

Elkarif, Halah; Rohrmann, Tim; Matsuda, Kozue & Moosa, Shaaista (2025). **Children's responses to a picture book on intersexuality: a cross-cultural perspective from Germany, Japan, and South Africa**. Paper presented on the 33rd Annual EECERA Conference, Bratislava/Slovakia, 26.8.2025.

Abstract

Drawing on data from Germany, Japan, and South Africa as part of a broader cross-cultural project, this study explores how children engage with *Jill is Different*, a picture book on intersexuality, through interactive read-alouds. Recognizing that picture books expand children's experiences (Mathuvi, 2012), this research contributes to the limited empirical literature on children's responses to picture books (Wang et al., 2021). Grounded in reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), which emphasizes the reader's active role in constructing meaning, the study investigates how children aged 4 to 8 interact with the book's themes. The book was presented by ECE educators in varied educational settings across the three countries. Researchers observed children's reactions, questions, responses to prompts, and discussions during the sessions. Ethical approvals were obtained in all participating countries, following national, legal, and cultural guidelines on addressing intersexuality in ECE. Key ethical considerations included children's consent to attend the reading sessions, the right to withdraw without consequence, and ensuring anonymity of all responses. Findings reveal that children engaged with the book with curiosity, openness, and active participation, yet sometimes struggled to comprehend the concept of intersexuality. The study (1) highlights interactive read-alouds as an effective method for exploring children's voices in ECE and (2) underscores picture books as a powerful pedagogical tool for engaging children in discussions on diversity, gender, and intersexuality. A key implication is the need to equip ECE educators with the essential knowledge, strategies, and methods to foster meaningful conversations with young children, creating more inclusive and responsive learning environments.

Keywords

Intersexuality, children's responses, interactive read-alouds, picture books, cross-cultural research

Presenters:

Halah Elkarif, Cairo University, Egypt & HAWK Hildesheim University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Germany

Tim Rohrmann, HAWK Hildesheim University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Hildesheim, Germany

Kozue Matsuda, Musashino University, Tokyo, Japan

Co-Author:

Shaaista Moosa, University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Education, Durban, South Africa

Children's responses to a picture book on intersexuality:

*a cross-cultural perspective from
Germany, Japan, and South Africa*



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

Dr. Halah Elkarif, Cairo University, Egypt

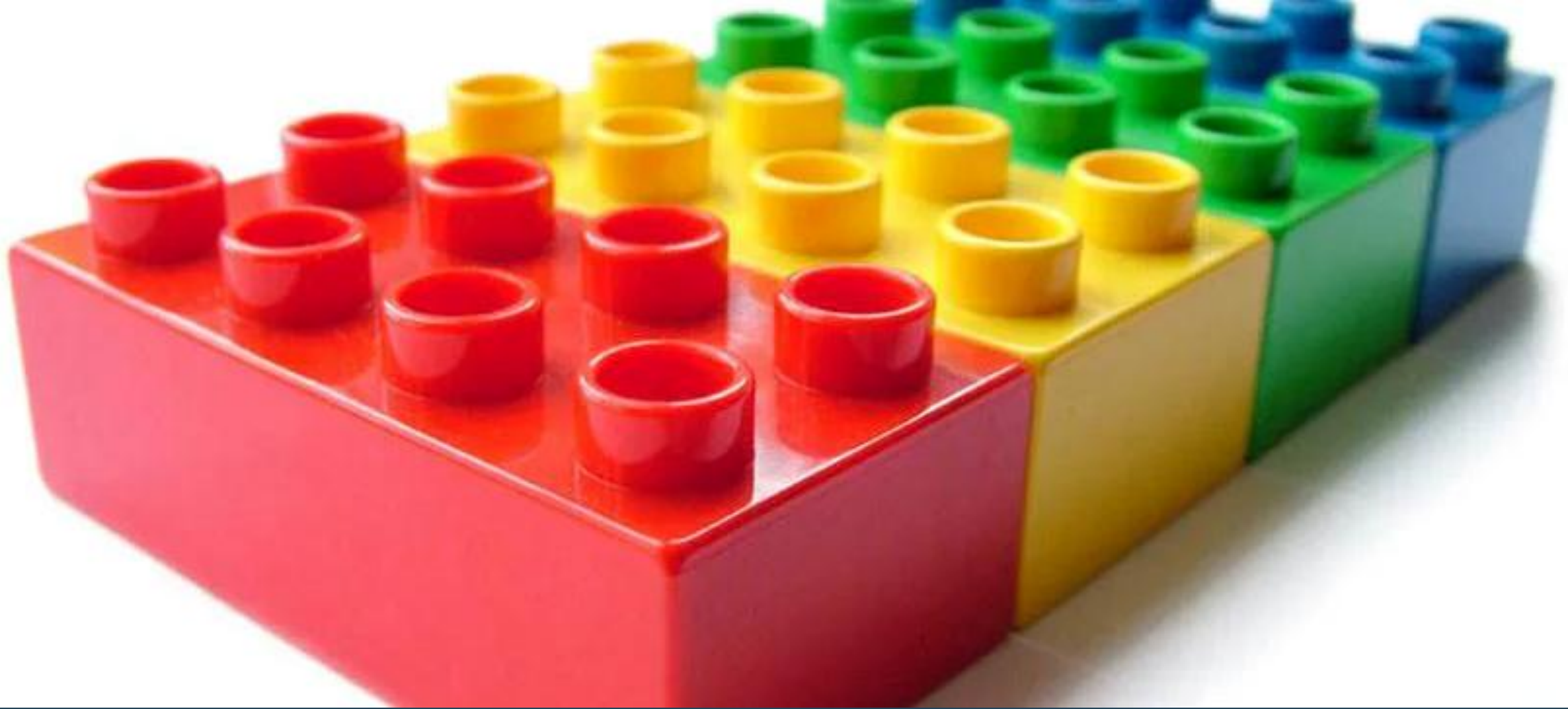
Prof. Dr. Tim Rohrmann, HAWK University of Applied Sciences

