

## Turning Crisis into Opportunity: School Transitions in Adolescence

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### Abstract

From a life course perspective, school transition represents a critical developmental turning point in adolescent growth, exerting substantial influence on individual developmental trajectories. Prior research has predominantly adopted a deficit-based perspective, conceptualizing school transition as a period fraught with challenges and risks, and has documented various negative developmental outcomes among adolescents during this phase. However, from the viewpoint of positive youth development, school transition may constitute a significant opportunity for adolescents to attain adaptive and healthy development, representing a period when developmental plasticity is most fully expressed. If adolescents' internal and external resources can be effectively integrated, they may achieve positive school transition.

### Full Text

## Turning Crisis into Opportunity: School Transitions During Adolescence

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**Abstract:** From a life course perspective, school transition represents a critical developmental turning point in adolescent growth that profoundly influences individual developmental trajectories. Previous research has predominantly adopted a deficit perspective, viewing school transition as a crisis period fraught with challenges and risks, and has documented various negative developmental outcomes among adolescents during this period. However, from a positive youth development perspective, school transition may constitute an important

opportunity for adolescents to achieve adaptive and healthy development, representing a period when developmental plasticity is most fully manifested. If adolescents' internal and external assets can be effectively integrated, they may achieve positive school transitions.

**Keywords:** adolescence, school transition, turning point, positive development

## 1. School Transition as a Critical Developmental Turning Point for Adolescents

The concept of developmental turning points constitutes a core element of life course theory, referring to developmentally relevant events that may produce “abrupt changes in status” and are closely tied to the specific time and place of individual development (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2015). Human development exhibits context-sensitivity, and certain key developmental turning points exert long-term influences on lifelong developmental processes (Cantor et al., 2019). These “turning points” include school transitions in the educational domain—such as the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school—as well as transitions to adulthood, first departure from home, and parenthood (Elder et al., 2015).

A comprehensive review of existing literature (e.g., Benner, 2011; Elder & Shanahan, 2015) reveals that for adolescents, school transition involves not only objective changes in the learning environment but also abrupt shifts in their physical and psychological states. Objectively, transitioning to a higher-level school means moving from familiar to unfamiliar campus environments, class sizes, and social contacts, while external demands and expectations regarding academic tasks and behavioral norms become more stringent. Subjectively, adolescents may experience complex changes in perceived stress, self-concept, emotions, academic performance, social relationships, and sense of school belonging during this period. Moreover, the transition to a new school coincides with the critical period of pubertal development—the second major developmental peak. Consequently, as an important developmental turning point during adolescence, school transition encompasses complex changes in academic, psychosocial, and physical development, playing a significant role in individuals' lifelong developmental trajectories (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Failure to successfully navigate the specific tasks of this period may affect developmental trajectories throughout adolescence and even into adulthood (Duineveld et al., 2017).

Currently, understanding school transitions during adolescence primarily employs life course theory as a framework to investigate how dynamic interactions between individual psychological characteristics and environmental contexts during this specific period influence adolescent development (Benner, 2011). Life course theory posits that during developmental turning points, impediments in one domain may create chain reactions that ultimately affect development in other domains (Elder & Shanahan, 2007). For example, if adolescents encounter academic difficulties at the outset of school transition and fail to cope

effectively, this may trigger developmental challenges across multiple domains of personality and social development (Benner et al., 2017). Research has found that adolescents in school transition periods exhibit strong sensitivity to external contextual changes, and the direction of their developmental trajectories results from interactions between individual characteristics and contexts during this period (Benner, 2011). Although educational systems vary across countries and regions (e.g., middle school transition occurs in grades 6-7 in the United States and grades 4-5 in Germany), previous studies have consistently identified a “school transition effect,” characterized by significant fluctuations in academic achievement, emotions, self-concept, and school belonging during this period (Arens et al., 2013; Benner, 2011). Therefore, examining adolescent development within the context of “school transition” is crucial for researchers to gain deeper understanding of “when” and “how” to more effectively promote adolescent development.

