.

However, there was a gap between Koby's learning abilities and language capabilities on the one hand, and the school academic requirements on the other. Children were required to remember 12 levels of words (20 words in each level). Class teacher assessed each child whether he/she was able to read the words. Only children, who passed the assessment, could have the word-paper of a higher level. When most children had already got word-paper of higher levels, Koby still had difficulties in passing the first level. Such contradiction caused his crises, but also drove him to search for mother's help and to work harder.

## Discussion

Transition period is often accompanied by crises (Vygotsky, 1998b). Vygotsky (1998b) claims that it is the gap between the changes in pedagogical system and the rapid changes in child's personality that lead to these negative characters. Bozhovich (2009) puts that crises arise when there is a contradiction between needs and the capabilities to satisfy the needs. This paper, based on cultural-historical scholars' work concerning crises and the analysis of two children's cases, raises following arguments.

### *Crises are originated from contradictions experienced through prism of perezhivanie*

This study supports that children's role adjustment crises are originated from contradictions. It can be the contradictions between the child's capabilities and the social demands, between institutional expectations, or between the child's different needs (Bozhovich, 2009). Whatever the contradiction is, it objectively exists, but it is only through the inter-psychological interaction that the contradiction become visible (consistent with Poehner & Lantolf, 2005). For example, it was only when Koby failed the word assessment (i.e. interaction with the teacher) and found other children passed the assessment (i.e. interaction with peers) that he consciously realized the contradiction between his lower literacy level on the one hand, and the peers' higher literacy level and the school requirements on the other.

Furthermore, whether the consciously realized contradiction would lead to an individual's crisis depends on how the contradiction is experienced intra-psychologically through the prism of his/her perezhivanie. In Covin's case, the contradiction, between his lack of concentration when doing homework and the requirement to finish the homework in time, did not cause any crisis for him until his mother was dissatisfied with his lack of concentration and supervised him when he was doing homework. On the one hand, Covin felt uncomfortable due to mother's dissatisfaction because Covin positioned his mother as authority and the failure to meet his mother's requirement signified rebellion against authority, which was regarded by Covin as inappropriate. On the other hand, his mother's supervision pushed him to suppress his desire to do things in which he had interest, and this made him stressed. These inner conflicts as a whole led to Covin's crisis in balancing the contradictory desires. This is consistent with the notion of Bozhovich (2004):

A person is directly motivated by his convictions, morality, and the traits of his personality. But because many needs and motivations simultaneously influence every act, there is a conflict among them that, when they are in opposition to each other but of equal strength, is experienced by the person as an internal conflict within

himself. If the stronger but rationally rejected motives triumph in this conflict, the person experiences unpleasant feelings. If immediate desires triumph over his moral convictions, these feelings take the form of shame, regret, and so forth. (Bozhovich, 2004, pp. 38–39)

The study also finds that depending on how the contradiction is being emotionally experienced through the prism of *perezhivanie*, the same contradiction may have different meanings, lead to different reactions, and have different impacts. This is consistent with Vygotsky's (1994) argument that individuals experience the situation in different ways and the same situation can influence various people's development in different ways. In Koby's case, the contradiction between his literacy level and the school requirements led to his severe crisis because he considered it as a failure to be accepted. Differently, the teacher only considered it as a normal challenge for many immigrant children, and Koby's mother also did not consider it to be a big issue and started to offer help only when Koby cried.

### ***Periods of crises provide potentials for qualitative leap in child development***

This paper admits that crises bring about 'danger' especially when they are mal-managed, but more importantly, crises signify potentials. As Veresov (2006) explains, during the period without crises, development is only the evolutionary change. Based on the cultural-historical concept of crises, this paper further argues that crises come from contradictions, but contradictions become crises only when they influence the subject's life and cause certain emotional experience (mostly negative). As Hedegaard (2009) claims, contradictions should be understood through practices, while crises can be only identified through individual's perspective. Let's see two children's crises in their adjustment to an *academic learner*.

