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Abstract

This study explores how early childhood educators in Japan, Greece and the Czech Republic perceive intersexuality and how their beliefs shape pedagogical practice. It examines educators' responses to intersex-inclusive materials and the socio-cultural and institutional factors influencing their perspectives. Research on intersexuality (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Dreger, 1998) highlights the need for informed pedagogy, while studies on teacher beliefs (Skelton, 2012) emphasise their role in shaping inclusive practices. Extending these discussions, this study explores early childhood educators' perspectives on intersexuality within the ECE context. Grounded in social constructivist (Cole et al., 1978) and queer theory (Butler, 1990), the study examines how normative gender assumptions influence educators. Ajzen's (2001) theory of planned behaviour informs the analysis of how beliefs impact pedagogical engagement. This study employs a mixed-methods approach as part of the international Jill is Different project. Participants include ECE educators. Data collection involves questionnaires, with pre- and post-intervention surveys assessing educators' perspectives on intersexuality as presented in the children's book *Jill is Different*. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) is conducted using MAXQDA software to identify key themes and data patterns. Following the EECERA Ethical Code (2024), all participants provide informed consent. Data is pseudonymized, ensuring confidentiality, with institutional ethical approval in all countries. Preliminary findings suggest varied educator reactions to intersex-inclusive curricula. Institutional policies shape engagement. Different legal frameworks and cultural norms in the participating countries influence teachers' attitudes and behaviour on the topic. Findings highlight the need for professional training on intersex inclusivity in ECE, informing policy and curriculum development.

Keywords

teacher beliefs, intersexuality, early childhood education, cross-cultural comparison, inclusive pedagogy

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Cross-Cultural Differences in Perceptions of Intersexuality: Perspectives of Early Childhood Educators

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Intersexuality in Early Childhood Education: Educators' Perspectives

- Previous studies emphasize the role of teachers' beliefs in shaping inclusive practices (Skelton, 2012).
- Research on intersexuality (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Dreger, 1998) highlights the importance of informed pedagogy. This study extends these discussions by addressing intersexuality in early childhood education.

Theoretical Framework

Social Constructivism

- Learning and understanding are shaped by social interactions and cultural context.
- Knowledge about gender and sexuality is co-constructed through dialogue between educators, children, and the community.

Powell, K. C., & Kalina, C. J. (2009)

Queer Theory

- Challenges fixed, binary notions of gender and sexuality..
 - Highlights diversity of identities and experiences, questioning norms that marginalize non-binary and intersex individuals
- Butler, J. (1990).

Inclusive, reflective pedagogy for diverse identities





Frameworks in Early Childhood: Intersex Children

Country	Birth Registration	Education / Awareness
Czech Republic	Binary only (male/female); no non-binary or deferred entry	Topic marginalized; very low awareness in early education
Greece	Binary registration only	Public awareness increasing; activism influences education
Japan	Binary registration required in family registry	Recognition of intersex still limited; not covered in curriculum

Education systems do not yet consistently include intersex awareness in early childhood contexts.



The present study: Aims

- This study explores how early childhood educators in the Czech Republic Greece, and Japan perceive intersexuality and how their beliefs shape pedagogical practice.
- It examines educators' **responses to intersex-inclusive materials**.
- Grounded in social constructivist (Cole et al., 1978), queer theory (Butler, 1990), and Ajzen's (2001) theory of planned behaviour informs the analysis of how beliefs impact pedagogical engagement

The present study: Research questions

1. How do early childhood educators in the Czech Republic, Greece, and Japan reflect the intersex-related content of *Jill is Different* within their pedagogical practice? – QN and QL
2. What similarities and differences can be identified in educators' perspectives on intersexuality across participating countries- QL
3. What kinds of support and resources do educators see as necessary for addressing intersexuality in their practice?"



Methodology: Sample

- All participants were teachers in kindergartens and pre-schools (N=27) with diverse age, educational backgrounds, and lengths of professional experience.
- All respondents read the book in their country's respective language.
- All respondents received **written instructions prior to participation**. They were asked to read the picture book *Jill is different* **at least three times** in before answering the questions. The aim was to ensure **sufficient immersion** in the story and **reflection on its themes before responding**.
- In none of the countries, participants were familiar with the book. Only 1 participant from Japan and 1 from Czech Republic had read a similar book (about gender issues/intersexuality, etc.) to children before.
- Institution's level of involvement in sexual education for children.

