



BRIDGING THE PRIMARY–SECONDARY SCHOOL TRANSITION: A RETROSPECTIVE LONGITUDINAL AND MULTI-INFORMANT RE-ANALYSIS OF A MULTI-SCHOOL PEER INTERVENTION

Eleni Konstantinidou¹,

Artemis Giotsa¹,

Panagoula Papadimitropoulou²

¹Department of Early Childhood Education,

Faculty of Education,

University of Ioannina,

Ioannina, Greece

²School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE),

Patras, Greece

Abstract:

The transition from primary to secondary school involves changes not only in routines and academic expectations but also in students' peer relationships. Historical longitudinal datasets can provide valuable insight into how such relationships develop across an actual school transition, particularly when they are revisited through new research questions. This article presents a retrospective re-analysis of a multi-school Social Art Group (SAG) intervention conducted in 2005–2006 across three primary schools and one receiving secondary school. The original project examined whether reciprocal peer relationships developed during the intervention and whether these relationships were maintained after transfer. The present re-analysis addresses a different question: whether observable peer interaction, reciprocity and relational continuity necessarily follow the same pattern across the transition to secondary school. Preserved peer-nomination data, sociograms, post-transition favourite-friend reports, video observations, and parent and practitioner accounts were reorganised around four dimensions: contact, reciprocity, persistence, and convergence or divergence across data sources. The findings showed a clear descriptive shift towards more positive cross-group peer choices during the primary-school phase, while negative cross-group choices disappeared. Two reciprocal relationships between students from the different groups emerged by the end of primary school and remained identifiable after transfer. However, cross-group interaction was less evident in the recorded secondary-school sessions. Thus, what students reported about continuing relationships did not fully correspond with what was visible during the limited periods of direct observation. The re-analysis suggests a useful distinction between interactional continuity and relational continuity. A relationship may remain identifiable after school transfer even when it is less visible in

* Correspondence: elkonstan2002@yahoo.com

a particular observational context. The findings therefore highlight the value of examining peer relationships through multiple sources rather than relying on observed interaction alone. Given the small historical sample, differences between measures across phases, and the limited post-transition observation period, the findings should be interpreted descriptively and do not establish causal intervention effects.

Keywords: primary–secondary transition; communication difficulties; peer relationships; reciprocity; relational continuity; social inclusion; peer intervention; longitudinal research; retrospective re-analysis

1. Introduction

Moving from primary to secondary school is a relational as well as an organisational transition. Students encounter new teachers, routines, buildings and academic expectations, but they also enter altered peer ecologies in which established networks may be disrupted, and new relationships must be negotiated (van Rens *et al.*, 2018; Stack *et al.*, 2021; Lorijn *et al.*, 2024). For students with autism or other communication and developmental difficulties, uncertainty about social expectations, continuity of support and peer relationships can make this transition especially demanding (Nuske *et al.*, 2019; Richter *et al.*, 2019; Becerril *et al.*, 2026). Transition interventions have therefore increasingly been considered not only in relation to orientation and academic adjustment but also in relation to wellbeing and social continuity (Donaldson *et al.*, 2023).

Contemporary inclusion research also makes an important distinction between being present with peers and having reciprocal, meaningful relationships with them. School-based interventions may increase opportunities for social participation without necessarily producing equivalent gains in reciprocity or friendship quality (Dean & Chang, 2021; Tsou *et al.*, 2026; Watkins *et al.*, 2019). Recent reviews of peer interaction and peer-mediated intervention similarly emphasise that social outcomes are multidimensional and should not be reduced to frequency of contact alone (Yardeni-Stern *et al.*, 2026). Belonging research adds a related perspective: reciprocity, acceptance, authenticity, support and meaningful connection feature prominently in autistic adolescents' accounts of belonging (Gies *et al.*, 2025). Belonging was not measured in the historical dataset analysed here, but this literature provides a contemporary framework for interpreting why observed contact and perceived relational significance may diverge. Greek special-education research provides a complementary context. Recent studies have addressed social-emotional functioning, social competence, psychoeducational intervention and inclusion across different groups of children. Sarris *et al.* (2024a) linked psychomotor functioning with socio-emotional behaviour in autistic children, while Sarris *et al.* (2024b) examined cooperation, interaction and independence as dimensions of social competence. Christopoulou *et al.* (2023) examined parental attitudes towards educational inclusion, and Charmpatsis *et al.* (2023) illustrated the value of individualised psychoeducational intervention for a child with deafblindness. Papadimitropoulou *et al.*

(2025) further addressed co-education and inclusion in the general classroom. These studies differ from the present transition dataset, but collectively reinforce the contemporary importance of looking beyond placement alone to the social, relational and psychoeducational conditions of participation.

