

Children's Responses to a Picture Book on Intersexuality: Insights from Cross-Cultural Research

Keywords: Intersexuality; Children's responses; Interactive read-alouds; Picture books; Cross-cultural research.

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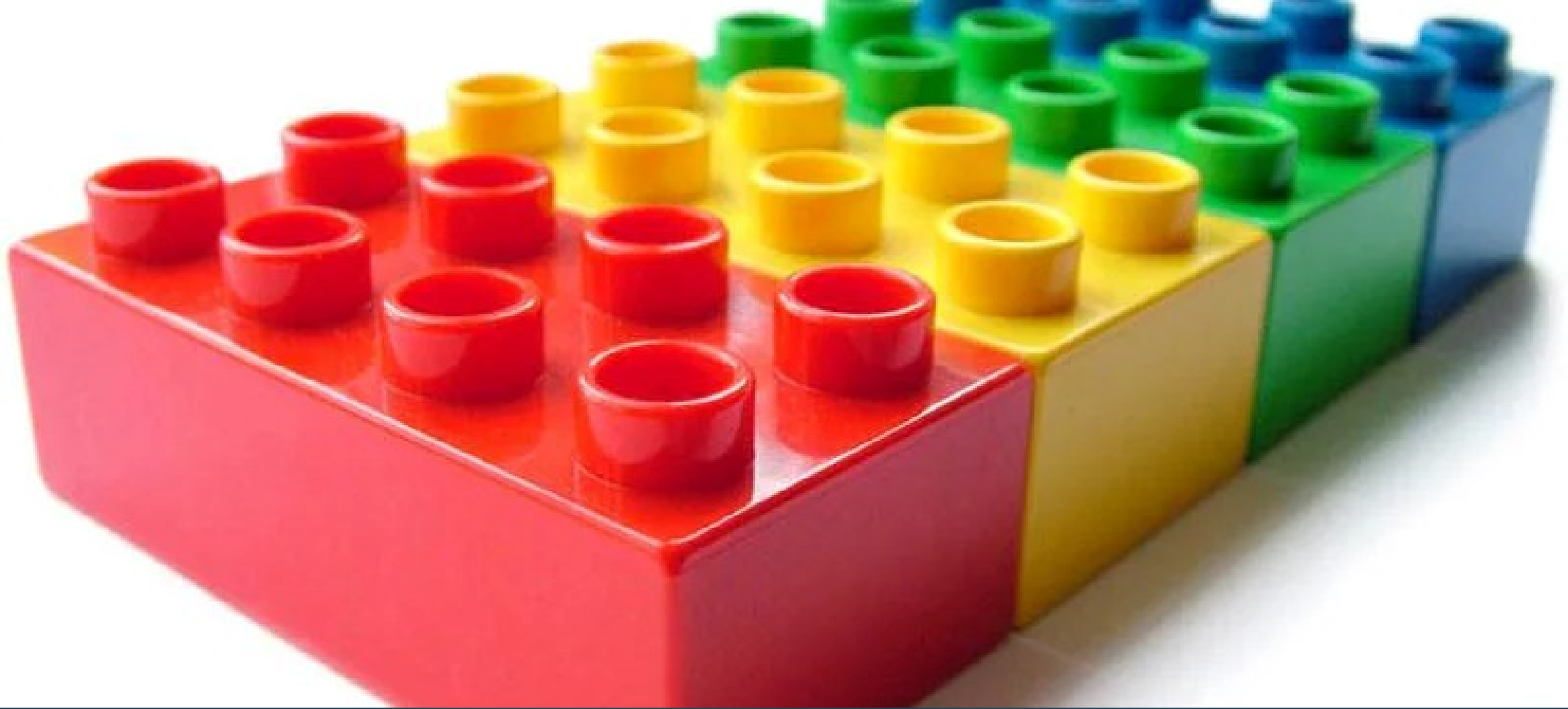
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Outline

- 1 Introduction & Research context**
- 2 Methodology**
- 3 Findings and Discussion**
- 4 Conclusion and Implications**



Introduction & Research context

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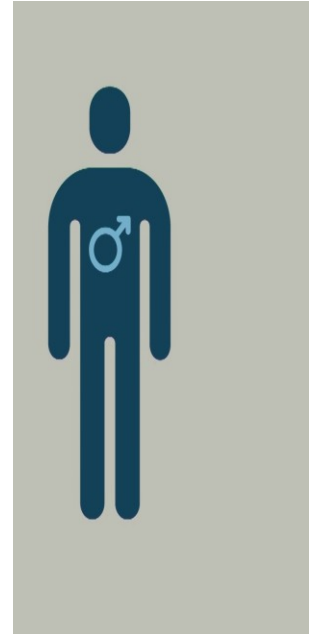
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Introduction & Research context

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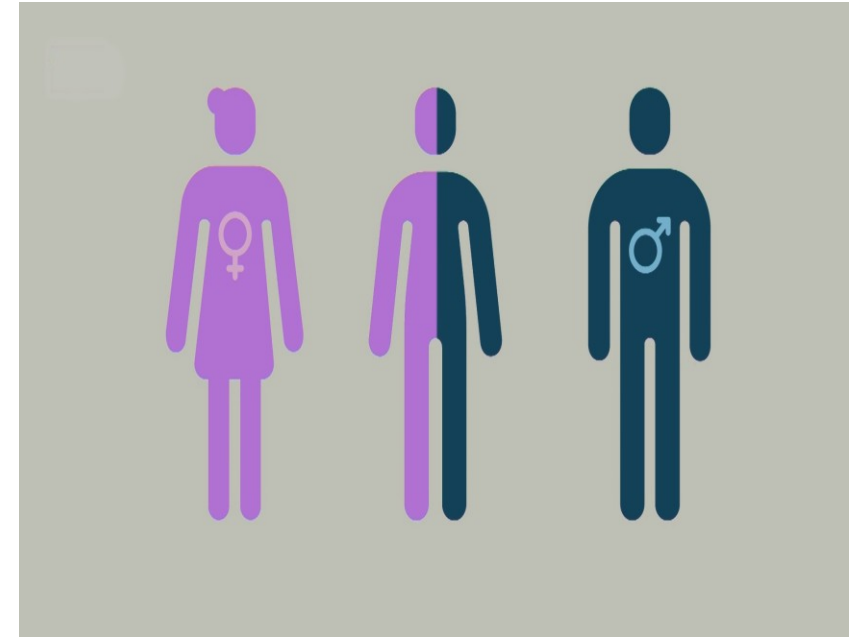
Introduction & Research context

- While most people are born either male or female, this is not true for everyone