## 2. School Transition from a Deficit Perspective

For a considerable period, understanding adolescent development has been dominated by a deficit perspective, which views this stage as a “storm and stress” crisis period, with researchers focusing primarily on various maladaptive developmental outcomes such as internalizing and externalizing problems (Lerner et al., 2005). Consequently, the school transition period is also regarded as a time filled with challenges and risks for academic and social development. A substantial body of previous research has explored non-adaptive developmental outcomes in adolescents’ academic performance, emotions, self-concept, and school belonging during this period, as well as related antecedent variables, from a problem-and-deficit perspective (Benner, 2011; Evans et al., 2018).

### 2.1.1 Declines in Academic Motivation, Behavior, and Achievement

Upon entering a new environment, academic tasks represent the primary challenge adolescents face during school transition. In a new, more demanding school environment, students must not only complete more numerous and difficult academic tasks but also establish new teacher-student and peer relationships while attending to personal career issues following middle or high school graduation (Crosnoe & Benner, 2015). According to the “cumulative disadvantage” effect in life course theory (Elder et al., 2015), for adolescents already at a disadvantage in the academic domain, the school transition period is more likely to be a developmental context filled with risk factors. Sustained trajectories of low academic achievement may increase the risk of dropping out in the new school (Langenkamp, 2010).

First, a widely studied aspect in previous research concerns how academic self-concept is affected by the new environment. The well-known “big-fish-little-pond effect” primarily refers to the phenomenon where “high-ability” students exhibit more negative academic self-concepts when placed in learning environments with relatively higher-ability peers (Marsh et al., 2008). A recent German

study found that after transitioning from elementary to middle school, adolescents' overall academic self-concept and subject-specific self-concepts in German and mathematics showed significant declines, demonstrating a "big-fish-little-pond effect" (Becker & Neumann, 2018). Second, upon entering new learning environments, teaching and learning methods do not always align well with each student's developmental needs, which may lead to declines in learning motivation and achievement (Evans et al., 2018). Regarding learning motivation, an Israeli study found that adolescents exhibited "maladaptive" changes in academic goal orientation during middle school transition, with mastery goal orientation gradually decreasing and performance goal orientation gradually increasing (Madjar et al., 2018). This suggests that after experiencing school transition, adolescents become more concerned with demonstrating their academic abilities while neglecting deep learning and long-term self-improvement. In terms of academic achievement, a short-term longitudinal study from China found that approximately 78% of high school freshmen exhibited declining academic performance trends during their first semester (Liu & Lu, 2011). Additionally, although assessment methods for academic engagement vary across studies, research consistently finds declining academic engagement during school transition periods, such as increased absenteeism and academic complaints (Benner, 2011; Benner & Graham, 2009).

### 2.1.2 Declines in Self-Esteem and School Belonging

Another characteristic of adolescent development during school transition is the reduction in positive perceptions of self and the current developmental context (i.e., the new school), specifically manifested as declines in self-esteem and school belonging. Self-esteem refers to individuals' overall positive or negative perceptions of themselves and serves as a barometer of adolescent developmental status (Craven & Marsh, 2008). Throughout the lifespan, self-esteem development is a dynamic process resulting from interactions between risk and protective factors in individual development. A long-term longitudinal study found that adolescents' psychological functioning may deteriorate during school transition, manifested as declines in self-esteem and increases in internalizing and externalizing problems such as depression, loneliness, aggression, and anti-social behavior (Barber & Olsen, 2004). School belonging involves perceptions of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by teachers and peers in the school environment and serves as an important predictor of positive academic and psychosocial development (Slaten et al., 2016). Previous research indicates that adolescents' developmental trajectories of school belonging show declining trends during school transition periods. For example, Benner and Graham (2009) found that adolescents experienced temporary declines in school belonging immediately after entering a new school, and these short-term declines were associated with emotional problems such as depression and loneliness, as well as maladaptive academic behaviors such as unexcused absences.