These strands of research leave an important question open. Transition studies often describe preparation, adjustment and students' experiences, whereas inclusion research tends to examine participation, peer interaction, friendship and belonging as related but distinct outcomes. Less is known about whether these relational indicators continue to point in the same direction once students actually move schools. A peer may be seen less often within a new timetable and social setting but may still remain important to the student. For this reason, observable contact, reciprocity and persistence are considered separately here. The longitudinal and multi-source character of the historical dataset makes it possible to examine where these indicators converge and where they do not.

The dataset revisited in this article originated in an earlier longitudinal university research project conducted in Scotland, with the principal intervention and data collection taking place during the 2005–2006 academic year and the complete work later reported in a university thesis (Konstantinidou, 2012). The age of the dataset is therefore explicit. The present article does not use these data to describe current school provision or contemporary diagnostic practice. Instead, it returns to a rare longitudinal record of naturally developing peer relationships before and after an actual school transfer and subjects that record to a new analytical question informed by current research.

1.1 What is New in the Present Article?

This article does not simply condense the original study. It returns to the same evidence with a different question and reorganises the data accordingly. The original project focused on whether mutual positive choices would emerge, whether reciprocity would occur across the C.D.–mainstream grouping, whether expectations about transition would become more positive, and whether relationships formed in the SAG would continue in secondary school. Relationship development and maintenance were therefore treated mainly as outcomes of the intervention.

The re-analysis starts from a different problem: different indicators of relationship continuity may not tell the same story. It therefore examines whether observable contact, reciprocal peer selection and post-transition persistence change together, and whether a relationship can remain identifiable after transfer even when it is less visible in recorded interaction. The emphasis is consequently on the pattern of relationships across time and sources, rather than on a simple judgement of whether the intervention 'worked'.

1.2 New Research Questions

- **RQ1:** How did the distribution of positive and negative peer choices, particularly cross-group choices, change from the early to the final primary-school phase?

- **RQ2:** Which reciprocal peer relationships identified at the end of primary school remained identifiable after transfer to secondary school?
- **RQ3:** Did observed cross-group contact and reported relational continuity follow the same post-transition pattern, or did the different data sources diverge?
- **RQ4:** What does convergence or divergence across peer nominations, favourite-friend reports, video observations and adult accounts contribute to a contemporary interpretation of social continuity across school transition?

2. Background and Original Research Project

2.1 Original Purpose and Intervention

The original project was developed around the transition of students identified at the time as having autism and/or communication difficulties from primary to secondary education. The Social Art Group (SAG) used shared art activities, games, drawing, collage and short transition-related discussions to create repeated opportunities for future schoolmates to meet before transfer. The intervention linked students from three primary schools who were expected to enter the same receiving secondary school. The programme and its practical activities were subsequently presented in greater detail in *The Transitional Social Art Group: For Children with Autism or Adjustment Difficulties* (Konstantinidou, 2014).

The historical label communication difficulties (C.D.) is retained when reporting the original dataset because it was the educational category used in the participating settings. The group was diagnostically heterogeneous and included students described at the time as autistic or having Asperger syndrome, students undergoing assessment, and at least one participant with communication and behavioural difficulties who was not autistic. The present article therefore does not retrospectively redefine the whole C.D. group as an autism sample.

2.2 Original Questions Versus Present Re-analysis

Table 1 makes the distinction between the original project and the present article explicit. The data source is historical, but the analytical purpose is new.