Dr. Kozue Matsuda, Masashino Univeristy, Japan

Dr. Shaaista Moosa, University of KwaZulu-Natal School of Education, South Africa

Outline

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



Introduction & Research context

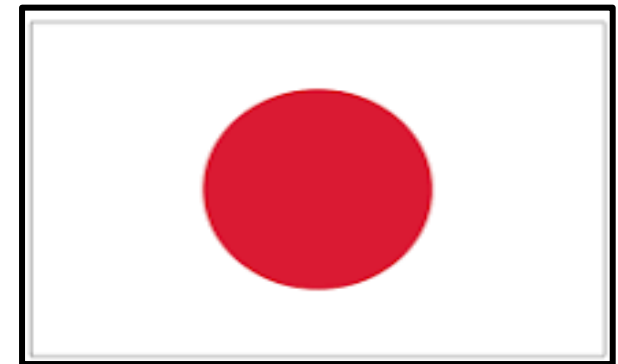
Introduction & Research context

- **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).

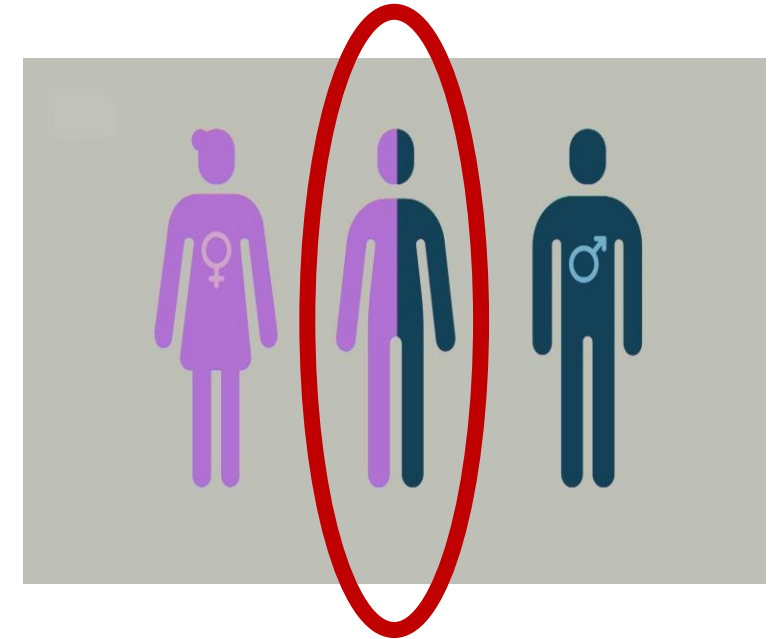


Introduction & Research context

- **Research focus:** How children (ages 4–8) engage with *Jill is Different*, a picture book addressing intersexuality, through interactive read-alouds, and how they interact with its themes.
- **Broader cross-cultural project:** Part of a larger research project conducted in five countries (Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Japan, and South Africa), with the current presentation focusing on data from ***Germany, Japan, and South Africa.***