### 2.1.3 Sharp Increases in Mental Health Problems and Risk Behaviors

Previous research has found that after transitioning to new educational environments, adolescents face numerous practical issues including changes in school environment, dissolution of previous peer networks, new academic challenges, and exposure to teachers with more diverse teaching styles. These factors increase stress in the short term and are accompanied by the emergence of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, as well as increases in risk behaviors such as alcohol consumption (Evans et al., 2018; Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010). At the mental health level, a longitudinal study found that adolescents experienced significant increases in loneliness and anxiety levels after entering high school, indicating that school transition poses considerable challenges for them (Benner & Graham, 2009). Regarding risk behaviors, a national survey study from the United States found that adolescents in school transition periods exhibited significant increases in alcohol-related risk behaviors (Jackson & Schulenberg, 2013). Specifically, higher proportions of adolescents transitioned from “non-drinking” to “light drinking” or “heavy drinking”; girls were more likely to transition from “non-drinking” to “light drinking,” while boys were more likely to transition to “heavy drinking.” Therefore, the school transition period may be a sensitive period for increased mental health problems and risk behaviors among adolescents.

In summary, adolescents in school transition periods may face certain challenges in academic, psychological, behavioral, and social development. It should be noted that although the above three domains are summarized separately, they are actually interconnected and jointly influence adolescent development, constituting an organic developmental system (Engels et al., 2019). For example, a longitudinal study of students in grades 3-9 (transitioning from elementary to middle school) found that adolescents’ social-emotional competence, academic achievement, and cognitive abilities were mutually predictive and collectively formed a developmental cascade system (Okano et al., 2019).

## 2.2 Factors Influencing Adolescent Development During School Transition

What factors may be related to developmental trends during adolescents’ school transition periods? Analysis of previous literature reveals that internal physiological and psychological factors, together with external family, school, and community factors, jointly determine whether adolescents can successfully navigate this important developmental turning point.

**2.2.1 Internal Physiological and Psychological Factors** As is well known, adolescence is a period of tremendous change in hormone-related physiological factors. Therefore, various problems that emerge during school transition may be attributable not only to the “transition effect” itself but also to brain development during this period. Brain science research has found that along with the development of brain function, adolescents’ social cognition

(e.g., “perspective-taking” ) and executive function (e.g., “selective attention and decision-making” ) are also rapidly developing. However, whether these changes are beneficial for adolescents’ positive development during specific periods remains uncertain (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). According to the contextual amplification hypothesis, physiological changes and environmental changes (such as new school environments) interactively influence adolescent development (Ge et al., 2011). If the development of self-regulation abilities cannot adapt well to suddenly changing environments, adolescents in school transition periods may become more sensitive to negative events, leading them to perceive important events and others in the new school more critically and making them more prone to emotional and behavioral problems.

However, can we conclude that various problems during school transition are rooted in “puberty” rather than “transition” itself? The German education system, where elementary-to-middle school transition occurs after fourth grade (i.e., before puberty), provides an opportunity to address this question. Research has found that fifth-grade students exhibited lower self-esteem, self-concept, and academic emotions compared to German fourth-grade students (Arens et al., 2013). This suggests that declines in self-concept during school transition may be primarily attributable to the “transition” itself rather than pubertal development. Overall, physiological influences may interact with school transition contexts to jointly affect adolescent development.

