Chapter 1
Transition to School in Latin American Countries: Introducing some Perspectives and Experiences

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Abstract In this chapter, we introduce a book on the transition to school in Latin American countries. This book showcases some of the quality work that researchers from Brazil, Chile, Cuba, and Mexico have done in this field, reflecting how the transition to primary school is experienced and how Latin American educational policies and cultural practices shape such an important process for stakeholders. The book offers the English-speaking world first-hand access to some Latin American transitions research, practices, and policies. The chapters in the book are also framed by the COVID-19 pandemic which placed the world in a global health emergency. The authors of the chapters themselves faced a number of challenges as a result of the pandemic when writing this material. It is our hope that this book will trigger future international collaborations between researchers, policy makers, and practitioners interested in transitions which could help produce a wealth of empirical evidence to inform educational policies and transitions practices across the world. This chapter introduces the reader to all the chapters in the book.

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Rationale for This Book

The growing body of research on transition to school has led scholars to cover many aspects such as educational and transition policies; transition practices and tools to support the transition; perspectives and lived experiences of children and teachers, practitioners and assistants as well as parents; and teacher-child relationships. However, these studies are predominantly from Europe, USA, Hong Kong, and Australia (Dunlop, 2018). This trend might suggest that research regarding transitions to school has been undertaken mainly in these developed countries. However, this is likely due to research in other countries being written in the authors' mother tongue rather than in English; research undertaken in Latin American countries being a case in point. To date, there has been limited awareness and understanding of Latin American transitions research, policies, and practices amongst the non-Spanish/Portuguese speaking readers. To redress this balance, Latin American authors in this book have presented their work in English, with the aim of creating opportunities for cross-national learning, reflection and collaborations.

This book comprises ten chapters. This chapter (Chap. 1) introduces the book and provides a brief overview to set the context for the other chapters, such as the rationale for the book, conceptualisation of transitions, educational systems, and policies of the four Latin American countries included in the book (Chile, Mexico, Brazil, and Cuba) and the emerging context of COVID-19. Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 present key information about transitions to schools in four Latin American countries, namely Chile (Chaps. 2 and 3), Mexico (Chap. 4), Cuba (Chap. 5) and Brazil (Chaps. 6, 7, and 8). Chapter 9, also from Brazil, differs from the other chapters by taking a particular focus on one independent system and the challenges presented by national policies for its philosophy and practice, It provides an in-depth example of the perhaps unforeseen challenges that can occur when government policies and early childhood education approaches clash. Chapter 10 concludes the book by synthesising the themes and directions presented in the previous chapters.

Brief Overview of COVID-19 and Related Challenges in Latin America

This section introduces some aspects of COVID-19 and its impact; however, these will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter (Chap. 10). On March 20th 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been one of the most difficult challenges faced by global contemporary societies in different areas of life. The education sector is not an exception. Formal schooling was massively disrupted across the world due to the measures taken by governments to tackle the spread of the SARS-CoV-2, which is the virus responsible for COVID-19 (Urbina-Garcia, 2021). The pandemic led global governments to close

schools and promote the use of remote learning instead; however, these measures posed many challenges. Children from low-income families and rural areas were reported to have less access to electronic devices and internet (World Bank, 2021) exacerbating the existing inequities due to this digital divide. School closures meant that children could not physically attend the premises of their schools, affecting over 170 million pupils across the Latin American and Caribbean region (World Bank, 2021). This also led to highlighting structural inequalities in different societies across the world, and magnifying the social inequality that prevails in Latin America and the Caribbean region (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) 2021; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 2021). For example, only 43% of primary schools in the region, have access to internet for pedagogical purposes.

Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic affected children's personal lives and schooling in very specific ways in Chile, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico. For example, in **Chile**, all schools and preschools were closed for almost the entire 2020 academic year and in 2021 only few have re-opened, as localities enter and exit quarantines. In **Mexico**, many children could not access distance education due to different reasons: internet access gaps and lack of adequate technological devices; absence of safe spaces in their homes, especially in the case of girls who must, on many occasions, assume care roles or are victims of violence and sexual abuse; and existence of overcrowding, food insecurity, and poor hygiene conditions that hinder the continuity of learning. In **Brazil**, most schools were closed during the pandemic but the Leeman Foundation, with funding from the LEGO Foundation, developed an initiative called *Educação em Rede* (Online Education). This initiative for teacher education, has reached 500,000 teachers across different regions of Brazil aimed to upskill and train teachers in the use of digital devices and platforms to deliver remote learning (World Bank, 2021). In **Cuba**, schools were closed in March 2020 and reopened in September 2020; however, they were again closed in early 2021. Televised programs were created to support children aged 0–5; however, there were children with limited access to these.