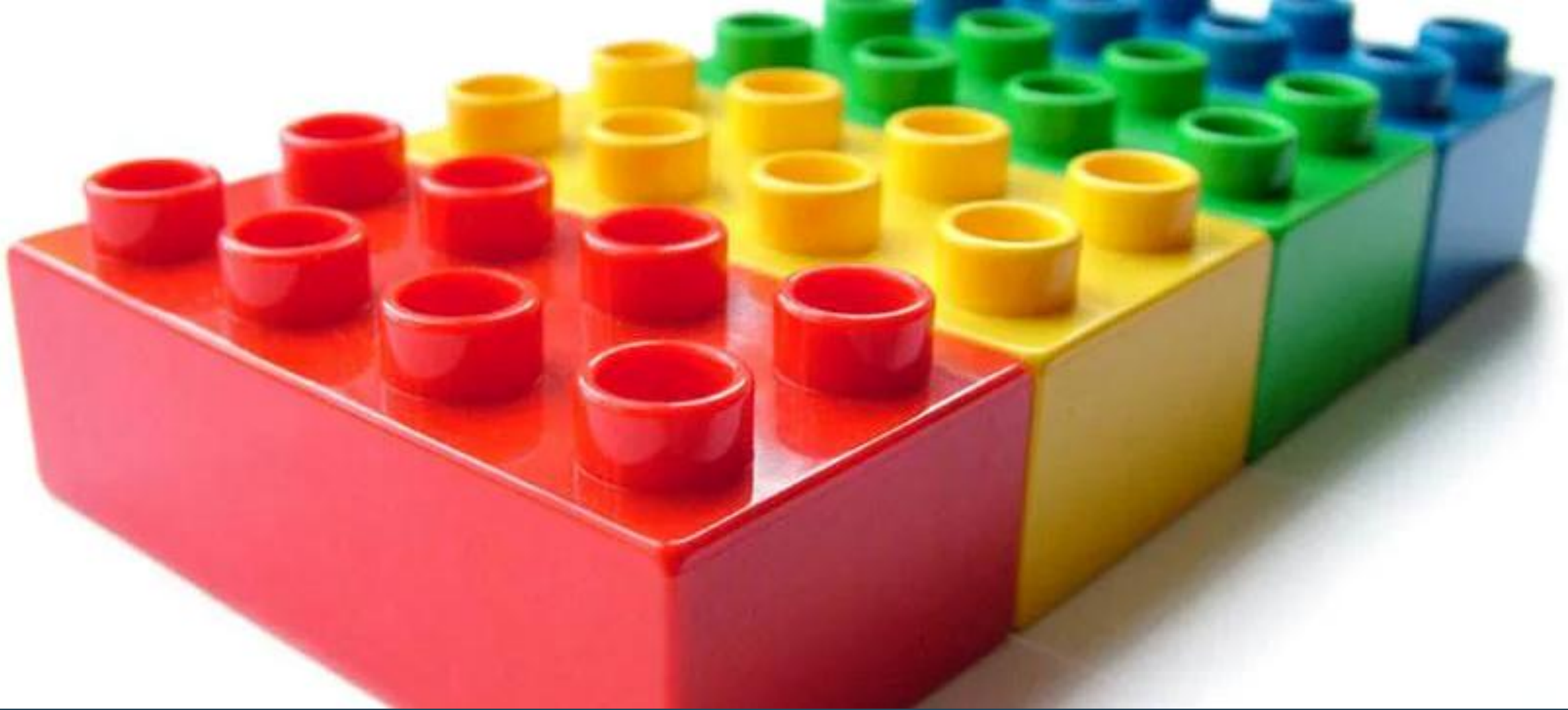


Introduction & Research context



Outline

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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?
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?
.....
disengaged