Dimension	Original longitudinal project	Present retrospective re-analysis
Primary focus	Whether SAG supported transition and peer relationship development	How different indicators of relational continuity converge or diverge across transition
Relationship question	Did mutual choices emerge and were relationships maintained?	Do contact, reciprocity and persistence follow the same trajectory?
Main analytical organisation	Stage-by-stage self-reports, sociograms, video observations and stakeholder perspectives	Contact, reciprocity, persistence, and cross-source convergence/divergence
Interpretive emphasis	Intervention experience and maintenance of relationships	Interactional continuity versus relational continuity

Contribution	Description/evaluation of the original school-based intervention	Contemporary relational interpretation of a longitudinal multi-source dataset
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3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Design and Setting

The original study was a pragmatic longitudinal school-based intervention using multiple methods and multiple informants. Three primary schools contributed participants, and the follow-up took place in one receiving secondary school. This multi-school structure is important because some participants did not previously attend the same primary school and therefore entered secondary education with peer familiarity that had been created through the SAG rather than through ordinary feeder-school membership.

3.2 Participants

Participant composition developed across stages as additional schools contributed students. In the final SAG phase, the principal comparison involved students identified as having communication difficulties and mainstream peers. The historical records show diagnostic heterogeneity within the C.D. group; consequently, analyses are reported using the original educational grouping rather than assuming a homogeneous autism sample. The final longitudinal summaries included seven students in the C.D. group and seven mainstream peers, although participation numbers varied at earlier stages.

3.3 Social Art Group intervention

The SAG combined shared art activities, art games, drawing and collage with brief group discussion about transition-related topics. Its function was not simply to deliver decontextualised social-skills instruction. It created a repeated common activity space in which future schoolmates could encounter one another before secondary school. Eighteen sessions were video-recorded in primary school, and three follow-up sessions were recorded in secondary school. Primary sessions were approximately 45 minutes; secondary sessions were approximately 30 minutes.

3.4 Data Sources

Peer relationships were assessed repeatedly. During primary school, the Spence (1995) peer-nomination procedure asked students to identify two SAG peers with whom they would choose to play and work and peers with whom they would prefer not to play or work. Sociograms distinguished one-directional from reciprocal selections. After transfer, a study-specific questionnaire asked students about continued contact with SAG peers and their favourite SAG friends. Because the secondary-school favourite-friend item was not identical to the primary-school nomination task, cross-phase comparisons are treated as descriptive evidence of continuity rather than as repeated measurement on a single scale.

Direct observation provided a second source. Historical video coding recorded who sat next to whom and whether students spoke to one another while sharing materials or completing activities. Parent and practitioner questionnaires/interviews provided additional perspectives, including accounts from primary-school staff, secondary-school pupil-support staff and an educational psychologist. The broader project also used the Pragmatics Profile of Everyday Communication Skills in Children (Dewart & Summers, 1995).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The original study received formal ethical approval from the appropriate university ethics committee before contact with participating students, parents and practitioners. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians before children participated. The consent process covered participation in questionnaires and video-recorded sessions and the confidential use of the research material for the research report and subsequent academic publications. Participant identity was not disclosed. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in the original data and have been preserved in the present retrospective re-analysis through the continued use of pseudonyms. No new participant data were collected for the present study.

3.6 New Analytical Strategy

The present analysis deliberately reorganised the historical material rather than repeating the original chapter structure. First, peer choices were classified as within-group or cross-group and as positive or negative. Second, sociograms were examined for reciprocity, distinguishing mutual selection from one-directional choice. Third, reciprocal dyads at the end of primary school were compared descriptively with post-transition favourite-friend reports to identify persistence. Fourth, video-derived sitting-and-speaking counts were used as an indicator of observable contact. Finally, student-reported patterns were compared conceptually with observation and parent/practitioner accounts. Convergence was noted when sources supported a similar interpretation; divergence was treated as analytically informative rather than automatically as error.

Four relational dimensions therefore organise the new analysis: (1) contact—observable opportunities for interaction; (2) reciprocity—mutual rather than one-sided peer selection; (3) persistence—whether a relationship remained identifiable after transfer; and (4) cross-source convergence/divergence—whether behavioural observation, student report and adult accounts produced the same relational picture. The analysis was descriptive and case-sensitive. A dyad was treated as reciprocal only when both students selected one another within the relevant peer-choice material; persistence was considered present only when a previously identified dyad remained identifiable in the post-transition favourite-friend data. Video counts were interpreted as context-bound observations rather than as direct measures of friendship quality. Adult accounts were used for contextual triangulation and were not allowed to override student-level nomination or observational evidence. Inferential statistical tests were not applied

because the sample was small, participant composition changed across phases, and the primary and secondary relational measures were not psychometrically identical.