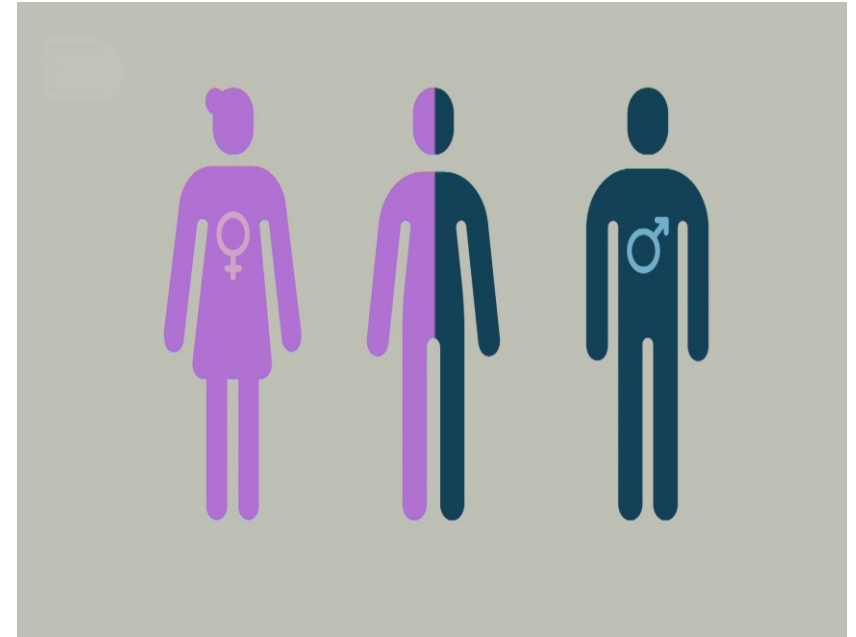
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- While most people are born either male or female, this is not true for everyone, some individuals are born **intersex**, which is a *biological fact*.



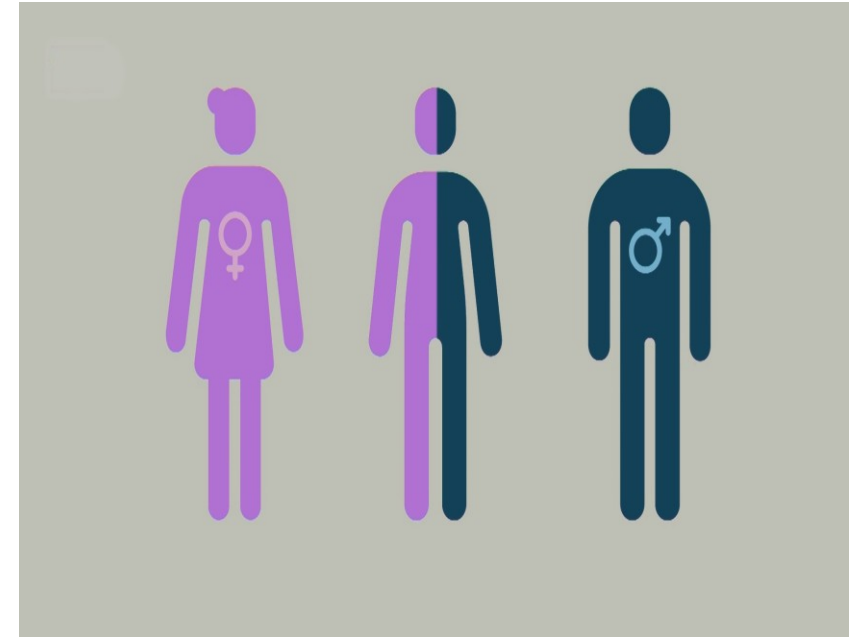
Introduction & Research context

- While most people are born either male or female, this is not true for everyone, some individuals are born **intersex**, which is a *biological fact*.
- In intersex individuals, *genetic, hormonal, and anatomical traits* do not fit neatly into the categories of 'male' and 'female'.



Introduction & Research context

- The proportion of intersexual children is small – 0.018%-1.7%, depending on the definition (Bates, Chin & Becker, 2022)
- There are many variations of intersexuality. Not all of these variations are visible (Hauck, Richter-Appelt & Schweizer, 2019)



Rare, but real

Introduction & Research context

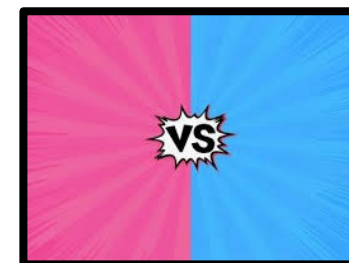
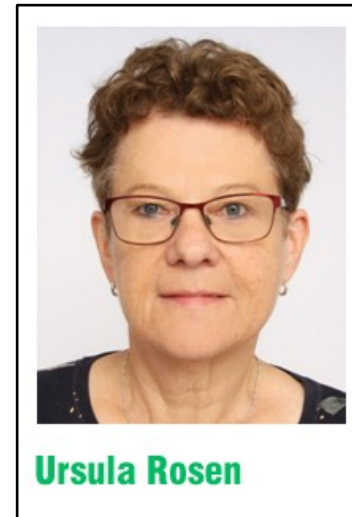
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Introduction & Research context

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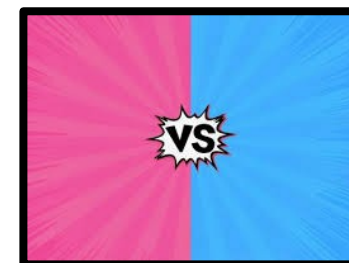
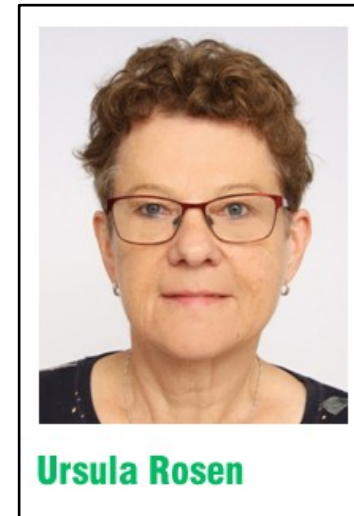
- Our research is based on the German children's book *Jill Is Different* by Ursula Rosen.
- The book is about an intersex child joining a kindergarten class. The other children try to figure out whether Jill is a boy or a girl – an impossible classification.