It is important to acknowledge that the chapter authors for this book were similarly experiencing professional and personal challenges during the writing of their chapters. We acknowledge their commitment to children's transitions to schools in their countries which made this book possible.

Importance of Transitions to School and Its Conceptualisation

The main purpose of early childhood education is to support a holistic social, emotional, physical, and educational development of a child which also sets the foundations for a love of learning, good health, wellbeing, and later personal development and life-long learning. Hence, offering a high-quality early childhood education is of utmost importance as it allows children to develop a range of social, motor, cognitive, and emotional skills which will form the basis of their personal development.

To this end, global governments ensure that early childhood education (UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education; ISCED 0) is well-aligned with the demands and expectations related to transition to formal schooling which usually starts with primary school (ISCED 1) across the globe. Such alignment should aim to provide continuity between preschool and formal school provision as this could potentially impact children's personal, emotional, social, and academic development.

Therefore, transition to primary school has been internationally recognised as one of the most important, not only educational but also life transitions for young children. Some like, Mascareño et al. (2014), argue that the transition to primary school is a challenging process whereby children enter a new world of higher expectations where academic demands represent one of their main challenges comprising a more-structured learning environment, more teacher-directed activity, and academic assessments. Globally, this period of change has led governments to make efforts to facilitate this transition with a view to promoting children's wellbeing and optimum development given that some "research has found that some of the positive effects of participation in ECEC can fade in primary school when transitions between ECEC and school are ill-prepared" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2017, p. 41). The following chapters provide an understanding of the perspectives from four different countries (and at times multiple within the same country) of how governments have prioritised transition to primary school. This transition is regarded as a key period for children as they experience a number of significant changes including, but not limited to new environment, relationships, identities, roles, expectations, routines, and rules (Hirst et al., 2011; Perry et al., 2014).

Further, it is important to understand how different stakeholders have conceptualised transitions across the world. International organizations such as UNICEF (2012, p. 8) defines this transition as "children moving into and adjusting to new learning environments, families learning to work within a sociocultural system (i.e., education) and schools making provisions for admitting new children into the system". Fabian and Dunlop (2007, p. 3) define it as "…the process of change of environment and set of relationships that children make from one setting or phase of education to another over time". Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (1999) define it as a process of significant change from one environment to another quite different environment in which children will need knowledge, abilities, and skills to adapt to their new setting. Therefore, based on the literature published in English, which is primarily Western, it seems that a key element of this transition is a response to a *change or movement.* Bohan-Baker and Little (2002) define this as an *ongoing process* rather than *an isolated one-off event* in children's lives where members of the community (i.e., parents, teachers, policymakers) should be involved. Similarly, Jindal-Snape (2018) highlights the role of all stakeholders and defines "transition as an ongoing process of psychological, social and educational *adaptation* over time, due to changes in context, interpersonal relationships and identity, which can be both exciting and worrying, and requires ongoing support." (p. 283).

These studies have provided important and valuable cross-cultural information that has contributed to a better understanding of the concept of transition from different contexts. What we do not know is whether these are also common conceptualisations in Latin America. To this end, Chaps. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 are crucial in providing us an understanding of this area. Here, we briefly highlight some conceptualisations that have been used by chapter authors, with details in the chapters themselves.

All chapters seem to have conceptualised transitions in the context of the relationship between early years education and compulsory schooling, and what their roles are in the process. In Chap. 6 for instance, the Brazilian authors' concept of transition seems to be about child's school readiness (focusing on preparing the child for school), with preschool teachers seen to have responsibility for preparing children for academic life in school, for instance by teaching scientific concepts using play as a vehicle. This emphasis on the child's readiness is proposed to enhance curriculum continuity. This view seems to be confirmed by the authors of Chap. 9 in their case study on transition in Brazilian Waldorf schools. Readiness in Waldorf is seen as the combination of a child's development of sensory, motor, cognitive, affective, and social skills and chronological age. However, it is not clear whether transition from a Waldorf preschool to a Waldorf primary school (which sometimes are in the same building) is smoother given the shared values, pedagogies, and aims, and potentially curricular continuity.