4. Results of the New Re-analysis

4.1 From Limited Cross-group Choice to Broader Positive Selection

The numerical summaries show a marked descriptive change in cross-group choice during primary school. In the spring phase, there was one positive cross-group play choice and one positive cross-group work choice. By the summer phase, these had increased to five play and five work choices. Over the same period, negative cross-group choices fell from six “not to play” and four “not to work” choices to zero. The result is not presented as an effect size or causal estimate; rather, it shows that the social distribution of nominations changed during the period in which the SAG brought the groups together.

Table 2: Cross-group peer choices from spring to summer primary-school phases

Cross-group choice	Spring	Summer
Positive: play	1	5
Positive: work	1	5
Negative: not to play	6	0
Negative: not to work	4	0

Note: Counts are descriptive historical summaries of cross-group selections. They are not affecting estimates and do not establish causality.

4.2 Reciprocity: A Stronger Criterion than Contact Alone

The sociograms provide information that simple choice counts cannot. At the end of the primary-school phase, two clear reciprocal cross-group dyads were identifiable: Wen–Teagan and Bailey–Jerry. Reciprocity matters because it indicates that both members selected the relationship positively; it therefore represents a stronger relational signal than physical proximity or one-directional choice. This distinction is central to the present re-analysis and is consistent with contemporary work that separates access to peer interaction from reciprocal social connection (Dean & Chang, 2021; Tsou *et al.*, 2026).

4.3 Persistence After Transfer

After transfer to secondary school, Wen–Teagan and Bailey–Jerry remained identifiable in the favourite-friend data. Several reciprocal within-group relationships also remained visible, including Casey–Drew, Casey–Ashley and Crane–Ashley within the C.D. group. The continuity of the two cross-group dyads is especially relevant to RQ2 because the same pairs that had become mutually selected by the end of primary school remained socially identifiable after transfer. This is descriptive relational continuity, not proof that the friendships retained the same intensity or quality.

4.4 Observable Contact Did Not Mirror Relational Continuity

The video data produced a different post-transition picture. Cross-group sitting-and-speaking counts in the three recorded secondary-school sessions were 2, 5 and 5. The observational window was also shorter than in primary school: only three 30-minute secondary sessions were available. These data therefore cannot establish a general decline in friendship. They do, however, show that the persistence of reciprocal or favourite-friend relationships was not accompanied by uniformly high observable cross-group interaction during the recorded sessions.

4.5 Cross-source Divergence as a Substantive Result

The clearest finding appears when the sources are read together. The three post-transition video sessions show relatively little cross-group interaction. Peer selections, however, tell a somewhat different story: Wen–Teagan and Bailey–Jerry were still identifiable as relationships after transfer. Neither source needs to be treated as the definitive account. In this dataset, the two patterns coexist. The contrast suggests that contact, reciprocity and persistence captured different aspects of the peer ecology rather than interchangeable versions of the same outcome.

4.6 Individual Variation and Social Peripherality

The overall pattern was not uniformly positive. Cameron remained socially peripheral in the longitudinal comparison and was not selected by other children in the relevant peer-choice summaries. This case is important because it prevents the aggregate increase in positive cross-group choices from being interpreted as universal benefit. The re-analysis therefore emphasises heterogeneity: group-level movement towards broader positive selection coexisted with persistent individual vulnerability.

4.7 Adult Accounts and Pre-transition Familiarity

Adult accounts add contextual support without resolving the student-level relational measures. Practitioners highlighted the value of arriving at secondary school with familiar peers, particularly for students who came from different feeder primary schools. The educational psychologist described the C.D. students as having formed a bond and functioning as a group. These accounts are compatible with the interpretation that pre-transition familiarity may reduce social novelty, but they do not demonstrate a causal mechanism and are therefore treated as contextual evidence rather than proof.