For Covin, at the beginning of the adjustment, the major contradiction was between the new academic requirements and his lack of interest in academic learning. This contradiction did not lead to his crisis until his mother was dissatisfied with his inattention and found ways to solve it. This crisis was relating to the balancing between contradictory desires. On the one hand, Covin had desires in doing things in which he had interest. On the other hand, he intended to meet the parents' requirements. When facing this crisis, it is observed that Covin suppressed his desires in doing things in which he had interest in order to meet the requirements. Through this process, his self-control was developing and his long attention span which was only shown on the activities in which he was interested extended to academic learning he showed no enthusiasm.

For Koby, various contradictions emerge at the beginning, including the contradiction: (1) between peers' higher academic level and Koby's 'zero starting point;' and (2) between teacher's requirement and Koby's inability to fulfil the requirement. These contradictions were not consciously realized until he failed the words assessment. Koby perceived it not only as the failure of remembering words, but also as the failure of being accepted. It was because of Koby's crying that his mother realized his crisis and started to help. Koby actively engaged with the supporting practices, and made progress in literacy learning. The most attainment was not the words he acquired. Instead, the positive emotional experience through hardworking helped him establish positive emotional connection with literacy learning and school. Thereby, attaining academic achievement became his major drive in learning, which was developed out of his desires to receive positive recognition. Due to his request for support received positive feedback, he was more willing to search support when needed, which was an important capability that many children even many adults lack.

To conclude, crises are usually accompanied by 'painful experience' that urges individuals to change. Without crises, contradictions remain and qualitative leap can hardly be achieved. Besides, children at same age have different capabilities, and thus have different developmental potentials. For instance, Covin started academic learning long before Koby and had a high starting point when school started, but had much less developmental potential than Koby concerning the

academic learning because the school practices were not challenging enough for him. This implies that pushing the academic tasks down to preschool might not be wise as it may decrease children's learning activeness (consistent with Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2013; Dunlop & Fabian, 2002).

### ***Mal-managed crises can be a danger to child development***

Periods of crises provide potentials for qualitative leap in child development, but it does not mean the qualitative leap will always be achieved. Crises can become a danger when they are not well-managed. Crises as danger are widely researched in empirical studies. They depict a reality we cannot deny: children who drop out of school and who are experiencing severe depression are struggling with crises. However, most empirical studies stop at the correlation without investigating why the crises become a danger. This is also not paid much attention in cultural-historical studies which are more interested in the developmental aspects of crises. This argument is supported by Covin's crisis in adjusting his role as a *player*.

The crisis was originated from the contradiction between desires to play and the reality that he nearly had no time to play as he started primary school. On the other hand, his perception of parents and teachers as authority pushed him to suppress his desires to do the things in which he has interest. On the other hand, the desires to do the things in which he had interest did not disappear, and thus negative emotions were accumulated through suppressing these desires. In this sense, once he was given free time, he behaved 'violently,' as a way to release his negative emotions.

Covin's way of solving the crisis invited further crisis when he was blamed by adults. Those behaviours were viewed as challenging and a breach of class rules, and were given the 'crying face' as a punishment. To Covin, the 'crying face' was a symbol representing his violation of the authority. Therefore, although he had strong desires to release the negative emotions, he controlled these emotions and behaviours during the recess time in order not to disobey the teacher's authority. During the last two school visits, his 'challenging behaviours' greatly decreased. This change indicates both the hidden danger and developmental potential. From the bright side, his self-control was further developed. From the dark side, the crisis due to the contradiction between his desires for free time and the limited free time in reality was still unsolved. Imagine, if the crisis still existed when he developed more autonomy and self-identity, or when he no longer considered adults to be authority, then his unrealized internal desires might be released in a more 'violent' way. Covin's case demonstrates how a crisis can become a hidden danger for a child's learning and development. The danger was now presented in a hidden way might lead to a real danger if it was not well managed. The hidden danger, which seems to be 'benign' in early years, might cause damage to the child's learning and development when his/her social situation of development changes.