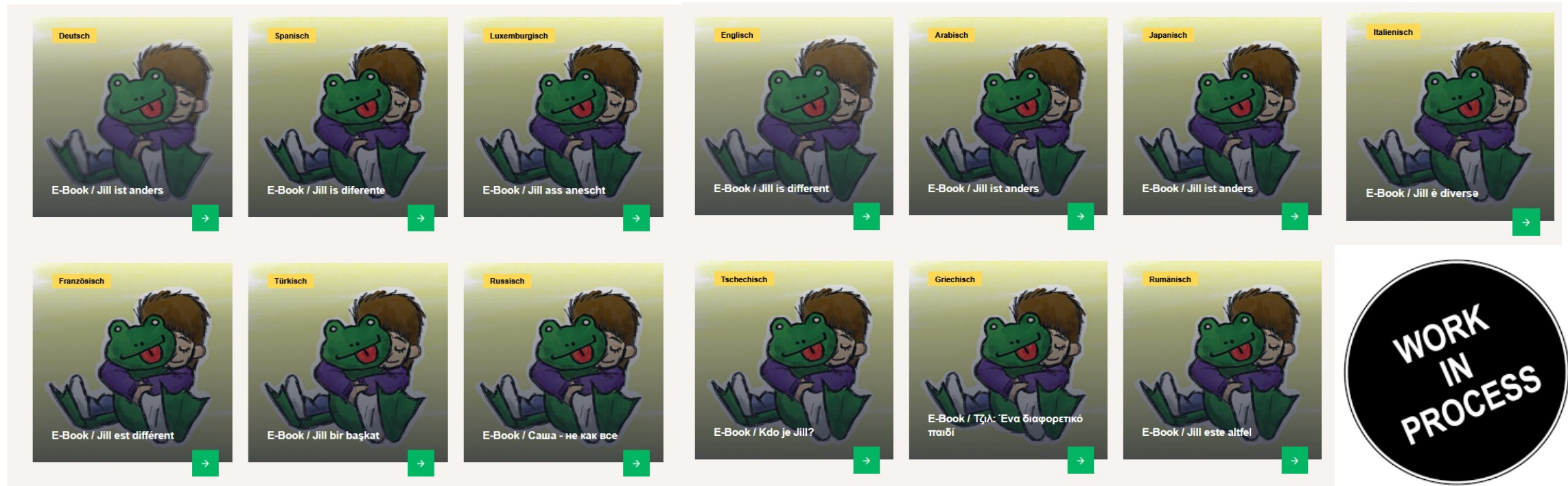
Introduction & Research context

The book:

- Explores the concept of *intersexuality* in a children's context
- Challenges traditional gender roles that categorize individuals into a strict binary, often overlooking identities such as intersex



Introduction & Research context



German, English, Spanish, Luxembourgish, French, Turkish, Russian, Arabic, Japanese, Czech, Greek, Romanian, and Italian

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Introduction & Research context

Children's Responses to a **Picture Book** on **Intersexuality**: Insights from **Cross-Cultural Research**

Introduction & Research context

- **Picture books** are powerful tools in early childhood education (Crawford et al., 2024; Mathuvi et al., 2012).
- **Interactive read-alouds** provide effective learning opportunities for children (Watts & Gandy, 2024; Wiseman, 2010).
- However, there is **limited empirical research** on how children respond to picture books (Wang et al., 2023).

Introduction & Research context

- **Research focus:** How children (ages 4–8) engage with *Jill ist Different*, a picture book addressing intersexuality, through interactive read-alouds, and how they interact with its themes.



Introduction & Research context

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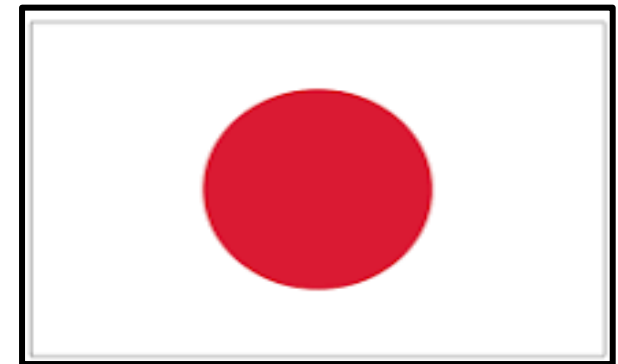
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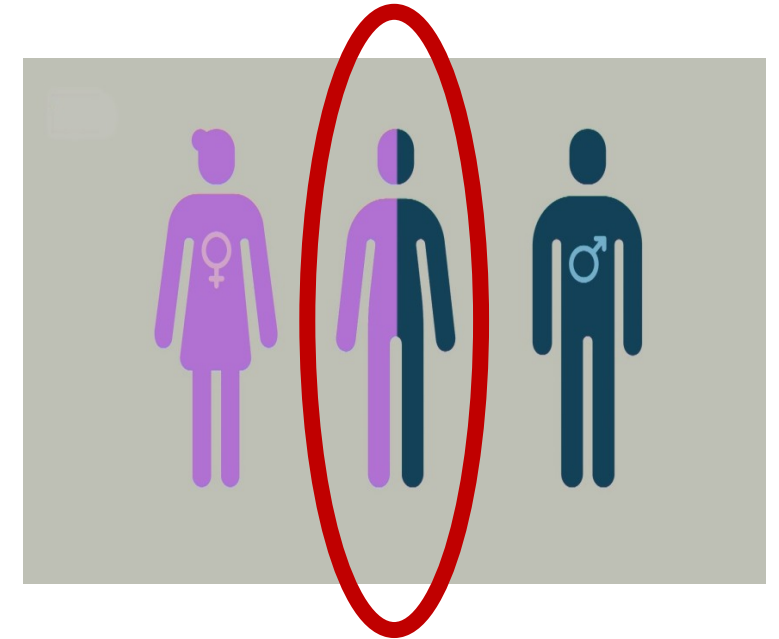
Introduction & Research context

- This is a cross-cultural research project conducted in five countries: **Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Japan, and South Africa.**
- The project comprises multiple strands:
 - Children's reactions to the book
 - Adults' perspectives, focusing on ECE educators' reflections on reading the book
 - Linguistic and ethical challenges in conducting cross-cultural research
- Today's presentation focuses on **children's reaction data from Germany, Japan, and South Africa.**