Demographics	Greece	Czech Republic	Japan
N	11	13	3
Gender – Female	10	13	2
Educational level	BA = 6 MA = 4	BA = 11 Other = 2	BA = 3
Years of experience (Mean)	16.3	14.3	9



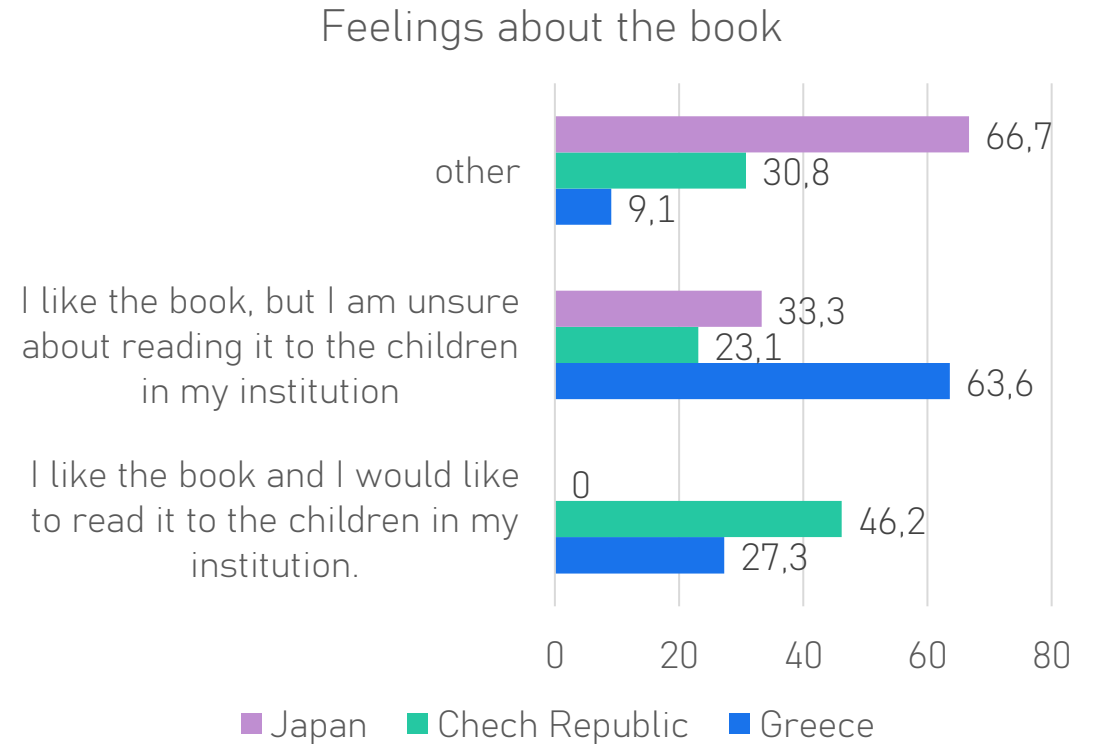
The present study: Methods

- Pilot data collection in the Czech Republic, Greece and Japan
- **Written reflections** collected from early childhood teachers
- Structured questionnaire with closed-ended, semi-closed, and open-ended items
- Closed-ended responses analyzed using **descriptive statistics in SPSS**
- Open-ended responses analyzed through **qualitative content analysis in MAXQDA**
- **Instruments prepared and tested for further data collection** in other project countries
- Following the EECERA Ethical Code (2024), all participants provided informed consent. Data was pseudonymized, ensuring confidentiality, with institutional ethical approval in all countries.

Results

RQ1: How do early childhood educators in the Czech Republic, Greece, and Japan reflect the intersex-related content of *Jill is Different* within their pedagogical practice?