.....
highly engaged

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

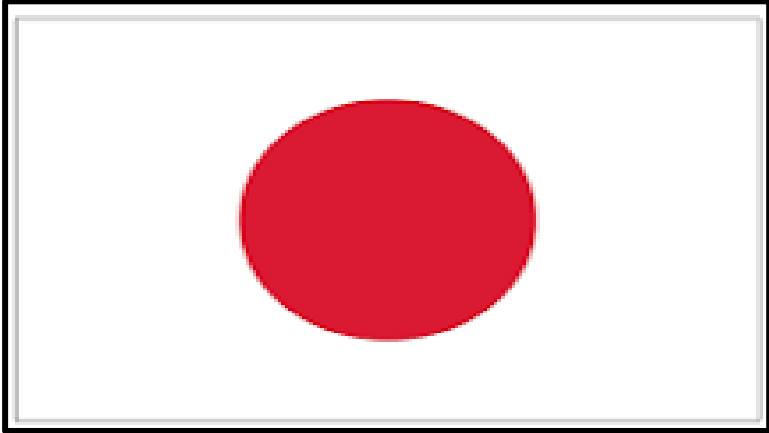
The reader

Pre-reading form

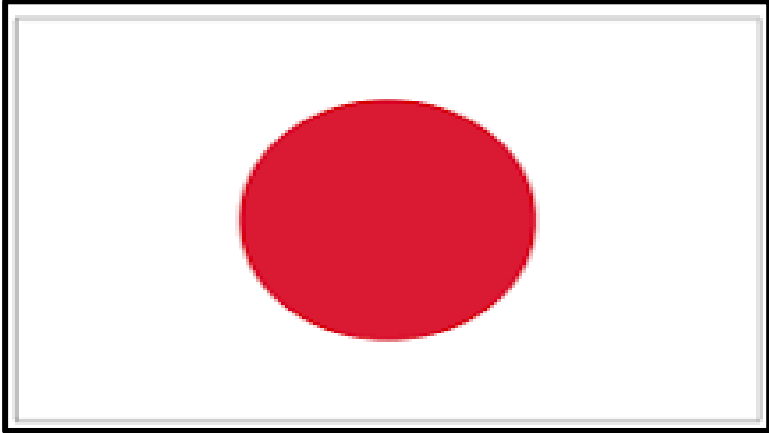
Post-reading form

The book	Jill is different			
	 Germany	 South Africa	 Japan	
Country				
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	

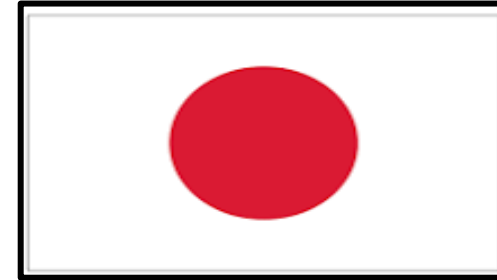
Methodology



Methodology



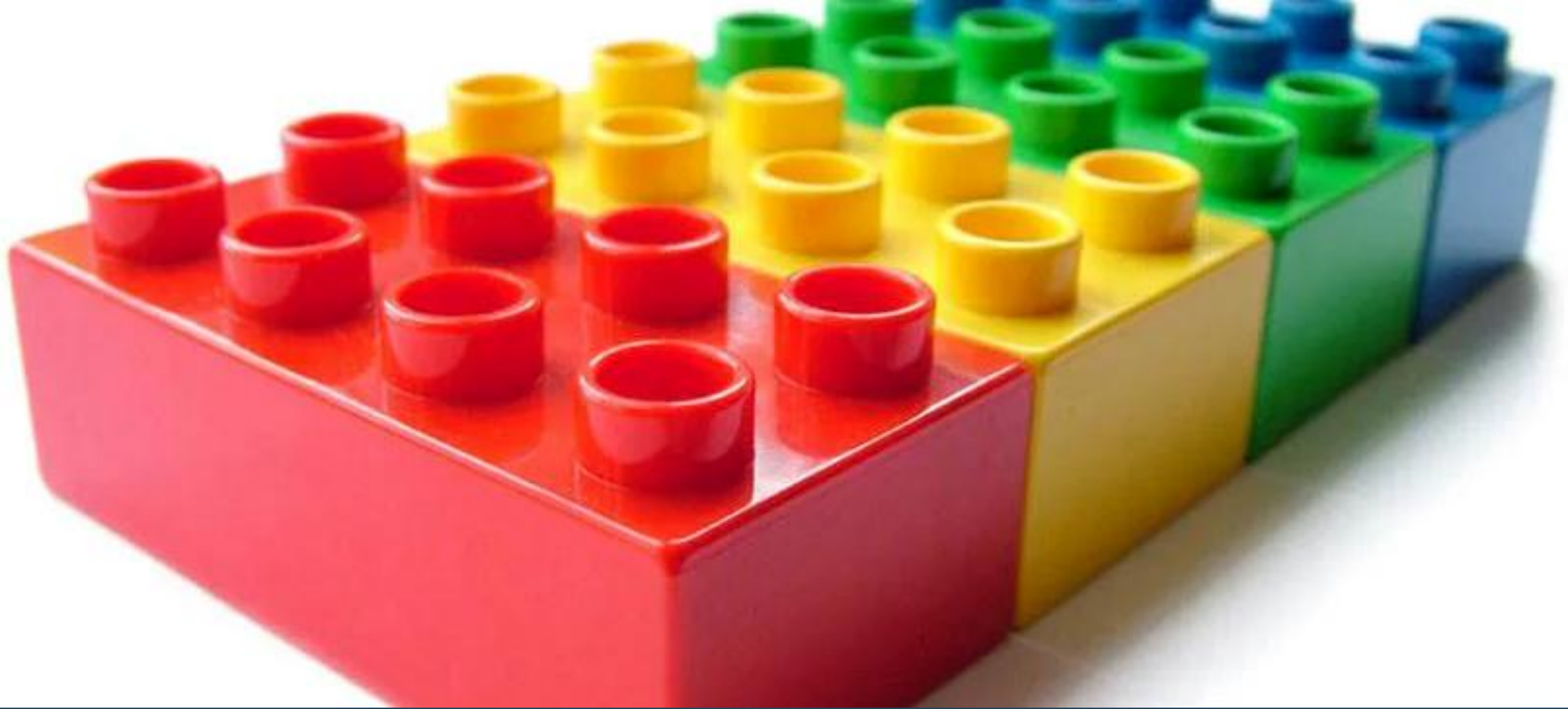
In all three countries, we purposively selected institutions likely **open** to reading a book on intersexuality, as the topic is often seen as highly sensitive and complex