Introduction & Research context

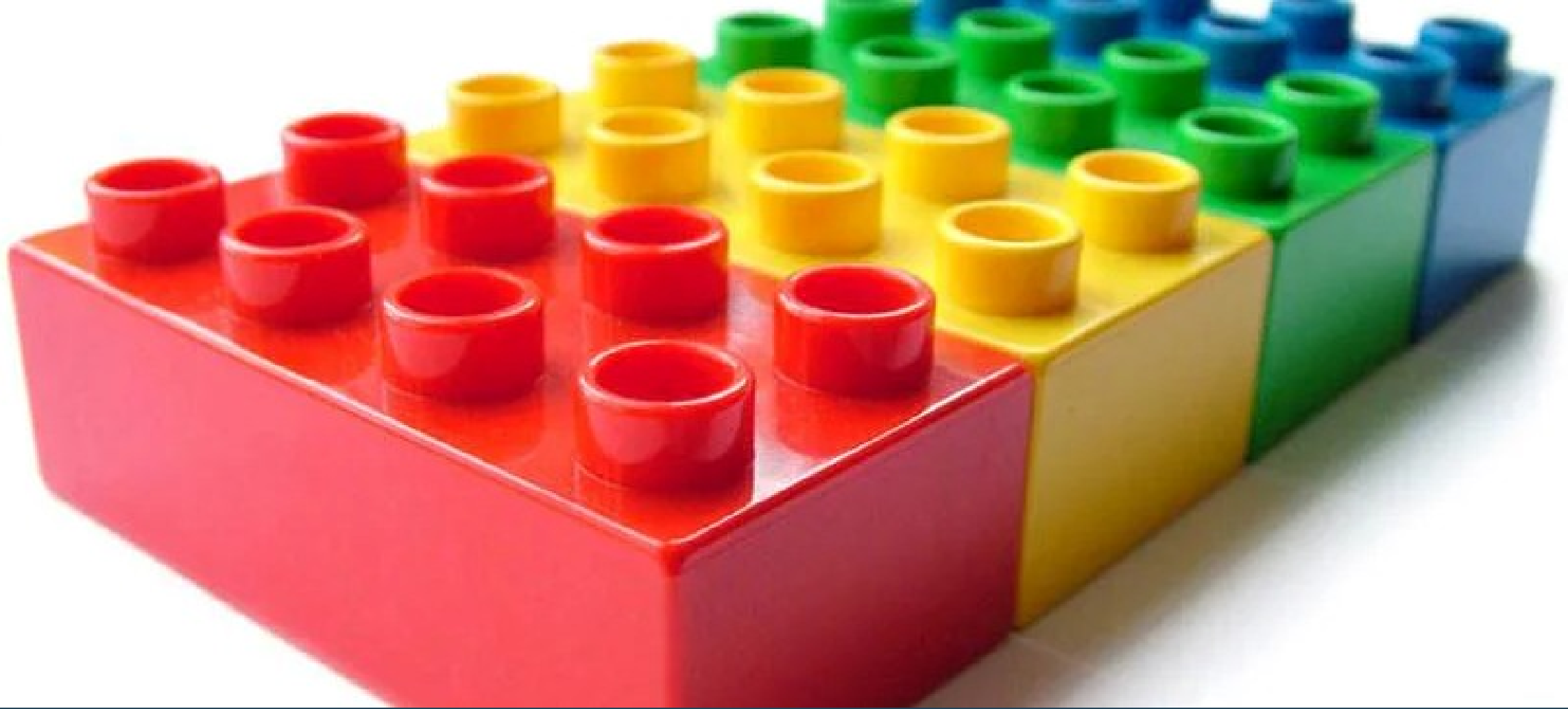


Introduction & Research context



Outline

- 1 Introduction & Research context ✓
- 2 Methodology
- 3 Findings and Discussion
- 4 Conclusion and Implications



Methodology

Methodology

- The book was presented to children *across the three countries* in various educational settings through ***interactive read-aloud sessions***.
- Researchers observed ***children's reactions, questions, responses to prompts, and discussions*** during the sessions.
- Ethical approval was obtained in all participating countries, following national, legal, and cultural guidelines for addressing intersexuality in early childhood education.



+

Interactive read-aloud method
children (ages 4 - 8)



Methodology

1. Which age group was the book read to?

- ☐ 4 Years ☐ 5 Years ☐ 6 years ☐ Mixed?.

2. Where did the reading take place?

- ☐ Reading room ☐ Reading Corner ☐ Other.

3. In what format was the book read? How was the book accessed?

- ☐ The original printed book ☐ A printed PDF book
☐ On a tablet ☐ Other (please specify)

4. How many children attended the session?

- ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ More than 5

8. Was the reader actively engaged during the reading session?

- ☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Partially

9. Did the reader employ interactive read-aloud strategies during the session? (e.g., open-ended questions, pausing for discussion, fostering comprehension and children's interest and attention, using props)

- ☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ Partially

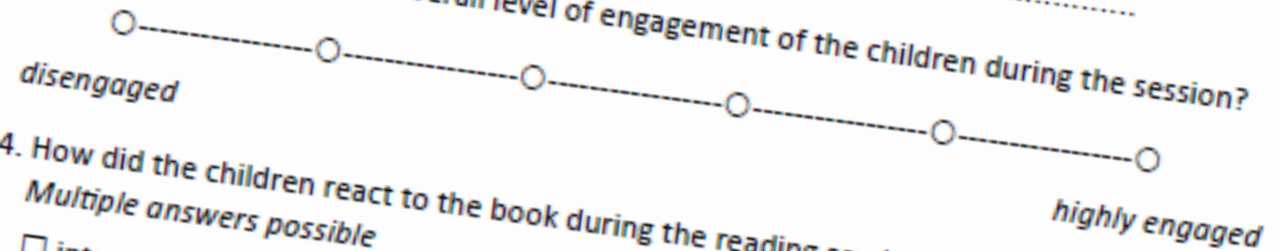
10. If any, what are examples of the reader's questions to the children?
Please give some examples, preferably with page numbers

.....

12. Describe the overall atmosphere during the book reading session.
(positive, relaxed, tense, etc., please describe)

.....

13. How would you rate the overall level of engagement of the children during the session?



14. How did the children react to the book during the reading session?
Multiple answers possible

- ☐ interested ☐ positively engaged ☐ curious ☐ confused
☐ not interested ☐ uncomfortable ☐ upset
☐ other please describe:

15. How did the children respond to the reader's questions? Actively participating / Shy / Hesitant / Other (Please describe)

- ☐ actively participating ☐ hesitant ☐ shy
☐ other please describe:

The researcher

Pre-
reflection on
the book

Research
diary

The observer

Pre-reading
form

Post-reading
form

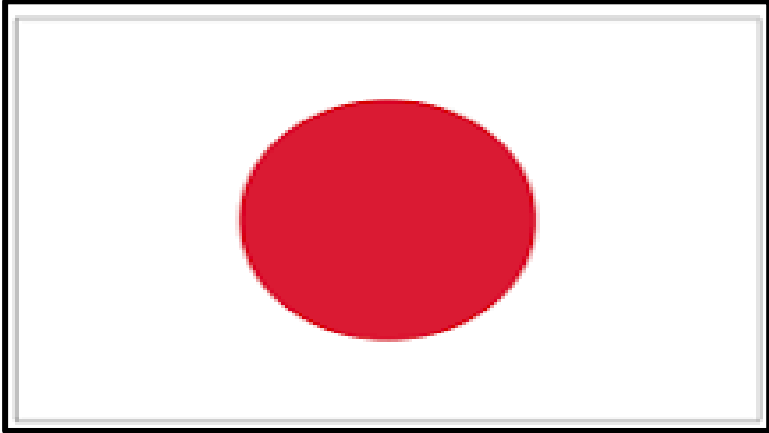
The reader

Pre-reading form

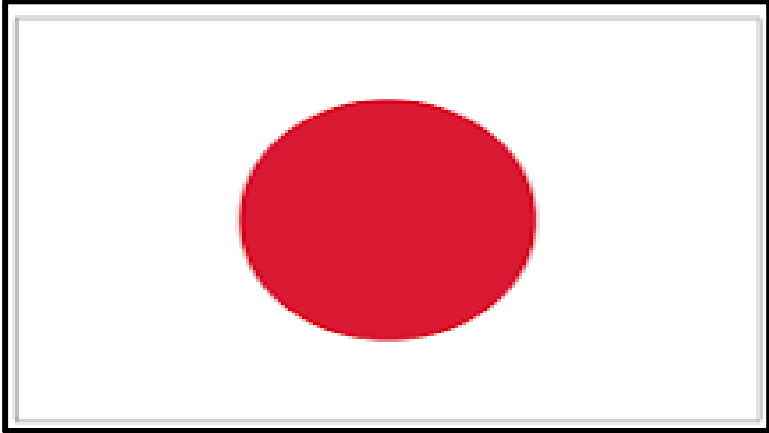
Post-reading form

The book	Jill is different			
Country	 Germany	 South Africa	 Japan	
Language	German	English	Japanese	
Data Collection	October 2024	May 2025	June 2024	
Reading Sessions	5	5	3	
Age of Children	5,6	6,7	5	
Number of children	26	31	16	
Duration of Sessions	M ≈ 18 min	M ≈ 28 min	M ≈ 10 min	
Documentation	Researcher observation	Researcher observation, voice recording	Researcher observation, video recording	