Chapter 7, also providing a Brazilian perspective, suggests that there is an emphasis on getting teachers ready with government's emphasis on educating teachers so that they can facilitate the transition framed by the rights of children to play. This seems to be underpinned by different expectations held by teachers from both levels, which seem to place a greater emphasis on the role of adults (i.e., teachers, managers, parents) to support children's transitions. Chapter 8 authors argue that there is the need to adapt the Brazilian curricula for both educational levels that would lead to more continuity. Further, Chap. 7 authors support the notion that the educational curricula should also be informed by children's voices. Whilst the transition seems to be conceptualised as a staged approach, there is a strong emphasis on children's rights to participate, play, and learn. According to these authors, there is the need to listen to children to ascertain how they understand and interpret the curriculum. A clear advantage of having at least two chapters about one particular country (the case for Brazil and Chile), is that it is possible to capture the notion of transition from different perspectives within the same context.

In Chap. 2, in a Chilean context, transition to school has been seen to be an *articulation*, and the term *articulation* is officially used to refer to transition. This notion places an important level of responsibility in adults' practices and agency to facilitate children's transitions. In fact, the transition is seen as a multidimensional process in this chapter with an important focus not only on school readiness, but also on having schools and stakeholders ready. Through their narrative, authors strongly emphasise the need to articulate the curriculum, support teacher education and improve policies to support the transition – rather than the focus being on having children ready. This chapter ends with the view that: *"Any change intended to*

ease transitions should follow the rule of thumb of redirecting all efforts towards all children's wellbeing". Certainly, the idea of promoting transitions to school with children's wellbeing as the main aim, is a welcome contribution to the scant literature in this area internationally. Other Chilean authors in Chap. 3, see the transition as the process whereby schools must be ready for children and propose that in doing so, we must avoid schoolification (structuring the preschool/kindergarten level in a more academic-led way, Shuey and Kankaraš 2018). Additionally, these authors seem to support the notion that this transition should emphasise supporting children's socioemotional development in light of the prioritisation of academic content in primary schools. Indeed, they go on to suggest that during this transition, the focus should be on children and not content coverage.

According to the Cuban author (Chap. 5), in Cuba the notion of school readiness is favoured. While the author argues that the transition occurs naturally and gradually, she also suggests that children must be prepared - by using play as a vehicle to prepare them for the *study activity*. Transition is seen as a staged approach which must prepare children to the *study activity* in primary school. Finally, in Chap. 4, the Mexican authors' conceptualisation of transition seems to mirror that of the other chapter authors. According to them, in Mexico, transition is viewed as getting the child ready for primary school; however, this notion is questioned by the authors and it is proposed that schools must also be ready, highlighting the interactionist approach (Mayer et al., 2010) to ascertain a good fit between each child and school. Children are seen as the agents who must develop skills to face the academic demands of primary school; however, the authors also argue that policies must be created to support this transition. These authors go on to propose that the curricula of both educational levels should be well-aligned, children must be prepared, and schools must be ready. Adults (teachers, parents, teaching assistants, and headteachers) are seen as active agents in this process who must help children get ready for primary school.

In conclusion, there does not seem to be a consensus as to what transition to school is and/or how it can be defined. However, there is a strong emphasis on readiness, of child and/or educational institutions. This notion seems to be strengthened by recognising the need to articulate curricula, educate teachers, and create policies to support this transition. There are lessons here about the importance of the voice of the child (that should also be considered in the context of their transitions) and children's wellbeing during transitions, given that some authors of chapters included in this book do recognise and emphasise the relationship with, and an active inclusion of, *the voices of children, school professionals, and parents* to inform school (and national) practices and policies. Further, given the enhanced focus on wellbeing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing global initiatives to support mental health and wellbeing in schools (United Nations (UN), 2014, 2020), the main focus of transitions practices and policies being on wellbeing outcomes rather than academic outcomes, might be gaining more traction internationally. However, it is important to be mindful that teachers will also be experiencing professional and personal transitions, some of which will be triggered due to children's transitions, and conversely, their transitions will trigger those of children and parents (see

Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory, Jindal-Snape, 2016). Therefore, the focus of transitions practices and policies should not be limited to children's wellbeing but should also focus on the wellbeing and transition support of significant others in their environment (Jindal-Snape, 2018).