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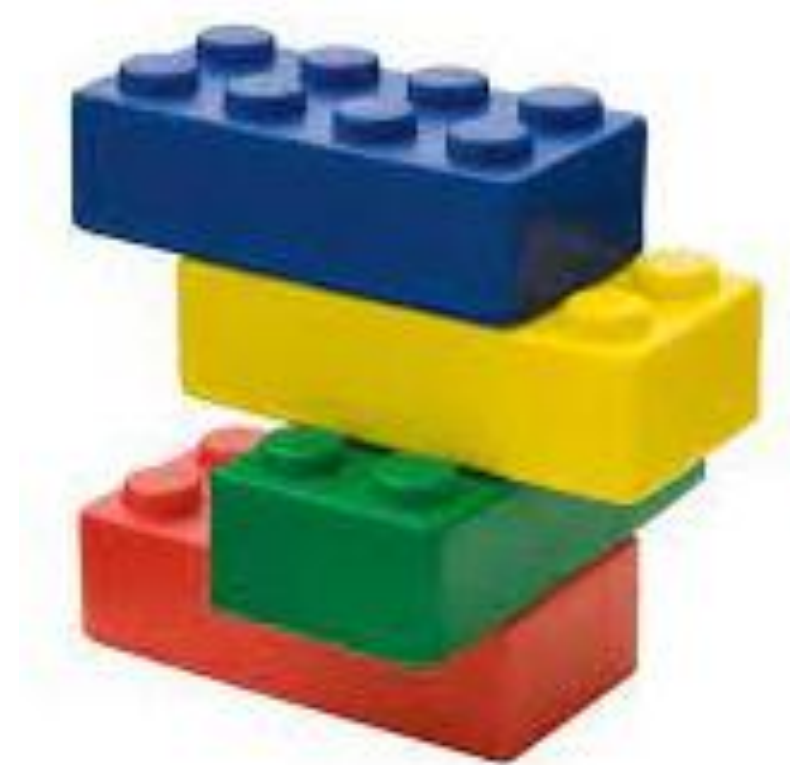
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Findings and Discussion

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 enjoyed the story and expressed enjoyment.

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

Well... that didn't actually happen!

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

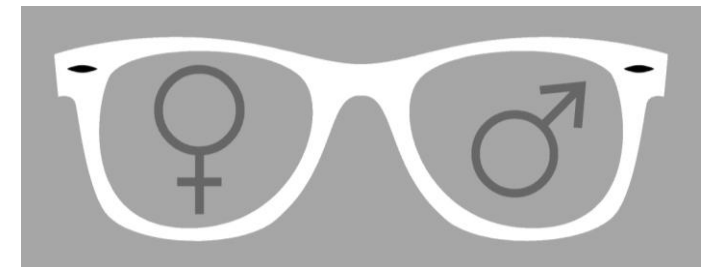
Children's discussions revealed that gender is highly significant in their daily lives, with gendered ideas already embedded in their social experiences



Reader: "Is pink also only for girls?"

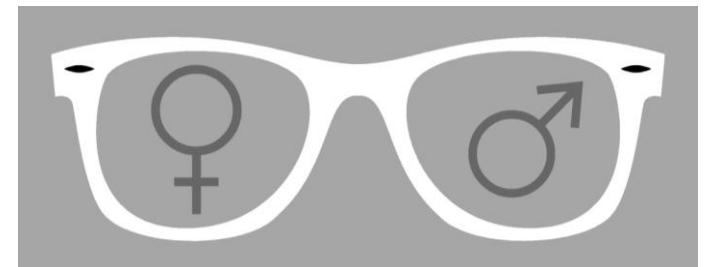
Boy 1: "No, I like pink!"