In addition to physiological factors, adolescents’ internal social-cognitive and emotional characteristics are closely related to academic and socialization outcomes during school transition (Evans et al., 2018). Regarding social cognition, key psychological characteristics include school transition efficacy, beliefs about intelligence, and self-control. For example, based on Bandura’ s (2001) social cognitive theory, Madjar and Chohat (2017) proposed the concept of school transition efficacy, which involves individuals’ beliefs about their ability to cope with academic tasks and adapt well in new school environments. Their study found that school transition efficacy in the early period of enrollment positively predicted later emotional and behavioral engagement in academics. Additionally, beliefs related to intelligence have been identified as important protective factors for coping with stress during school transition. For instance, during the transition to high school, students holding an entity theory of intelligence (i.e., believing intelligence is a fixed, unchangeable trait) exhibited higher cortisol levels than those holding an incremental theory of intelligence (i.e., believing intelligence is malleable and can be improved through effort) (Lee et al., 2019). This result suggests that beliefs may influence biological stress responses during adolescents’ challenging school transition periods. Furthermore, high-level self-control is an important indicator of adolescents’ cognitive maturity and executive function, closely associated with positive developmental outcomes (Moffitt et al., 2011) and serving as an important protective factor during school transition.

Regarding emotional characteristics, emotional intelligence may be an important predictor of school performance among adolescents in transition periods. For

example, a UK study found that students with average or higher emotional intelligence demonstrated better school grades and greater academic effort after transitioning to secondary education (ages 11-12) compared to students with below-average emotional intelligence (Qualter et al., 2007).

**2.2.2 External Family, School, and Community Factors** At the family level, parental support, care, developmental guidance, and good parent-child communication help alleviate difficulties adolescents face during school transition. For instance, a Finnish longitudinal study found that higher parental autonomy support positively predicted adolescents' self-esteem and life satisfaction during school transition while negatively predicting depressive symptoms and emotional exhaustion (Duineveld et al., 2017). Additionally, higher parental emotional support may indirectly predict higher school satisfaction and lower dropout intention by enhancing adolescents' autonomous motivation (Vasalampi et al., 2018). More importantly, if parents can cognitively and behaviorally guide their children in addressing these challenges, it will facilitate adolescents' positive adaptation in social development. For example, teaching children how to think positively about peer pressure and how to behaviorally cope with peer challenges will help adolescents gain acceptance in peer groups (Gregson et al., 2017). Furthermore, lower family socioeconomic status may be an important risk factor for adolescent development during school transition (Serbin et al., 2013). For example, a US longitudinal study showed that students from low-income families experienced more pronounced declines in academic achievement during elementary-to-middle school transition (Akos et al., 2015).

At the school level, changes in school size, dissolution of original peer groups, more difficult academic tasks, and more complex social environments pose highly challenging contexts for adolescents entering new schools (Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010). According to stage-environment fit theory, if developmental resources in the school environment during transition do not match adolescents' internal needs, adolescents will navigate this period with more risk problems, adversely affecting their subsequent healthy development (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). A longitudinal study found that during middle school transition, students' perceived teacher warmth declined while conflict increased, and these changes significantly predicted declines in academic engagement and mathematics achievement (Hughes & Cao, 2018). Overall, close and supportive teacher-student relationships, as important developmental resources, help adolescents gain emotional security and confidence in school, thereby promoting proactive adaptation to changing environments and more effective coping with academic and social stress (Verschuere & Koomen, 2012).

Meanwhile, after entering a new school, an important issue adolescents face is rebuilding peer relationship networks. Experiencing long-term peer rejection or unpopularity is more likely to be accompanied by poor academic performance during school transition (Bellmore, 2011). Conversely, high-quality friendships and peer relationships can provide adolescents with a relatively secure relational

foundation, enabling them to explore the new environment more comfortably and effectively cope with academic and social adaptation difficulties during transition (Aikins et al., 2005). However, it should be noted that peer relationships may also be an important risk factor for adolescents' engagement in risky behaviors. For example, an fMRI study found that when adolescents were told peers were present (compared to being told their mother was present), they exhibited significantly higher frequencies of risk-taking behavior during risk-taking games, and increased activity in brain regions sensitive to rewards was associated with increased risk-taking influenced by peers (Telzer et al., 2015). Additionally, whether schools can provide high-quality "school transition counseling programs" is closely related to adolescents' school entry adaptation. For example, a school transition intervention study for high school students found that by enhancing adolescents' adaptive coping and interpersonal control abilities and strengthening school attachment, depressive emotions during transition could be significantly reduced (Blossom et al., 2020).