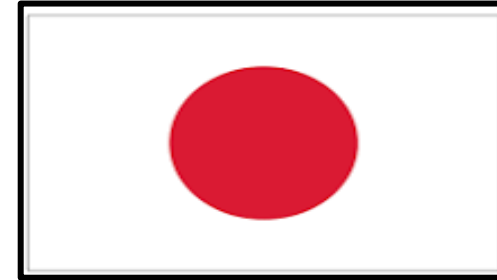
Methodology



Methodology



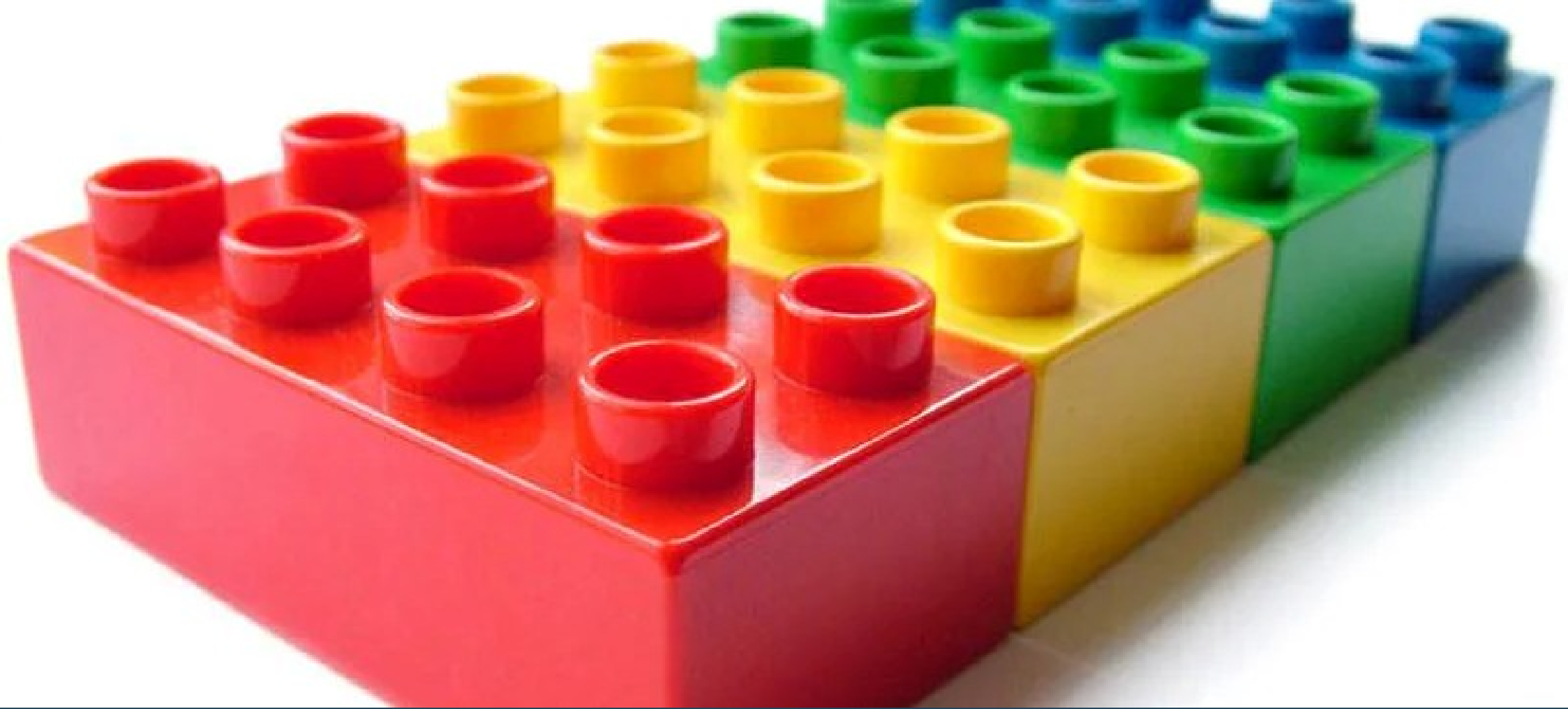
In all three countries, we purposively selected institutions likely **open** to reading a book on intersexuality, as the topic is often seen as highly sensitive and complex



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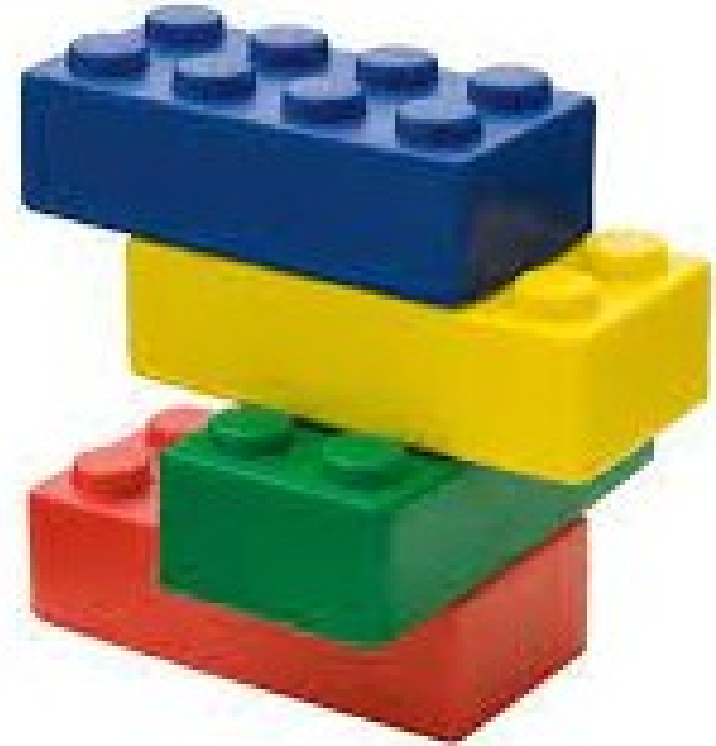
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Findings and Discussion

Our research is ongoing, and analysis is still in progress; however, we are pleased to share some preliminary findings today.





Jill Is Different proved to be an effective resource for introducing the concept of intersexuality to children. During the read-aloud sessions, the children engaged actively and expressed enjoyment. Their responses indicated that, through this story, they were able to grasp and discuss a concept that is often considered complex.



Jill Is Different proved to be an effective resource for discussing the concept of intersexuality to children. During the read sessions, the children expressed interest and enjoyed the story.

Well... that didn't actually happen!

That, through this story, they were able to discuss a concept that is often considered complex.

Children's Reactions and Understanding

Engagement: Some children showed curiosity and active participation, but mainly on pages unrelated to intersexuality.



Children's vs. Adults' Focus

Children's Reactions and Understanding

Limited Comprehension: Most children struggled to understand intersexuality, based on comments after the reading session (Germany).