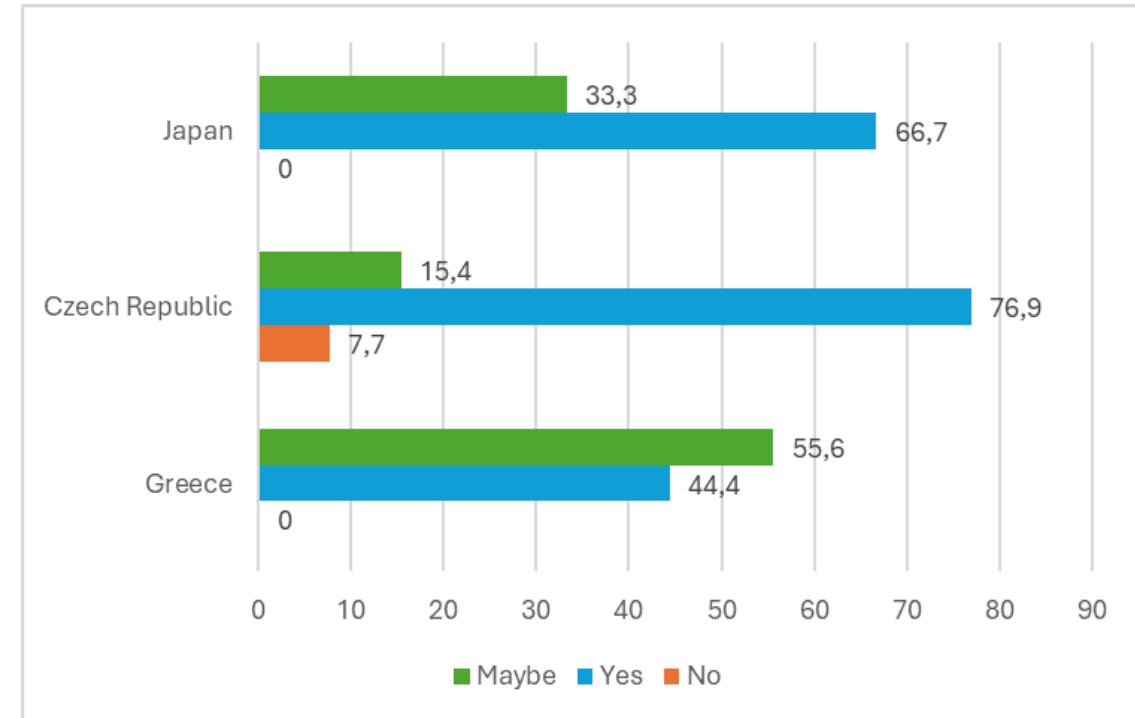
- Mostly **positive attitudes** toward the book
- Several respondents would **use it if the topic arose**
- Some noted **limitations** (e.g. few details, disliked illustrations)
- One respondent highlighted **social/religious barriers**
- Emphasis on the need for **better understanding before use**



Results RQ1

Possible benefits of reading this book to children

- Book supports understanding that **everyone is unique**
- Promotes **acceptance, empathy, and inclusion**
- Helps explain situations children may **not understand**
- Encourages **reflection beyond gender binary**
- Useful even if children do **not currently encounter** intersex persons
- Can provide **framework** for families discussing sexuality

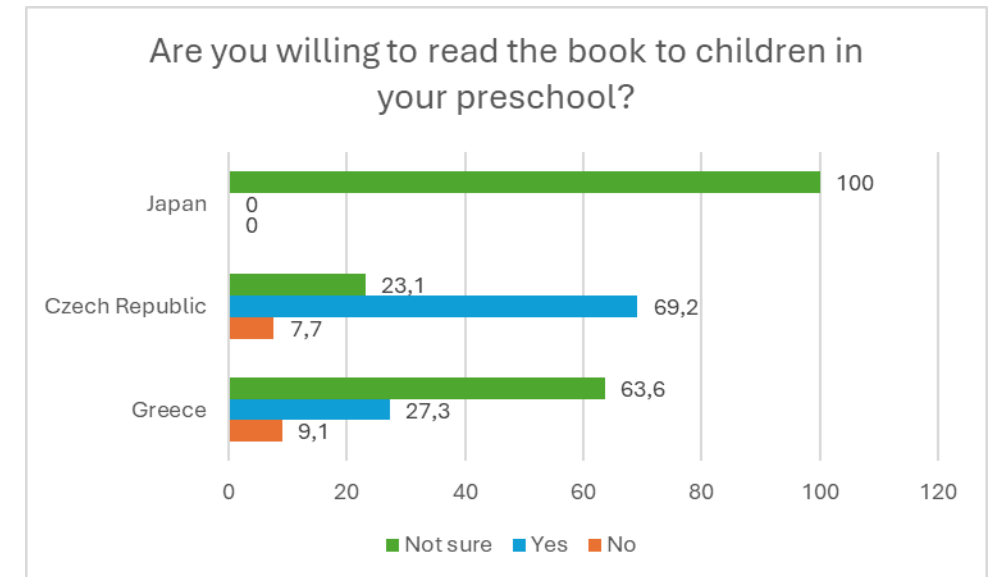


Results RQ1

Reading the book in preschool programs

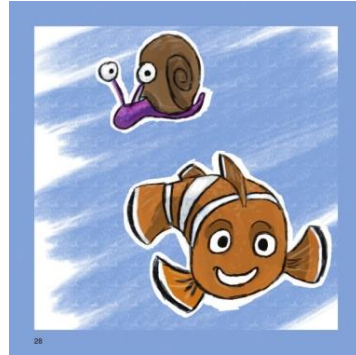


			How do you perceive the act of reading this book in your preschool institution?				
			Nothing special	Important	Sensitive	Risky	Other
country	Greece	Count	0	0	5	5	1
		% within country	0,0%	0,0%	45,5%	45,5%	9,1%
	Czech Republic	Count	2	4	4	1	2
		% within country	15,4%	30,8%	30,8%	7,7%	15,4%
	Japan	Count	0	0	3	0	0
		% within country	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%	0,0%	0,0%