Education Systems in Chile, Brazil, Mexico, and Cuba

A great deal of transitions research has been undertaken in many parts of the world. Oftentimes comparisons are made and conclusions drawn about theoretical stances, conceptualisations, practices, and policies. While much can be gained from these explorations, the relevance and impact are limited if there is no consideration of context. One critical element of context relates to the content and structure of education systems. The following discussion considers the particular characteristics of the education systems that shape the transition in the countries included in this book: Chile; Mexico; Brazil; and Cuba. An overview is provided in Table 1.1.

Chile

In Chile, the establishment of early years education provision is recognised in the Chilean constitution under the law N° 19.634/1999 (Alarcón et al., 2015). The basic education system comprises initial education (Educación Parvularia) for children 0–2 years old; childcare centres (Jardines Infantiles) for children 2–4; first level of transition for children 4–5 and second level of transition for children aged 5–6 (OECD, 2017). The first cycle of primary education is provided for children aged 6–10 years old, albeit education in Chile is now compulsory from ages 5–18 as a result of a policy reform proposed on May 21st of 2013 by the Chilean president (Alarcón et al., 2015). Early childhood education is centre-based and aims to support children's development from a holistic perspective considering social, motor, emotional, and cognitive domains (OECD, 2016).

In terms of enrolment and coverage, Chile reports one of the lowest rates (55%) compared to other Latin American countries such as Brazil and Argentina (65% and 72% respectively). In Chile, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the design and implementation of educational policies as well as managing the funding provided at national level, whereas the National Council of Education is tasked with developing curriculum and assessment strategies (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2021). The Quality of Education Agency, on the other hand, is in charge of assessing children's learning outcomes as well as monitoring and assessing of schools' performance. Finally, the Education Superintendent's Office, oversees the way in which resources are used, ensures that educational norms are followed and legal standards met, and addresses families' complaints (Consejo Nacional de Educación, 2021). Whilst the Ministry of Education sets the policy agenda and the national

Table 1.1 Overview of educational systems

Countries		Stages of preschool/school education	Age at each stage	Legal status of early years provision	Child: Teacher ratio in early years
Brazil	Right to free education, mandatory (6-14 years of age)	Preschool level	Creche 2–5 years	Brazilian constitution, article 6/1988	18:1 (in public ECEC 3–5 y.o.)
			Jardim 3–6 years		
		Fundamental education I	6–10 years		
		Fundamental education II	11–14 years		
		Upper secondary education (optional)	15–18 years		
Chile	Right to free education, mandatory (5–18 years of age)	Preschool (5 levels, starting at 85 days of age), 4–5 years is mandatory	0–5 years	Chilean constitution under the law N° 19.634/1999	20:1 in ECEC (3–6 y.o.)
		Primary school, grades 1–8	6–14 years		
		Secondary school, grades 9–12	15–18 years		
Cuba	Right to free education (including university education), mandatory (6–16 years of age)	Preschool level	0–5 years	Constitution of the Republic of Cuba (articles 39 and 51); the Child and Youth Code of 1978, whose article 17 specifically focuses on the care and education of children under six; and the Family Code	5:1 (aged 1–3 y.o.)
		Primary school education, grades 1–6	6–11 years		
		Secondary school education (basic and pre-university secondary education), grades 7–9	12–15 years		7:1 (aged 3–5 y.o.)
					13:1 (aged 5–6 y.o.)
Mexico	Right to free education, mandatory education (3 to 15 years of age)	Preschool	3–5 years	Constitution of the United Mexican States: Article No. 3	24:1
		Primary/ elementary school, grades 1–6	6–12 years		27:1
		Junior high/middle school, grades 7–9	12–15 years		28:1
		Secondary education, grades 10–12	15–18 years		

framework in terms of education provision, municipalities are tasked with delivering education programs with certain degree of autonomy, including the increasing number of privately-owned educational institutions which are subsidized by the government (OECD, 2015). Chile is considered to have a good alignment between

pre-primary and primary school education (OECD, 2017). In Chile, educational material related to the transition to school (guidelines, leaflets, flyers, websites, books) is prepared and shared between early childhood educators (Educadora de Párvulos) and primary school teachers. Chile has one of the highest child-teacher ratio in the first grade of primary school among OECD countries with 45 children per teacher – significantly higher than the ratio in the last year of preschool of 22.5 children for every adult. Expenditure per student in preschool and primary school education remains markedly lower in Chile compared to the OECD average (OECD, 2016).