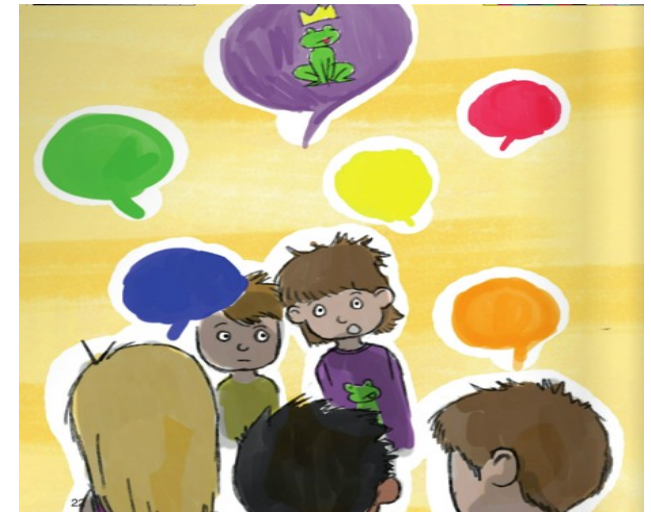
"Is Jill a god or a goddess?"



"What is Jill now? A boy and a girl."

Children's Reactions and Understanding

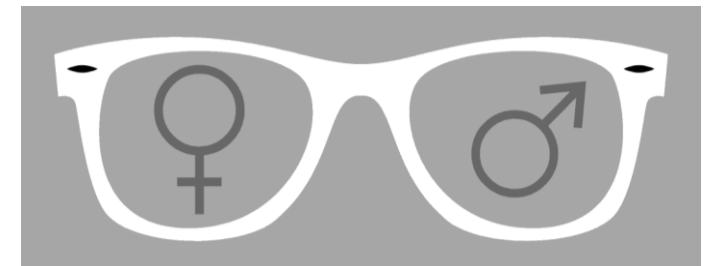
Children's discussions revealed that gender is highly significant in their daily lives, with gendered ideas already embedded in their social experiences



Reader: "Is pink also only for girls?"

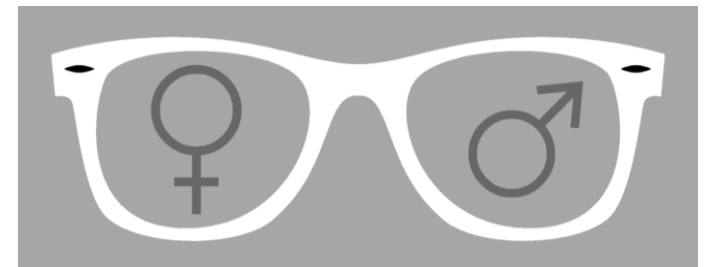
Boy 1: "No, I like pink!"

Boy 2: "Hhhhh, pink!"



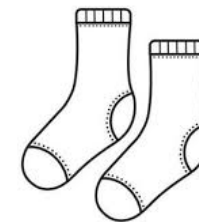
Children's Reactions and Understanding

Persistent Gender Assignment: Many continued to assign Jill a specific gender (e.g., calling Jill a boy).
(South Africa)



Children's Reactions and Understanding

Disconnect Between Diversity & Intersex: Although children were familiar with and accepting of diversity, they did not connect this understanding to the concept of being intersex (observed in Japan and Germany)



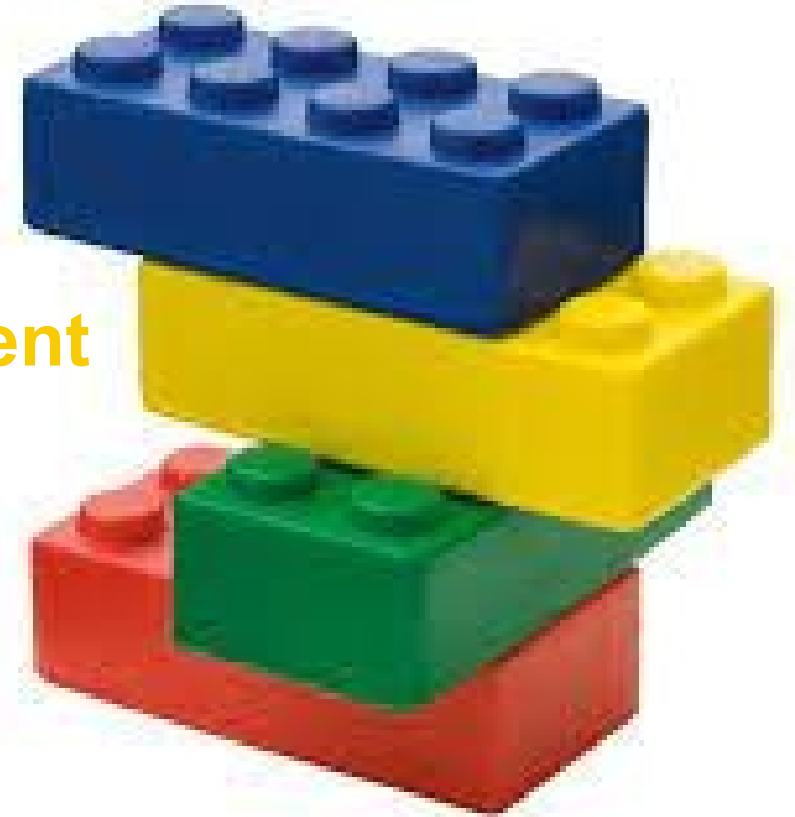


Interactive read-aloud method

Children's reactions and engagement

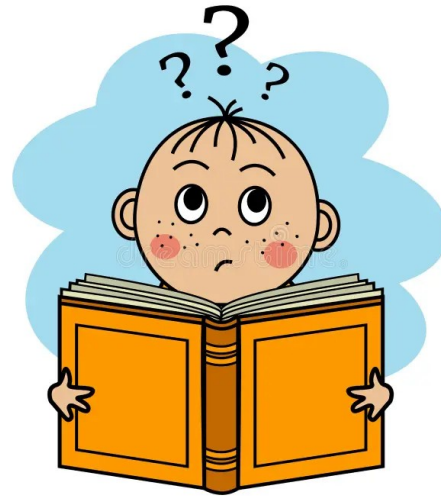
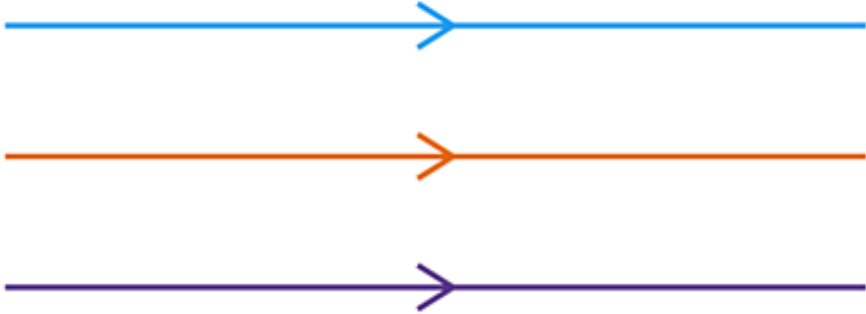


**Different
linguistic
contexts**



Diverse cultural and social contexts

Findings & Discussion



Findings & Discussion



Findings & Discussion

"I'm 30 years old, and yet this is the first time I'm learning about intersexuality," said a female preschool teacher who conducted one of the reading sessions.