5. Discussion

5.1 The New Conclusion: Interactional Continuity Is Not the Same as Relational Continuity

The principal contribution of this retrospective re-analysis is a distinction that was not foregrounded by the original study: interactional continuity and relational continuity should not be assumed to be equivalent. In this small historical dataset, observable cross-

group interaction during the limited secondary-school sessions was modest, yet two reciprocal cross-group dyads remained identifiable after transfer. This pattern suggests that a relationship can become less visible within a particular observational context without necessarily losing its relational significance. The finding should not be generalised beyond the sample, but it demonstrates why transition research benefits from combining behavioural observation with measures of reciprocity and persistence.

Contemporary research provides a useful context for this pattern. Studies of the primary–secondary transition emphasise peer relationships and the fit between students and their new school environment (Stack *et al.*, 2020; Lorijn *et al.*, 2024). Reviews of autistic students' experiences in mainstream education similarly show that meaningful participation involves more than physical access or frequent visible interaction (McKinlay *et al.*, 2025; Perrelet *et al.*, 2025). Reviews of school-based interventions also distinguish opportunities for interaction from reciprocity and friendship-related outcomes (Dean & Chang, 2021; Watkins *et al.*, 2019). Friendship quality and belonging were not measured in the historical study, so they cannot be inferred from these data. What the dataset does show is why contact counts alone provide an incomplete picture of relational continuity.

5.2 Why the Historical Dataset Remains Informative

The data are approximately two decades old and cannot be treated as a description of current educational provision, diagnostic practice or contemporary school systems. Their value lies instead in the longitudinal architecture of the record. The dataset captures peer nominations before and after a structured pre-transition period, follows the same peer ecology into the receiving secondary school, includes repeated observational material, and incorporates student, parent and practitioner perspectives. Such a configuration is difficult to reconstruct retrospectively. The age of the data therefore limits claims about current practice but does not remove their value for a relational question concerned with within-dataset change, reciprocity and persistence. The appropriate contribution is conceptual and descriptive rather than prevalence-based or causal.

5.3 Inclusion, Social Competence and Psychoeducational Support

The new interpretation also fits a broader contemporary emphasis on the quality of participation. Recent Greek research has examined socio-emotional behaviour and social competence as multidimensional constructs rather than simple school placement (Sarris *et al.*, 2024a, 2024b). Work on parental attitudes towards inclusion highlights that inclusive education is also shaped by the expectations and support of the surrounding social system (Christopoulou *et al.*, 2023), while psychoeducational intervention research illustrates the importance of adapting educational support to individual communicative and developmental profiles (Charmpatsis *et al.*, 2023). The present findings extend this relational emphasis into the context of school transition: knowing whether students are physically together is not enough; reciprocity, persistence and individual variation also matter.

5.4 Within-group Ties Should Not Automatically Be Interpreted as Failed Inclusion

A further implication concerns the relationships among students with communication difficulties themselves. The persistence of within-group affiliation should not automatically be classified as evidence that inclusion failed. Familiar relationships may provide social safety and continuity during a period of environmental change. At the same time, the persistence of within-group ties cannot by itself demonstrate broader inclusion. A more useful interpretation is to examine the ecology of relationships: whether students have reciprocal ties, whether those ties persist, whether opportunities for wider participation exist, and whether any students remain socially peripheral.

5.5 The Multi-school Feature

The involvement of three primary schools and one receiving secondary school is particularly relevant to transition planning. The SAG created opportunities for some future schoolmates to become familiar before they shared a secondary-school environment. Contemporary transition literature continues to emphasise coordination, preparation and relational continuity across settings (Nuske *et al.*, 2019; Richter *et al.*, 2019; Becerril *et al.*, 2026). The historical practitioner accounts are consistent with this emphasis, especially for students entering from different feeder schools. Nevertheless, the present study cannot determine whether familiarity itself caused better adjustment; this remains a hypothesis for prospective research.

One plausible interpretation is that the SAG reduced social novelty by allowing some future schoolmates to become familiar before transfer. That interpretation is supported by practitioner accounts of the value of arriving with known peers, but it remains a hypothesis rather than a demonstrated mechanism. The design cannot separate the effects of repeated contact, shared activity, individual compatibility, school context or maturation. Framing pre-transition familiarity as a possible mechanism, rather than as a proven effect, better reflects the evidence available.