At the community level, students' participation in extracurricular activities is also considered an important developmental context during school transition. Modecki et al. (2018) examined the relationship between breadth of extracurricular activity participation and self-concept during high school transition. The study found that greater participation breadth (i.e., wider range of extracurricular activities) helped buffer declines in self-concept (including general, social, and academic self-concept) during transition. Therefore, extracurricular activities provided at the community level may also be important resources for intervening in or promoting adaptive development during school transition, and exposure to diverse constructive developmental contexts helps buffer the negative impact of school transition on self-concept.

Through the above literature review, existing research has predominantly focused on negative developmental outcomes among adolescents during school transition, such as declines in academic motivation and achievement and psychosocial adaptation difficulties, with less attention paid to potential positive developmental processes during this turning point. Below, this paper attempts to analyze the possibility of positive development among adolescents during school transition from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, point out methodological orientations for advancing understanding of positive school transition from a methodological standpoint, and finally propose a hypothetical model of positive school transition processes for adolescents.

### **3.1 School Transition as an Important Opportunity for Positive Youth Development**

At the theoretical level of positive development, the potential developmental processes of adolescents during school transition can be understood from at least three perspectives. First, in recent years, the strengths-based "positive youth development perspective" has increasingly replaced the previous "problem-and-deficit" model to guide research and practice in adolescent developmental science

(Lerner et al., 2015; Petersen et al., 2017). More and more researchers have become interested in the positive aspects of adolescent development, shifting their focus from identifying or intervening in problems or risk factors to advocating for the promotion of positive development by enhancing internal strengths and external ecological assets. The positive youth development perspective posits that adolescent development exhibits relative plasticity—even adolescents in difficult circumstances can achieve positive development if external environments such as schools and families provide sufficient developmental resources to activate their internal strengths and potential (Lerner et al., 2015). It can thus be inferred that if adolescents possess abundant, high-quality external ecological resources (such as support and care from new school teachers, parental encouragement, etc.) and can utilize these resources to regulate the conflict between transition environment and their own needs, they may avoid or reduce some negative developmental outcomes and achieve positive development.

Second, stress-related growth theory suggests that after major life events (such as trauma, illness, and other high-stress events), many people invest tremendous mental effort in coping with these challenges (LoSavio et al., 2011; Park, 1998). Consequently, they may experience broad positive outcomes, such as positive changes in self-esteem, coping skills, spirituality, and social support. This phenomenon also exists in the domain of general negative life events, with the underlying mechanism being meaning-making in adversity—achieving positive adaptation by changing the meaning evaluation of specific situations or by altering beliefs and goals (Park, 2010). According to this theory, school transition as a stressful event may also create developmental opportunities: if individuals can manage stress effectively, fully utilize supportive resources, and develop effective coping strategies, this “stress” may instead benefit their cognitive, personality, and social development and enhance personal resilience.

Third, based on life course theory, “turning points” may also be opportunities for individuals to “disconnect” from past negative experiences, meaning they have chances to change (Elder et al., 2015). As Roepke and Seligman (2015) noted, the key to growth after stress or adversity lies in seeing “doors opening” and the new opportunities that follow after losing something. Following this logic, after transitioning to a new school, adolescents who previously performed poorly in academics and social domains finally have an opportunity to shed their “poor self-image” and reshape a new self. For adolescents who were already developing well, although entering a new school means losing original social resources, the new environment provides a broader platform for social development. If they can actively integrate into the new environment, they may also achieve more positive changes. Overall, the positive youth development perspective emphasizes the importance of interaction and integration between external resources and internal strengths during school transition based on “relative plasticity” (Lerner et al., 2015), while life course theory and the stress-related growth perspective focus on seeing new opportunities and hope—reconstructing the positive meaning of “stressful events” themselves (Elder et al., 2015; Park, 2010). Despite different perspectives, their core assumptions allow researchers to infer the

possibility of positive development among adolescents during school transition.