On the next morning, Tim brings two pictures to the kindergarten. His father is a teacher and has drawn them.

"My father says: It's not so difficult to find out what you are: If you have a penis and a scrotum with testicles, you are a boy. If you have a vagina and a small knob in front of it, which is called clitoris, then you are a girl.",

Tim explains. And Carola attaches the two pictures to the board.

In Japanese culture, when a teacher reads a book to children, they are accustomed to sitting quietly, remaining calm, and listening politely.



Findings & Discussion

After each session, the children insisted that Jill was a boy because of her short hair.



English – isiZulu



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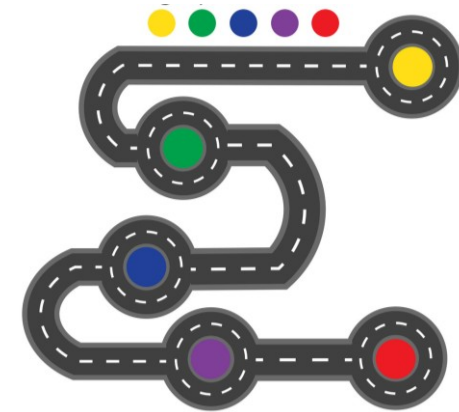
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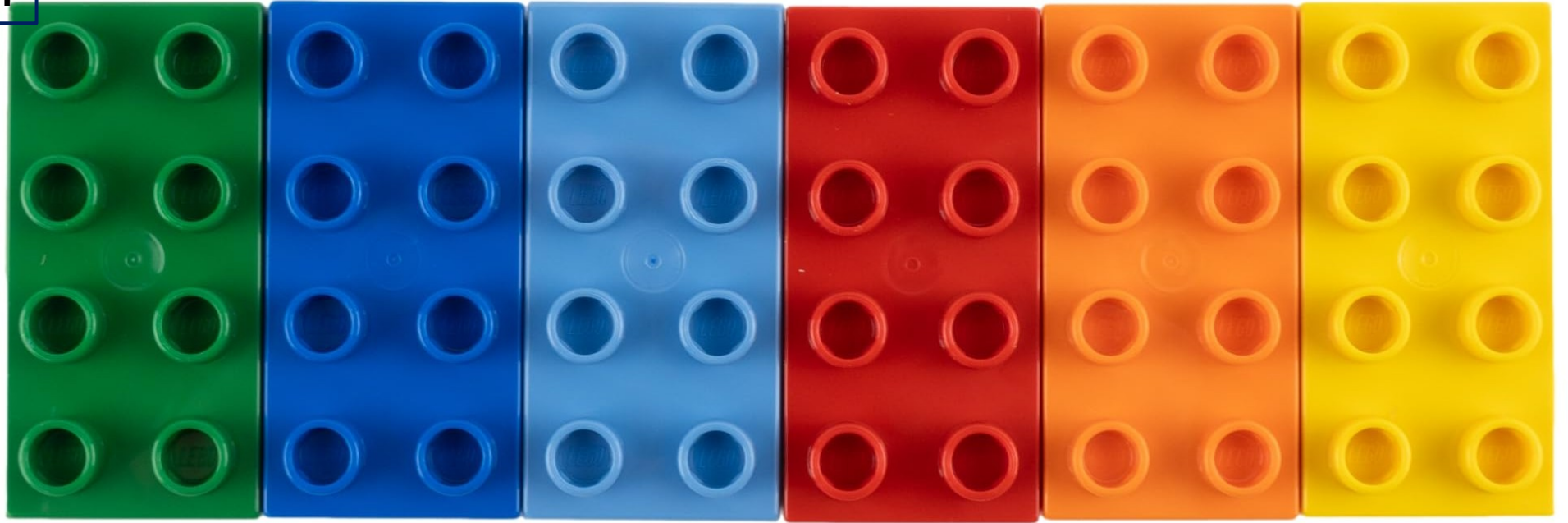
Binary gender practices: uniforms, gendered toilets, lining up by boys/girls.

What we expected did not appear during the reading session. A more interesting conversation emerged **after** the session.