Brazil

In Brazil, the 1988 Constitution (for an English translation, see Rosenn 2017) reflected the re-democratisation process in its description of education as a "fundamental social right" (Article 6) and through the establishment of the principles of education policy (Bucci & Gomes, 2018). Following Brazil's participation in the 1990 world conference that resulted in the *World Declaration on Education for All* (UNESCO, 1990), the Ministry of Education committed to including early childhood education as the first stage of basic education (Kramer & Nunes, 2013). The third edition of the Brazilian constitution (Câmara dos Deputados, 2010) continues to recognise education as "a right of all" (Article 205). Further, Article 208 determines that the government is responsible for guaranteeing "free compulsory elementary education from four to 17 years of age…" and "early education in nurseries and preschool for children up to 5 years of age". These articles reflect legislative changes in 2005 (Law 11.114/2005) and 2006 (Law 11.274/2006) which extended the period of basic (compulsory) education from 8 to 9 years by lowering the school starting age from 7 to 6 years. Extending the period of basic education was one of the targets of the National Education Plan outlined by the Ministry of Education (Brazil, 2001). Further constitutional changes established that municipalities held responsibility for early childhood education and the early years of elementary education (Bucci & Gomes, 2018). A further change related to financing basic education, with the establishment of Fund for the Development of Basic Education and for Enhancing the Value of the Teaching Profession (FUNDEB) in 2007 to redistribute resources to states and municipalities. Despite this fund, financial challenges have remained, with unequal distribution of funds (Mami, 2013).

Two levels of education are defined by Brazil's education law: basic education and higher education. Basic education consists of early childhood education (Educação Infantil, for children aged 4–5 years); elementary education (Ensino Fundamental, for children aged 6–14 years); and secondary education (Ensino Médio, for those aged 15–17 years). Early childhood education consists of 2 years of preschool for children aged 4–5 years. Prior to this, children can attend nursery schools (for children aged 0–3 years), although this is not compulsory. Elementary education is further divided into Fundamental education I (children aged 6–9 years)

and Fundamental education II (children aged 10–14 years) (Monroy & Trines, 2019). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019, pp. 5–6) reports that:

In Brazil, enrolment of children under the age of three in early childhood education and care (ECEC) jumped from 10% in 2012 to 23% in 2017, although it remains below the OECD average of 36%. Enrolment among 3–5 year-olds also increased considerably, from 60% in 2012 to 84% in 2017, close to the OECD average of 87%. Among 5–6 year-olds, enrolment in either ECEC or primary education is largely universal.

According to the Constitution, compulsory education – since 2005 encompassing children aged 6–14, (9 years) and more recently encompassing children aged 6–17 (12 years) – is to be provided free of charge in public schools. However, it is noted that the public school system has "neither expanded enough to attend to this need nor improved its quality, a situation that opened a space for private institutions to expand and take an important role in ECE" (Mami, 2013, p. 3).

Recognising the significance of the change to school starting age, the Ministry of Education (Ministério da Educação, 2007) issued some guideless for the inclusion of six-year-olds in elementary school. While the legislation and guidance to support early childhood and elementary education sets out expectations, Campos (2018) emphasises the difference between what is written in official documents and what happens in practice. In addition to the great geographical diversity of Brazil, Campos notes vast economic and social diversity, all of which contribute to unequal access to education across the municipalities and educational levels. With 5, 570 municipalities across Brazil, encompassing major cities and remote areas, it is probably not surprising that considerable differences exist.

This diversity is reflected in the organisation of early childhood education. Many settings for younger children are offered by private organisations – including both for profit and not-for-profit organisations. Some municipalities prefer to support the services offered by not-for-profit organisations rather than establishing their own public services (Campos, 2018). In some municipalities, preschools are part of elementary schools; in others some preschools may be separate institutions. Differences in facilities and resources, as well as in pedagogy and teacher preparation have been noted (Bruns et al., 2012; Campos et al., 2011; Evans & Kosec, 2012). Promoting universal access to high-quality early childhood education across diverse contexts and for the diverse population remains an ongoing challenge (Oliveira, 2018).

National curriculum guidelines for early childhood education have been promulgated (Brazil, 2009) as have the most recent guidelines for basic education (Brazil, 2017). Both documents note the importance of transition between early childhood and elementary education. However, as these areas of education fall under the auspices of municipalities, guidance around transition mainly comes from municipal education authorities. The recent national curriculum (*Base Nacional Comum Curricular*; Brazil, 2017) covers all levels of education from early childhood to secondary, listing expected learning outcomes, skills, and competencies across each level. The rationale underpinning the national curriculum has been that "the alignment of all other education policies … will promote greater integration, synergies

and exchanges among cities and states and lead to better outcomes for children" (Costin & Pontual, 2020, p. 48).