From an empirical research perspective, recent longitudinal studies have provided preliminary evidence for the possibility of positive development among adolescents during school transition. For example, a Japanese study found that during the transition to high school, there existed a group of adolescents who achieved “positive growth,” showing positive changes at the end of the first semester such as improved interpersonal relationships, recognition of new possibilities, spiritual growth, and greater appreciation of life (Iimura & Taku, 2018). In subsequent research, it was found that if adolescents perceived school transition as more important, their socio-emotional health levels might actually improve during the transition period (Iimura, 2020). Similarly, a Finnish study showed that approximately one-third of adolescents maintained positive developmental characteristics during middle school transition, manifested as high levels of school enjoyment, future aspirations, and self-esteem, along with low levels of school burnout and internalizing/externalizing problems. Moreover, a larger proportion of students generally developed in positive directions rather than the opposite (Virtanen et al., 2019). In summary, both theoretical inference and recent empirical evidence demonstrate that school transition, as an important turning point in lifelong development, provides significant opportunities for the reshaping and positive development of adolescents’ academic and personality-social development.

### **3.2 Person-Centered Approaches to Understanding Potential Positive School Transition Processes**

The majority of previous research has not paid sufficient attention to positive and adaptive school transitions, possibly for two main reasons. First, there is a bias in research perspective: the “problem-and-deficit” perspective has long dominated adolescent development research, limiting the focus to negative developmental outcomes during school transition without attempting to view the issue from a positive development perspective. Second, research has been constrained by methodology and statistical techniques. For a long time, school transition research has over-relied on “variable-centered” approaches to describe overall characteristics, lacking attention to heterogeneity within groups from a “person-centered” perspective. In recent years, when exploring positive developmental trajectories among adolescents, researchers have increasingly emphasized “person-centered” approaches to reveal the diversity, dynamism, and complexity of positive youth development (von Eye et al., 2015).

Variable-centered approaches, primarily based on linear models, assume homogeneity among individuals and typically reveal average variable relationships or psychological processes through statistical methods such as linear regression and mean difference tests. In contrast, person-centered approaches aim to reveal heterogeneity and diversity within groups, employing statistical methods such as latent class/profile analysis, cluster analysis, configural frequency analysis, and latent growth mixture models. These approaches emphasize attention

to individual differences, dynamic factors in developmental processes, and bidirectional individual context interactions in research design and interpretation (von Eye et al., 2015; Yang & Xin, 2016). As von Eye et al. (2015) pointed out, quantitative differences may be so extreme that no two individuals can be considered identical; in data analysis, researchers should not only examine overall differences but also create subgroups based on group differences, and in many cases, identical scores from participants may not represent the same phenomenon even when derived from the same scale.

Thus, describing developmental trajectories of adolescents during school transition based solely on average variable relationships may have significant limitations, making it difficult to identify potentially positive developmental patterns. However, if person-centered approaches are used to further reveal different subgroups of adolescent developmental trajectories, researchers may be able to identify potential mechanisms or processes of positive development within adolescent populations. For example, in Virtanen et al.'s (2019) study, latent transition analysis revealed six subgroups ("high well-being," "moderate well-being but low educational aspiration," "low well-being," "low well-being but high educational aspiration," "low well-being but moderate self-esteem," and "moderate well-being but high educational aspiration") in psychological well-being (including school enjoyment, future educational aspirations, self-esteem, academic burnout, and internalizing/externalizing problems) during the elementary-to-middle school transition. The results showed that the vast majority (two-thirds) of students had relatively high psychological well-being, and more students became happier rather than the opposite during the transition process. Further analysis of changes in adolescents' individual and external ecological contextual characteristics (such as social support) could help researchers understand the processes and reasons for adolescents' positive development during school transition.