Some children explicitly asked: *“What is Jill now?” a boy or a girl?”*

At the end, children made statements such as: *“Jill is both a girl and a boy.”*



**The picture
book Jill is
Different**

Intersexuality

Interactive read-aloud method

Different linguistic contexts

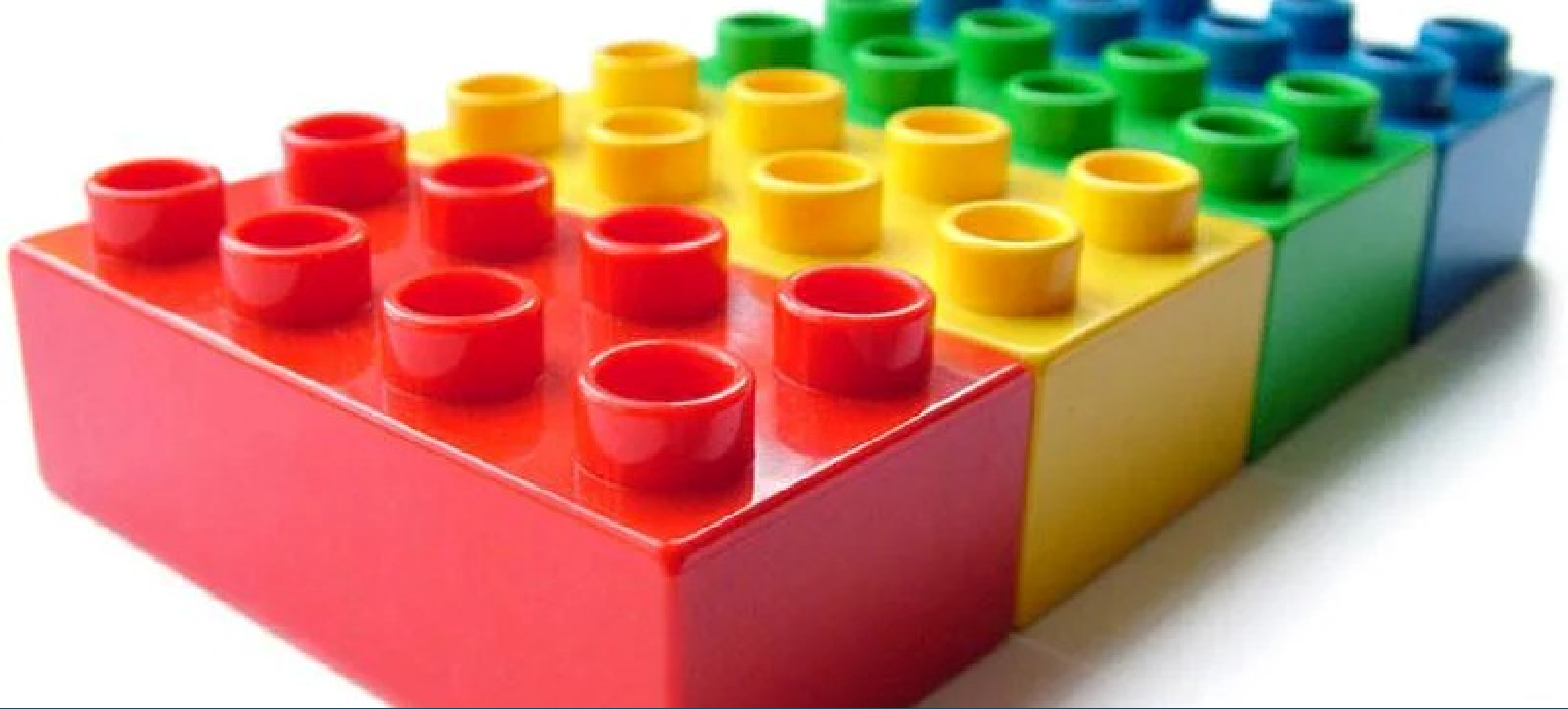
Diverse cultural and social contexts

**Children's
reactions and
engagement**



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Conclusion and Implications

Conclusions and Implications

- Our research highlights interactive read-alouds as an effective method for exploring children's voices in ECE.
- The Role of the Reader: Meaning-making is shaped by the reader (Rosenblatt, 1978 – Reader Response Theory).
- This approach was evident in the South African context (teacher: 1 session; researchers: 4 sessions).



Conclusions and Implications

- Simply giving this book (or any book) to a preschool teacher who is unfamiliar with interactive reading - or unprepared to introduce such a topic - is insufficient.
- ECE educators need to be equipped with the essential knowledge, strategies, and methods to foster meaningful conversations with young children, creating more inclusive and responsive learning environments.

Conclusions and Implications

- Picture books are powerful pedagogical tools to engage children in discussions on diversity, gender, and intersexuality.
- Our book Jill is Different may not fully succeed in delivering the concept of intersexuality in a single reading, but it successfully
 - Introduced the topic
 - Stimulated curiosity and questions
 - Encouraged reflection and post-session discussions
 - Demonstrated that children could engage with the topic without treating it as “dangerous,” contrary to adult perspectives



Conclusions and Implications

- Social, cultural, and educational contexts are critical when analysing findings across cultures. Apparent similarities can be misleading; understanding context adds depth and reveals unique perspectives.



Conclusions and Implications

In our research:

- One book, same text, presented in different languages
- One research question, explored across multiple cultural contexts
- Resulted in diverse and thought-provoking insights
- *Implication:* Reflexivity in cross-cultural research enriches understanding and interpretation of findings.

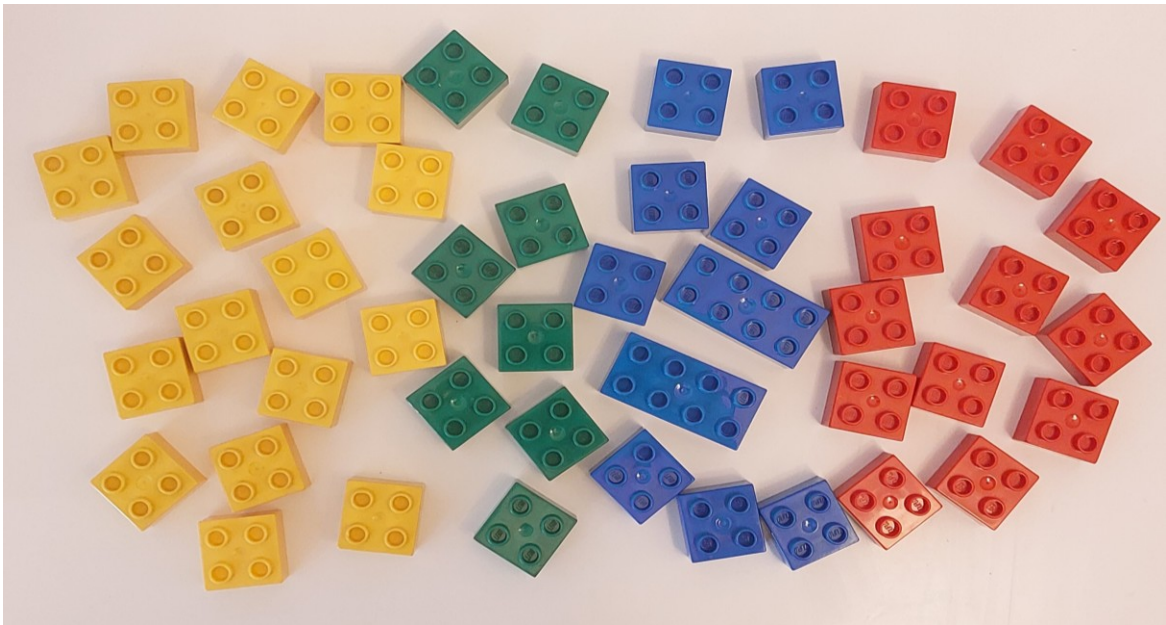
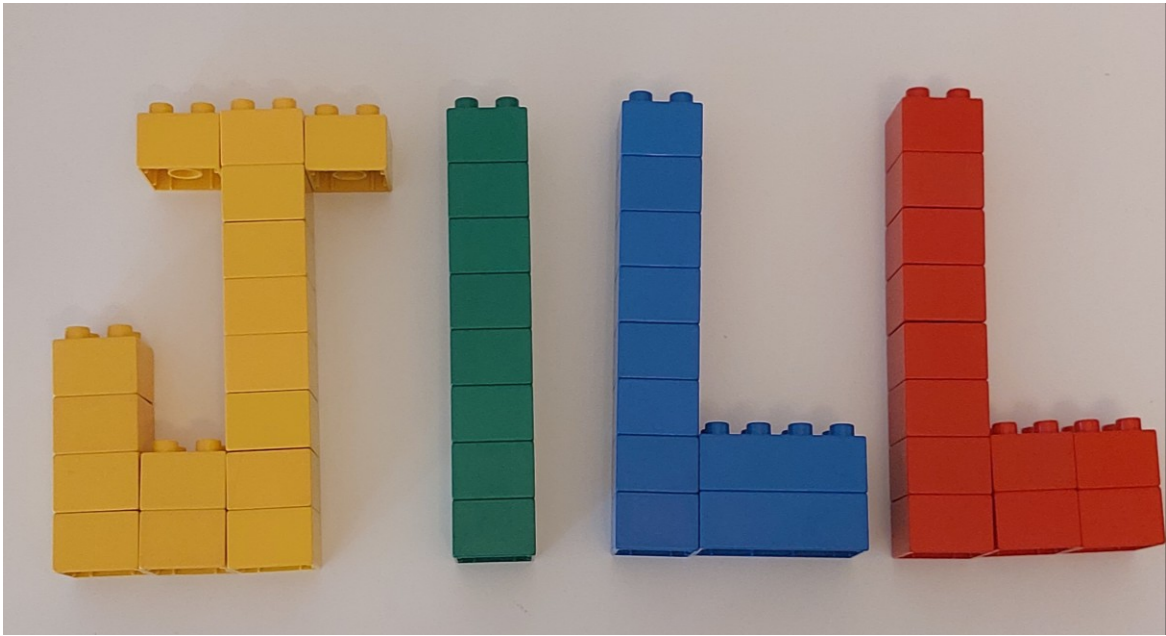


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References

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THANK YOU!

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