The second National Education Plan (2014–2024) (Brazil, 2014; Bucci & Gomes, 2018) sets ambitious goals for early childhood education, outlining plans for increased attendance for children, aiming at 100% preschool enrolment for children aged 4–5 years (Campos, 2018). However, the drastic impact of COVID-19 on early childhood education in Brazil is likely to dent these goals severely (Campos & Vieira, 2021).

Mexico

In México, Article No. 3 of the constitution establishes that every Mexican citizen has the right to free and secular education provided by the government (Aboites, 2012) including all levels comprised within the basic education scheme namely preschool, primary school and secondary school. The obligatory basic education scheme is run by the Ministry of Public Education (Secretaria de Educación Publica) and covers children aged 3–15 years old, although initial education – for children aged 0–3 – is not mandatory (OECD, 2013). The education system is divided into preschool (children 3–5 years of age), primary/elementary school (Grades 1–6; 6–12 years), Junior high/middle school (Grades 7–9; 12–15 years) and Secondary education (Grades 8–12; 15–18 years).

In 1992 a policy reform took place whereby the education sector was decentralised, meaning that each of the 32 states of México are in charge of the education provision; however, and despite the decentralisation, the federal government maintains control in matters of normative, evaluative, planning, and programming of the education provision. In 2002, the Mexican government approved an educational reform by which preschool education became mandatory for children aged three to six. This reform was gradually applied, starting in the 2004–2005 academic year for children aged five, in 2005–2006 for children aged four, and in 2008–2009 for children aged three (Alarcón et al., 2015; Rivera & Guerra, 2005). This policy reform required the Ministry of Public Education to place a greater focus on ensuring a high quality of education provided to all children. However, this reform also brought some important challenges. Firstly, Moreles (2011) suggests that this reform lacked empirical support and was mainly driven by political interests and a deep interest to fit the international agenda. The National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación, 2008) echoes López's (2016) views in that lawmakers should have considered the implications of a reform like this, such as infrastructure, physical spaces, classroom availability, teacher education, and so forth. Secondly, this reform created important challenges related to an increase demand, coverage, equity, and quality (López, 2016).

The National Plan of Development (2018–2024) clearly outlines the government's commitment to ensure employment, education, health, and wellbeing (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2019a). From this document, the Regional Program of

Education (2020–2024) is derived, and which outlines the main activities to focus on for the 6 year period of the current's government tenure. There are six main aims described in this document which focus on the government's commitment to: (1) guarantee an egalitarian and inclusive education; (2) guarantee the right and access to an excellent pertinent and relevant education provision; (3) value teachers as agents of change; (4) generate favourable environments to facilitate the teaching-learning process; (5) guarantee the right and access to a physical education culture; and (6) ensure the hegemony and active national participation of the government to ensure the transformation of the education system (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2019b).

Whilst the reform which made preschool education mandatory helped Mexico give an important step in terms of providing compulsory free education to all children, recent reports suggest that there are still challenges at national level regarding low quality of education, social inequality, poverty, high levels of crime, low quality of teacher education, and limited access to school for children from rural areas and from low income backgrounds (UNESCO, 2020). In fact, only 82% of children aged 3–5 are currently enrolled in early childhood and primary education programs which is below the OECD average of 88% (OECD, 2020) whereas only 15% of 3–5 years old are enrolled in private schools compared to a nearly 30% in average in other OECD countries. The child-teacher ratio in Mexico is 24 children per teacher at preschool level, which does not change significantly, with a ratio of 25:1 and 27:1 and 28:1 in primary school and junior high/middle school. Mexico's government invests on average USD 3320 per student on primary education which is lower compared to the average the average of USD 11,231 in other OECD countries.

Cuba

In Cuba according to Malott (2009), Cuban education provision is the sole responsibility of the revolutionary government led by the Ministry of Education. The Cuban National Education system aims to offer compulsory and free of charge education until the age of 16 (Malott, 2009) with the ultimate goal of "capital formulation through labour power" (Fox & Byker, 2015, p. 186). The education system supports the acquisition of Cuban values to counteract the values underpinning neoliberalism and capitalism ideologies (Fox & Byker, 2015) and heavily relies on the legacy of Paulo Freire related to using education to empower Cuban citizens to 'read the world' through critical lenses (Allman, 2001).