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)



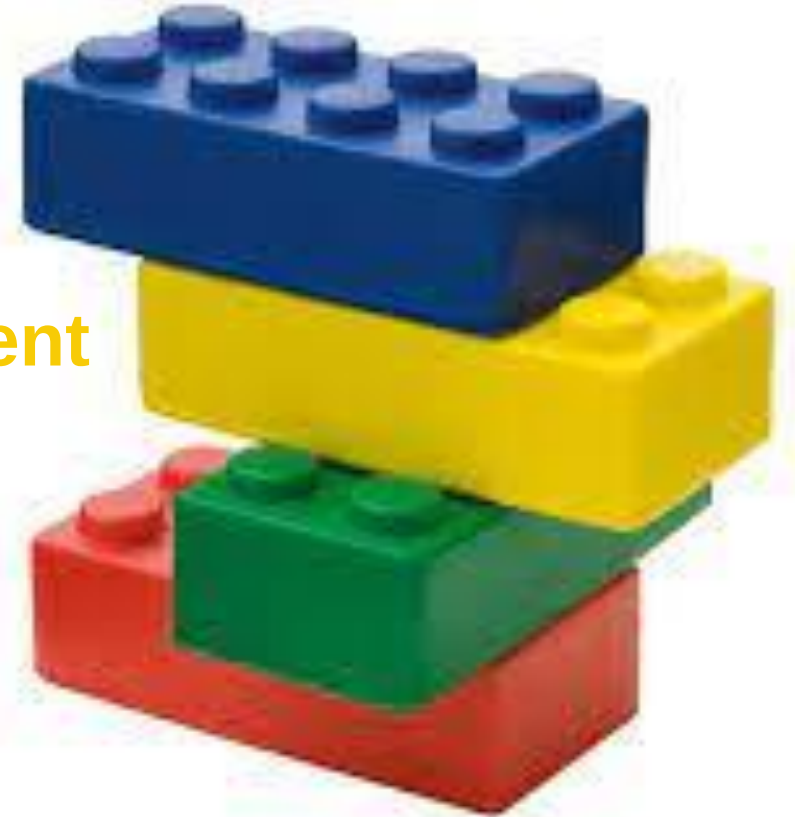


Interactive read-aloud method

Children's reactions and engagement

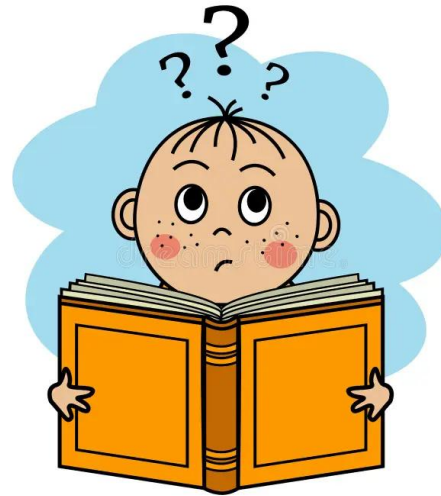
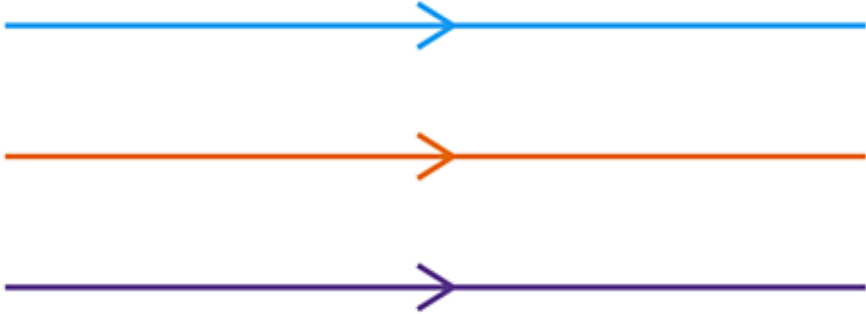


**Different
linguistic
contexts**



Diverse cultural and social contexts

Findings & Discussion



Findings & Discussion



Findings & Discussion



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



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

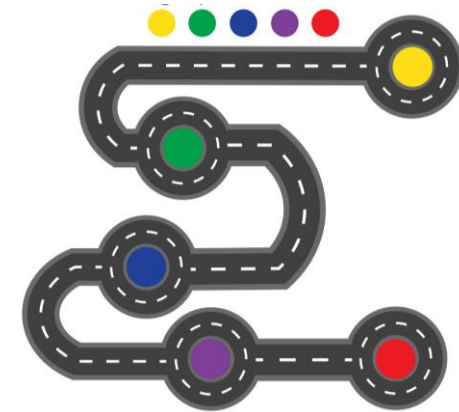
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Tim explains. And Carola attaches the two pictures to the board.