Similarly, a longitudinal study based on latent growth mixture modeling (Gazelle & Faldowski, 2019) revealed three typical developmental trajectory types of anxious solitude after adolescents transitioned to middle school: "decreasing from high" (7%), "increasing from low" (34%), and "continuously low" (59%). This suggests that not all adolescents become "worse" during school transition; rather, their developmental trajectories are diverse, with groups exhibiting positive development. Likewise, in intervention research, person-centered approaches can help identify differences in intervention effects within groups (e.g., analyzing developmental trajectory types of intervention effect indicators), which helps researchers search for the reasons behind such "differences" and is important for conducting more precise interventions in the future. In summary, the person-centered methodological orientation is crucial for understanding the complex developmental trajectories that may exist among adolescents during school transition and for identifying potential mechanisms of positive development.

### 3.3 Possible Mechanisms of Positive Development During School Transition

When describing and explaining diversity in adolescent development, optimizing individual context interactions constitutes an important foundation for promoting positive and healthy development (Overton, 2015). The relational-developmental-systems model of positive youth development emphasizes (see Lerner et al., 2015) that adolescent development is embedded in a system composed of individuals and various ecological contexts, with adaptive development arising from positive interactions between individuals and contexts. If adolescents and their ecological contexts have mutually beneficial relationships, adolescents are more likely to actively engage with the surrounding world and exhibit fewer risk and problem behavior tendencies (Lerner et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2018). Meanwhile, these adaptive developmental outcomes have feedback effects on both individuals and their developmental contexts, laying foundations for further adaptive development.

Based on this model and previous literature review and speculation, this paper proposes a hypothetical model of positive school transition for adolescents, as shown in Figure 1.

[Figure 1: see original paper]

**Figure 1.** Process model of positive school transition for adolescents.

First, from a developmental assets perspective (Sesma et al., 2005), adolescents need good external and internal resources to achieve positive school transition. Simultaneously, external and internal resources and various resources themselves have interactive relationships. Within this interactive relationship, adolescents need to play an important role in developmental regulation. Regulatory behaviors during development both characterize individuals' ability to regulate developmental contexts and demonstrate that contexts themselves regulate personal development, representing an important manifestation of relative plasticity in development (McClelland et al., 2015). Therefore, if individuals can effectively integrate their internal and external resources, positive school transition may be achieved.

Second, positive school transition may mean that adolescents develop better on positive indicators while experiencing fewer problems on negative indicators. However, it should be noted that whether the relationship between positive and negative developmental outcomes is "inverse" remains undetermined (Lerner et al., 2015). Due to differences in developmental resources and individuals' developmental regulation abilities (McClelland et al., 2015), adolescents' developmental outcomes during school transition are likely diverse, with some adolescents possibly exhibiting coexisting positive and negative characteristics for a period. Understanding this "diversity" requires a person-centered methodological orientation to further explore within-group differences.

Third, in this model, understanding relationships among all variables needs to

be placed within a “time” framework, meaning that “relationships” among factors are always in a dynamic process of change. Particularly when understanding diversity in developmental outcomes, it should be recognized that “diversity” at a specific moment is only a temporary “endpoint.” Moreover, these “temporary” endpoints also have reverse effects on individuals’ developmental resources, influencing resource acquisition and overall adaptive regulation and healthy development.

#### 4. Summary and Future Directions

In the course of lifelong development, school transitions experienced by adolescents are nested within multiple domains of individual development and continue to influence subsequent developmental trajectories. Existing research has primarily explored the basic characteristics and causes of adolescent development during this period from a “problem-and-deficit” perspective, yielding substantial and rich findings mainly in the following aspects.