### ***Crisis impact relies on child's social situation of development***

The paper finally argues that every crisis contains both potentials and danger. Whether or to what extent the potentials will be utilized to achieve development, and the dangers will be mitigated or amplified, depend on the child's social situation of development. When we capitalize certain potentials, we face certain danger. It is consistent with Zukerman's (2007, p. 182) notion that 'different educational systems send the students in diverging directions by facilitating particular developmental potentials, while ignoring or curbing others.'

This argument is supported by analyzing Koby's crisis in being a *social member*. This crisis existed throughout the kindergarten period mainly due to his limited English capabilities and his 'unpopularity' among his peers. His limited English capabilities, which existed as a hidden danger at kindergarten period, became a real danger and contributed to his crisis in being an *academic learner* when he started school. Although Koby was disappointed to be placed in an unnoticed position among his peers, he kept trying to integrate with his peers, which helped him realized some developmental

potentials. In order to be accepted, he helped others, and followed others' intentions although he was eager to take the *leading role*. This showed his developing capability of compromise, which is an essential capability in being a social member (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). This crisis was naturally relieved as school started. For instance, instead of choosing friends and partners by children themselves at kindergarten period, it was now the class teacher who decided which children should stay together by arranging their seats. In this way, Koby would no longer be afraid of being ignored or rejected by his peers. This also suggests that although it is widely accepted that crises appear in critical period, crises in the previous period can also be relieved when the critical period starts or the social situation of development changes.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented a case study of two children's role adjustment during the transition to school, and finds that the crises a child encounter in his/her role adjustment could provide both potentials and dangers for his/her learning and development, depending on how the crises are managed within the child's particular social situation of development through his/her prism of *perzhivanie*. This finding overcomes the over-pessimistic view on children's crises among empirical studies, and meanwhile enriches the cultural-historical concept of crises and offered a through explanation of how crises and development are related. On the one hand, consistent with the cultural-historical theory, this paper agrees that qualitative leap in development normally takes place in the periods of crises (Veresov, 2006; Vygotsky, 1998b). It is because crises are usually marked by painful experience (Vygotsky, 1998b). Since crises are originated from contradictions, the best way to get rid of the painful experiences is to solve the contradictions, and through this process the whole structure of his/her personality might change, new psychological functions might appear, and the qualitative leap in his/her development could be achieved. In Koby's case – he had painful experience when he encountered crises in academic learning which urged him to search help and work harder, and this helped him to a large extent solve the previous contradictions and finally achieved qualitative leap in his academic learning and development of positive learning motives. On the other hand, it further argues that the emergence of certain crises only signifies the potential for but does not guarantee the qualitative leap. It is because in order to get rid of the painful experiences, the individual might not always choose to solve the contradictions when the contradictions are not fully recognized and when other options have a more immediate effect. In this sense, the qualitative leap in development could hardly be achieved and negative influences might even occur. In Covin's case – he did 'violent' actions as a way to release his negative emotions from his crises in being a player, but later he chose to suppress his negative emotions as the 'violent' actions were forbidden. In this case, the contradiction was still unsolved and no qualitative leap was achieved. Even worse, the suppressed negative emotions might 'explode' some time which could negatively influence his learning and development.

The findings also provide implications for the educational practices. Firstly, pulling academic tasks down to preschool might not be wise as it may decrease children's learning activeness and children can hardly gain great achievement when most primary school tasks are unchallenging. Secondly, smooth adjustment does not always imply better development in the future because certain danger might hide under the 'smooth surface;' difficult school adjustment accompanied with crises does not always imply dark future because certain potential might be hidden under the 'turbulent surface.' Therefore, more attention needs to be paid on how to identify, utilize, and amplify children's potentials and how to identify and avoid the dangers or even to transform the dangers into potentials. Finally, the same environmental change can be damaging for one child, but can be developmental for another child, depending on the child's particular social situation of development. This questions the advocates for improving the continuity or narrowing the gap between preschool and primary school environment without considering individual child's social situation of development.

## Notes

1. Children behaved wrongly would be given a crying face.
2. Children considered the researcher as a teacher because class teacher introduced her to children as a teacher.

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