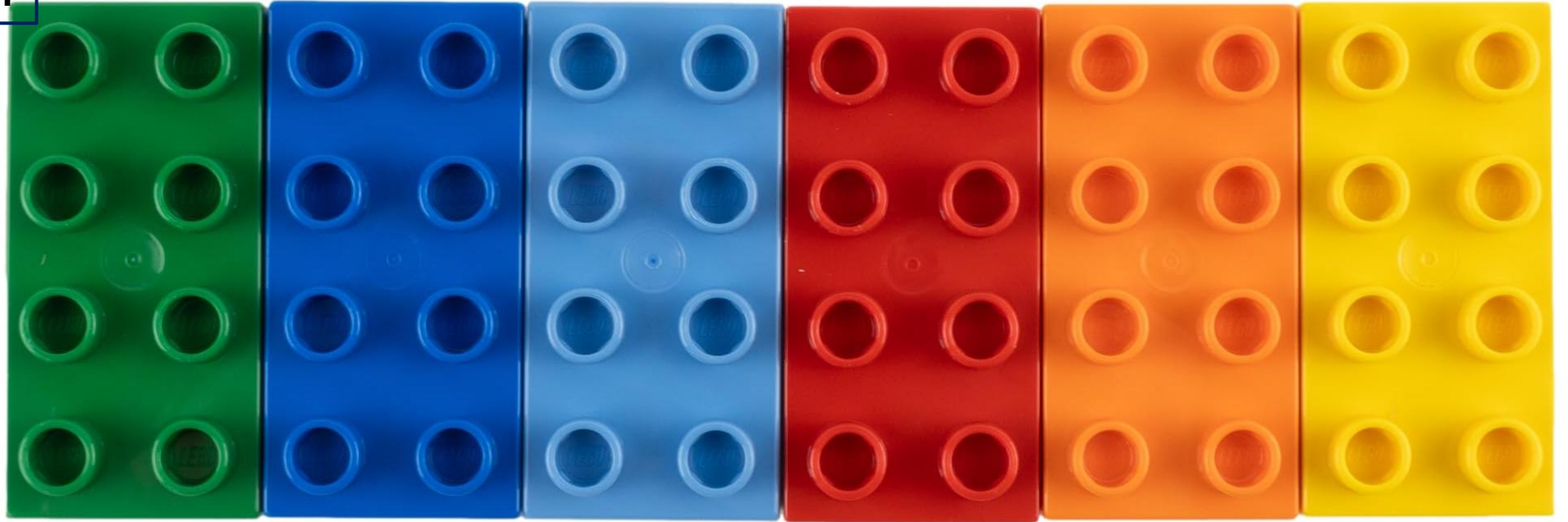
Binary gender practices: uniforms, gendered toilets, lining up by boys/girls.