According to López (2011), the structure of the Cuban educational system comprises preschool level (children aged 0–5 years old), followed by 6 years of primary school education (6–11 years old), and 3 years of secondary school education (12–14 years old). Preschool education aims to support children's moral, aesthetic, physical, and intellectual development with a view to preparing them for further academic education. Preschool education is delivered by the *Educa a tu Hijo*

program [Educate Your Child] which involves the wider community and parents. Primary education is regarded as 'General Education', is divided in two cycles (first to fourth grade and fifth to sixth grade), and aims to help children develop their personality, and to develop "…patriotic feelings and civic education, capable of identifying with the values and principles of our society, exalting the value of work as a source of wealth and acting as the protagonist in the leaning process" (López, 2011, p. 61).

López (2011) illustrates how Cuba has undergone deep internal changes due to changes in the global landscape of education which has also prompted the Cuban education system to evolve. The evolution of the Cuban system is argued to have gone through four specific phases. The first phase took place in 1961 when illiteracy was eradicated. In the second phase, the National System of Education was created in 1959 after the Cuban revolution and thus consolidated in 1970 which allowed the Cuban government to highlight the importance of ensuring access to education to all of its citizens (Abendroth, 2009). The third phase took place in 2000 which aimed to offer an ongoing and sustained process of education to ensure an efficient human development of young children, teenagers, and young people. Finally, the fourth phase is regarded as the current climate Cuba is living in the twenty-first century. The National System of Education is the government-led institution tasked with overseeing all levels of education in the country. While Cuba created the *Instituto Pedagógico*, aimed to train teachers to work in the national education system, Cuban teachers work in an undervalued profession – as it happens in other countries – and with one of the lowest pays for teachers ($25 USD per month) in the world (Fox & Byker, 2015). The child teacher ratio changes from 7:1 in the final year of preschool to 13:1 in primary school.

Overall, it can be observed that there are a number of educational and government policies and procedures which differ from country to country. These policies and procedures shape the direction of education provision in general, but they also shape the transition to school. In the following discussion, we consider more closely those policies which are specifically related to the transition to school.

Policies Supporting Transitions to School in the Four Latin American Countries

Within educational research, it is widely accepted that educational policies have a strong influence on different aspects of education provision namely, processes, environment, procedures, curriculum, teacher education, and leadership (Spring, 2014; Verger et al., 2012). Such influence also applies to the way in which school pupils experience the learning process. The chapters included in this book report on the policies that have been developed and which seem to influence the way in which the transition to school is experienced. Chapter 7 from **Brazil** highlights policies that the Brazilian government has in place around the transition to school, namely the National Curriculum Guidelines for Basic Education and the National

Curriculum Base (Brazil, 2017). These policies state the relevance of different transitions and indeed outline what schools should be doing to support transition from initial to formal education. In fact, the City Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (Sao Paulo, 2019) contains an entire chapter dedicated to transitions, emphasising the need for additional public policies to ensure curricular integration and relevant education of teachers. Additionally, in some municipalities there seem to be Municipal Education Networks which emphasise the importance of professional education of teachers to facilitate this transition. The impact of these policies is given particular focus in Chap. 9 with analysis pertinent to the particular Waldorf School system within Brazil.

Chile (Chap. 2) similarly recognises the relevance of transition to school by having important policies in place to support this process. Firstly, the National System of Quality Assurance established in 2011, has recognised the importance of early childhood education and thus included it in such a quality-related system to ensure a common infrastructure and structural quality among educational levels. Secondly, the relevance of the transition to school seems to be further strengthened with the recent publication of the *Transitions Decree* in 2017. This Decree requires all schools to plan transition activities involving teachers, children, and parents with a view to supporting the transition to first grade. This is further supported by the action of the Viceministry of Early Childhood Education which creates strategies to support the transition to primary school. While not focused specifically on preschool or first grade teachers, the *Teachers Career Law* established in 2016, aims to improve preservice training, foster professional development and enhance salaries which is expected to have a positive impact on the way in which teachers support this transition. However, Chap. 3 (**Chile**), reports interesting challenges regarding school funding and school competition which may impact this transition. This chapter makes the case of the pressure experienced by some Chilean primary schools whereby children seem to be pressured to perform well in national standardised tests, otherwise, the school may be at risk of being closed and pupils being sent to other schools. Interestingly, this chapter reports that the there is a direct correlation between high grades and funding for schools whereby the better grades obtained by children, would secure more government funding to schools. As a result of this, there seems to be an additional pressure on teachers in that they need to have children with high grades which could result in children feeling pressured to obtain high grades.