6. Strengths and Limitations

The study has several unusual strengths: longitudinal follow-up across an actual primary–secondary transfer; collaboration across three primary schools and one secondary school; repeated peer-choice data; sociograms capable of distinguishing reciprocity from one-directional choice; video-recorded interaction; and perspectives from students, parents and practitioners. These features make possible the cross-source re-analysis presented here.

The limitations are substantial and define the boundaries of the conclusions. The sample was small and non-random; there was no randomised control group; participant composition changed; school staff influenced selection; and only three shorter secondary-school sessions were recorded. The primary-school nomination task and the secondary-school favourite-friend question were not identical measures. The data were collected in 2005–2006 under the educational and diagnostic terminology of that period. The present

article therefore does not claim causal efficacy, current prevalence, current school practice, or direct measurement of belonging. Its contribution is analytical: it shows what becomes visible when the historical multi-source evidence is reorganised around contact, reciprocity, persistence and cross-source divergence.

7. Implications for Educational Practice

For practice, it may be useful to distinguish three aims in transition planning: opportunities for contact, reciprocal connection, and continued access to valued peers after transfer. Meeting future schoolmates before transition may reduce unfamiliarity and give relationships an opportunity to develop, although this study cannot establish that contact itself causes friendship. A fuller assessment of social transition would therefore ask not only whether students interact, but also whether particular relationships are mutual and whether important peer connections remain available in the new school.

8. Directions for Future Research

Prospective studies should follow students from the final year of primary school through at least the first full year of secondary education using equivalent repeated measures of contact, reciprocity, friendship quality, belonging and school adjustment. Social-network methods could examine whether pre-transition ties persist, weaken or are replaced, while repeated observation could establish whether interactional and relational continuity diverge systematically. Future studies should also test whether structured cross-school familiarity before transfer has effects beyond ordinary feeder-school familiarity and should include student-defined indicators of meaningful relationship rather than relying solely on adult ratings or interaction counts.

9. Conclusions

This article asked a new question of an existing longitudinal dataset. Whereas the original project examined whether peer relationships developed and were maintained during a school-based transition intervention, the present retrospective re-analysis examined whether contact, reciprocity and persistence produced the same relational picture across transition. Within this dataset, they did not fully converge.

During primary school, positive cross-group choices increased, and negative cross-group choices disappeared in the historical summaries. Two reciprocal cross-group dyads emerged and remained identifiable after transfer. At the same time, cross-group interaction was only modestly visible in the three recorded secondary-school sessions. Taken together, these findings support a cautious distinction between interactional continuity and relational continuity: reduced observed contact in a specific post-transition context need not mean that a previously reciprocal relationship has ceased to be socially meaningful.

Recent research likewise distinguishes social access and participation from reciprocity, friendship quality and belonging. The historical evidence here is more limited: belonging and friendship quality were not directly measured, the sample was small, measures changed across phases, and post-transition observation was brief. The re-analysis therefore does not establish intervention efficacy. Its more modest contribution is methodological and relational: social continuity across a school transition is better understood by considering several indicators together than by treating visible interaction as a sufficient sign that a relationship has persisted or disappeared.

Ethics Statement

The original study received formal ethical approval from the appropriate university ethics committee before contact with participating students, parents and practitioners. Written informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of participating children prior to participation. The consent process covered questionnaires, video-recorded sessions, and the confidential use of the research material for research reporting and academic publication. Participant identity was not disclosed. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the original study and have been preserved in the present retrospective re-analysis through the use of pseudonyms. No new participant data were collected for the present study.

Data Availability Statement

The present article is a secondary re-analysis of the original longitudinal school-based research dataset. No new participant data were collected. Availability of historical individual-level records remains subject to the confidentiality conditions governing the original study.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

About the Authors

Eleni G. Konstantinidou is a PhD Candidate in Special Education at the Department of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ioannina, Greece. Her academic and research interests include special and inclusive education, psychomotor development, pre-literacy skills, school transition, and educational interventions for children with special educational needs.

Artemis Giotsa is Professor of Social Psychology at the Department of Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ioannina, Greece. Her teaching and research interests include social psychology, family and interpersonal relationships, resilience, psychosocial development, and educational contexts.

Panagoula Papadimitropoulou holds a PhD in Science of Education and teaches Developmental Psychology at the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE), Patras, Greece. Her academic interests include developmental psychology, special education, psychoeducational interventions, psychomotor development, and child development.

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