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

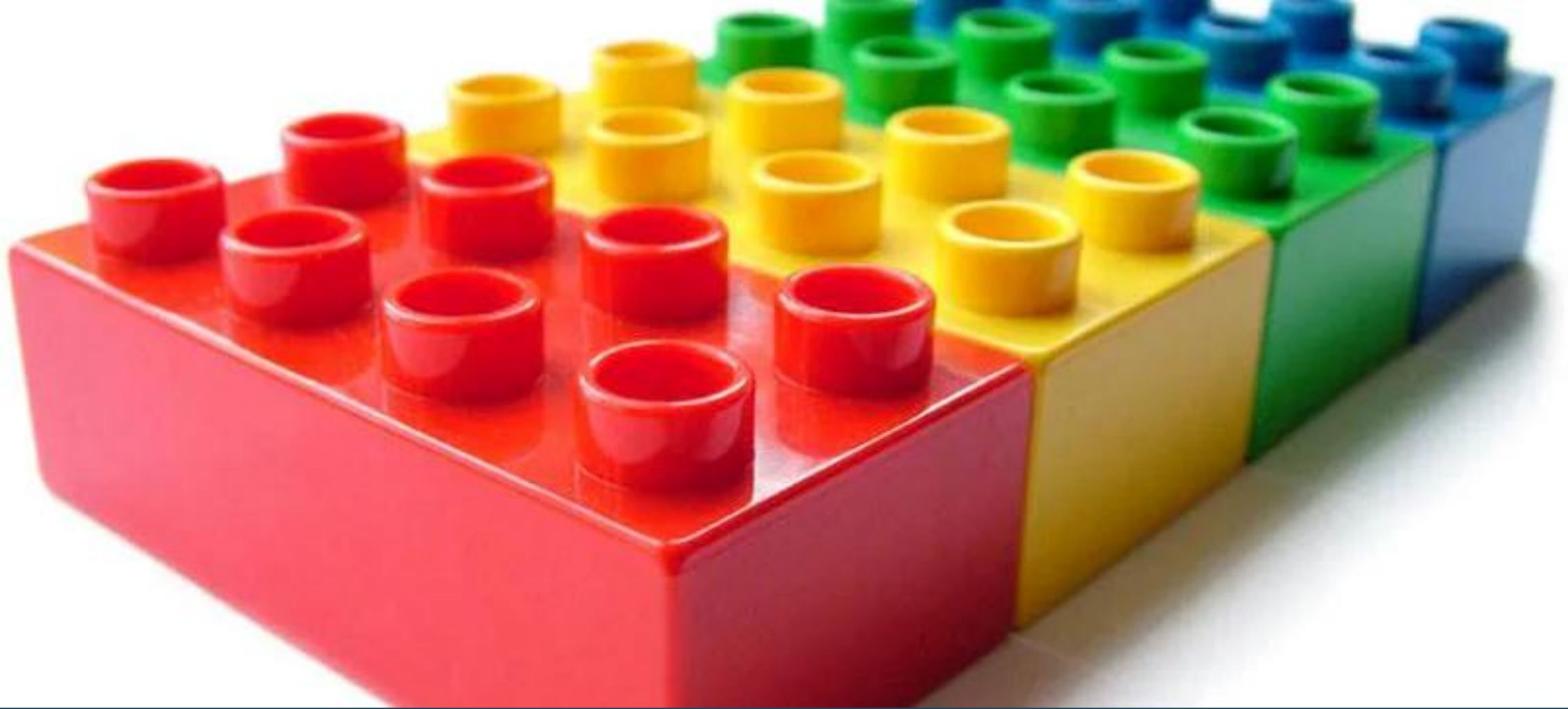
Diverse cultural and social contexts

**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.

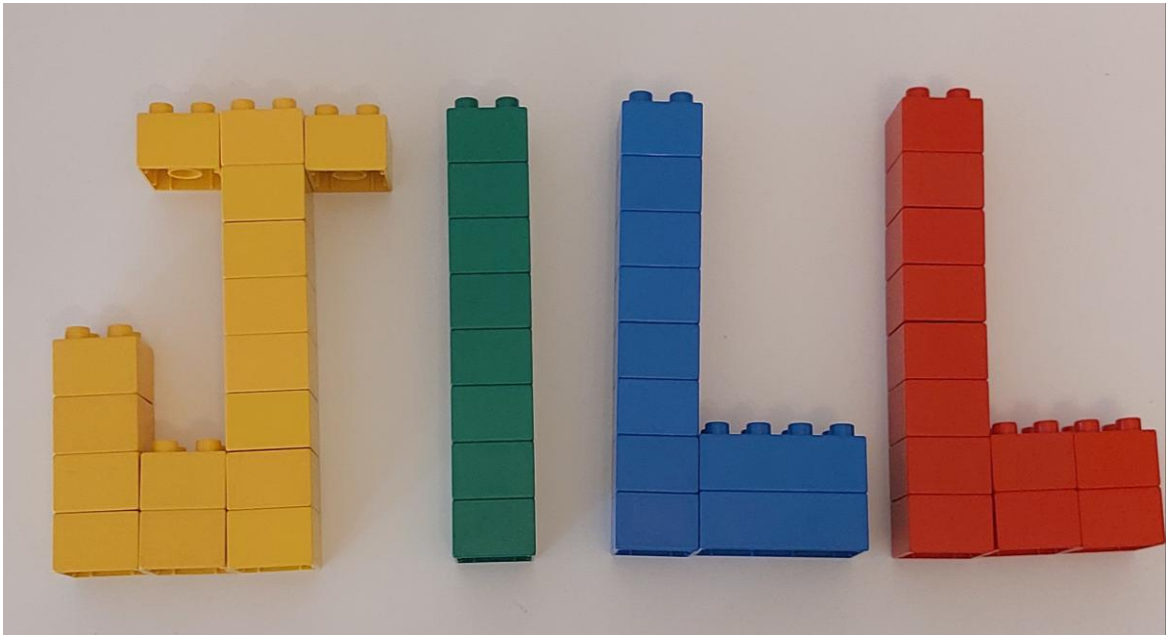


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THANK YOU!

Halah Elkarif
halahgaber@gmail.com

- **Prof. Tim Rohrmann**
- **tim.rohrmann@hawk.de**