First, research has confirmed that “school transition” is indeed an important “turning point” in adolescent developmental trajectories, with inflection points appearing on various developmental indicators (e.g., self-concept, depression) before and after transition. This is consistent with the basic tenet of life course theory that individual developmental trajectories may be shaped by people or things in specific “times and spaces” (such as entering higher-level schools) (Elder et al., 2015).

Second, overall, “school transition” represents a “stressful” major challenge for most students, bringing negative effects to their academic and non-academic development. These negative effects may largely stem from mismatches between developmental contexts and individual needs—that is, external ecology fails to provide sufficient social, emotional, and academic support for adolescents (Gutman & Eccles, 2007).

Third, and notably, based on person-centered approaches, researchers have found that not all adolescents perform “poorly” during this period; instead, some individuals achieve positive developmental trajectories. Correspondingly, strengths-based theories such as the positive youth development perspective (Lerner et al., 2015) provide good explanations for this phenomenon. Based on these findings, this paper proposes a process model for adolescents’ positive school transition, offering new insights for future research to understand adolescents’ school transition experiences from a positive development perspective.

Based on the above findings, several important questions need to be explored in future research. First, although relatively abundant resources are beneficial for adolescents’ positive development, the positive effects of resources are not simply cumulative. Regarding school transition, which internal and external resources are most critical? What types of developmental resource combinations can help adolescents turn crisis into opportunity and ultimately achieve positive development? Future research could employ person-centered approaches (e.g.,

latent profile analysis) to holistically evaluate optimal combination patterns among various developmental resources and synergistic gains between resources.

Second, previous research has not clearly articulated whether the relationship between “positive” and “negative” aspects of individual development is one of “coexistence” or “inverse relationship.” If both situations exist, what are the internal mechanisms and reasons? Therefore, it is necessary to simultaneously examine how positive and negative developmental characteristics co-occur from a longitudinal developmental trajectory perspective, which is important for comprehensively understanding the dynamism and complexity of adolescent development during transition.

Third, according to relational-developmental-systems theory and life course theory (Elder et al., 2015; Overton, 2015), school transition represents a critical context-sensitive period in individual lifelong development, during which dynamic changes in person context interactions constitute an important window for promoting positive development. Therefore, designing effective psychological interventions or development promotion programs based on adolescents’ developmental characteristics during transition and cutting-edge scientific theories is important for adolescents’ successful transition. Unfortunately, relatively mature intervention programs in this area are still scarce. Future research needs to develop more scientific intervention plans based on differentiated needs of different schools and students, and provide more robust evidence for identifying key factors promoting positive adolescent development during this period through randomized controlled trials.

Fourth, are there stage differences between adolescents’ transitions to middle school and to high school? Does the previous school transition experience affect the subsequent one? What are the main tasks faced in each of the two school transitions? Exploring these questions can help educational practitioners develop more precise school transition-related intervention programs for adolescents. However, existing research cannot yet provide reference basis for these questions, and lacks long-term longitudinal studies to help researchers deeply address them.

Fifth, most school transition research is based on Western educational systems, and these findings may have limitations when explaining Chinese adolescents’ school transition processes. For example, due to the influence of “school choice” when Chinese adolescents transition from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school, and since high school education is not compulsory and adolescents face their first academic “tracking” (vocational education, regular high school education, etc.) after middle school, Chinese adolescents’ school transition patterns are highly competitive. Under this “high-competition” developmental context, how should families and schools respond and help adolescents achieve positive school transition? Especially during the first year of transition to a new school, parents and teachers may need to start from establishing positive “relationships” among teachers, peers, and parents to optimize adolescents’ external developmental resources and promote their internal developmental po-

tential, rather than focusing solely on academic adaptation.

In conclusion, many questions remain to be explored regarding positive developmental processes during school transition and school transitions within Chinese educational contexts, requiring more researchers to work together to support adolescents' positive development during this critical turning point from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

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