Although the **Cuban** chapter (Chap. 5), does not report in detail on the current policies that shape the transition to school, recent reports suggest that the Cuban education system has gone through a deep transformation to ensure a high-quality education provision for all Cuban children (Murray, 2017). The report documents that education policies support the involvement of families in their child's education, especially in day care centres (D'Emilio & Laire, 2016). The report and Chap. 5 highlight the Cuban government's community-based program *Educa a tu Hijo* [Educate your Child] which is formed of stakeholders from different sectors such as education, health, sports, and culture aimed to work with parents to support their child's development through home-based activities. The report goes on to describe that there are policies in place to identify at-risk families (low income families,

history of violence and/or alcoholism) who need tailored attention at the start of each school year. On the other hand, the Preschool Education Program which was published in 1990, and is still in place, seems to favour development of early literacy skills (Hernández & Gómez, 2018) to prepare them for further academic education. While this may suggest that the Cuban education policies seem to place an emphasis on developing academic-related skills of preschool children, there seems the need to investigate further what specific policy-related mechanisms the Cuban government has, to specifically support this transition. Authors from **Mexico** on the other hand (Chap. 4), reflect on the fact that the Mexican Ministry of Education through the National Program of Education (2018–2024), acknowledges the need to articulate all basic education systems including preschool, primary, and secondary school curricula. However, no specific steps have been taken to produce specific guidelines or policies to support the transition to school nor are there guidelines or policies for teacher education in this respect. The authors highlight the need to conduct additional research to inform policy development around this transition.

Conclusions

The chapters in the book showcase some of the transitions research, practices, and policies underway in Brazil, Chile, Cuba, and México, making important contributions to knowledge and understandings of how the transition to school is perceived and experienced by different stakeholders. Each of the chapters outlines both advantages and challenges of current educational systems and approaches and the positions occupied by transition to school within these. Readers will no doubt identify similarities and differences with transitions research undertaken in various other parts of the world. However, our purpose in compiling these chapters is not to promote direct comparisons and the judgments that often accompany these. Rather, we recognise and value diverse perspectives and approaches and argue that there is limited value in aiming to seek or promote a universal definition or conceptualisaton of transition. Acknowledging that transition is contextually based, we propose that each of the chapters offers opportunities to reflect upon our own contexts and the ways in which transition is shaped by the actors involved, in line with their cultural practices, education systems, and policies. Indeed, the premise of this book is that we each have much to learn from others. One way we hope to achieve this is by sharing research that is sometimes not accessible to English-speaking audiences. However, this is not necessarily a simple task.

When the editors first mooted this volume and invited expressions of interest, potential contributors were identified from 14 Latin American countries. We – the editors – were delighted and thought that these contributions could provide broad perspectives of transition across a diverse range of countries and contexts. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a particularly devastating impact on Latin American countries (see Chap. 10 for discussion of the impact on early education and transition to school). At the time of writing, several Latin American countries continue to be severely affected by the pandemic. Reluctantly, several authors

withdrew their participation to attend to their immediate concerns and contexts. Despite the challenges faced, other authors maintained their involvement and shared their research with us. We admire their resilience, perseverance, and commitment to writing their chapters. We also appreciate their assistance in responding to questions and clarifications throughout the process of compiling the book.

Our invitations to authors included options to submit chapters in English, Spanish, or Portuguese. We have appreciated the efforts of authors to write chapters in English, have their chapters translated into English, and for authors to translate other chapters into English. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the assistance of Thais Ciardella in translating Portuguese to English and clarifying the queries of the non-Portuguese speaking editors.

For many readers, this book may provide an initial opportunity to engage with transitions research, policy, and practice emanating from parts of Latin America. It also provides an opportunity for Latin American transition to school research to influence research beyond this region. However, the relatively limited attention to transitions research in Latin American countries within English chronicles to date should not be taken to indicate that nothing has been happening in this space. Indeed, the opposite is the case, with a great deal written about transitions and shared in both Spanish and Portuguese, accompanied by recent evidence from policy and practice that the focus on transitions has gained traction in several Latin American contexts. Our aim in preparing this volume has been to broaden the scope of international exchange around transitions research and to invite continued conversations, reflections, and shared commitments to the topic.

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