Results RQ1 – Educators' reflections

Expectations about children's reactions to the book



The majority of the participants, across countries believe that **children would be curious**. The second most frequently referred to reaction was **confused** and the third **interested**.

Concerns about reading the book:

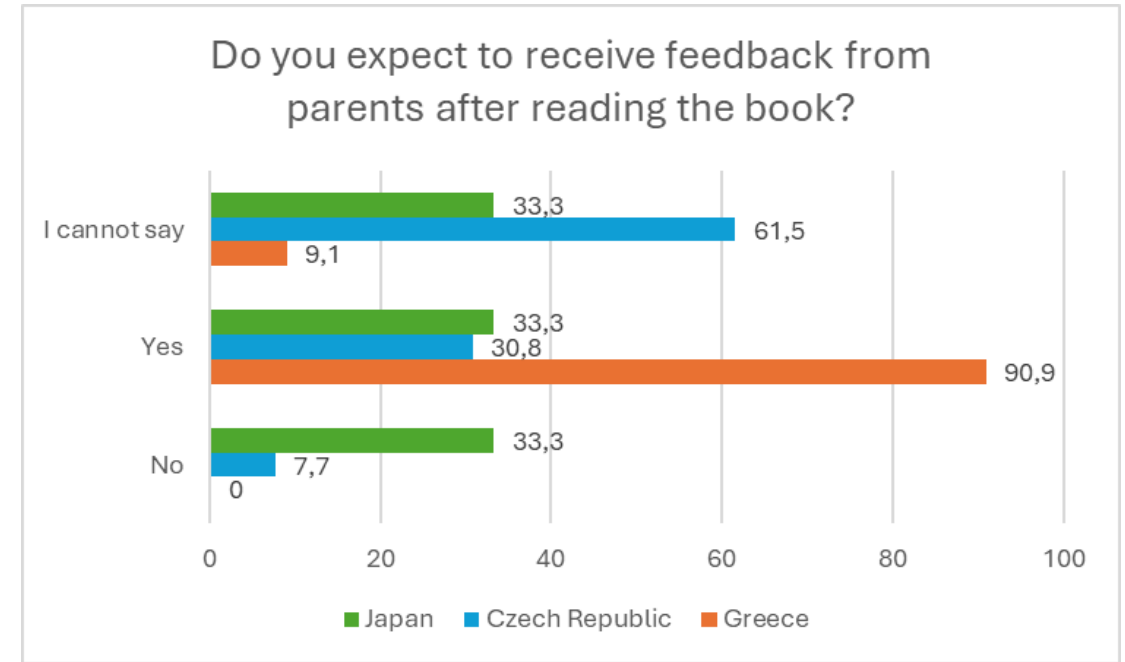
- How to answer children's **unexpected or sensitive questions**
 - Possible **negative reactions** from parents or colleagues
 - Concerns about **appropriateness of wording** for young children
 - Cultural/religious context (e.g. Christian or rural preschools)
 - Worries about children **misunderstanding or laughing** at the content
-
- Some respondents reported **no concerns**

Results RQ1

Expectations about parent's reactions to the book

Anticipated parents' reactions:

- Concerns about **age-appropriateness** and **explicit terms**
- Anticipated **questions and requests for explanation**
- Some expect **interest or curiosity** from parents
- Worries that **children might repeat unknown terms at home**, triggering parental concern



Potentially problematic elements for parents:

- Most commonly mentioned:
 - Anatomical terms (e.g. *penis*, *vulva*, *clitoris*, *testicle*)
 - Use of the word *hermaphrodite*
 - Body-related **illustrations**

Conclusion RQ1 – Educators' reflections

Positive attitudes:

- Higher ratings of the book's **appropriateness** and perceived **benefits**
- Working in institutions with **active sex education**
- Having **previous experience** with similar inclusive materials



Hesitations:

- Limited experience or exposure to gender-diverse content
- Concerns about **parents' reactions** or age-appropriateness
- Lack of institutional support or clear **pedagogical guidelines**
- **Personal factors** (e.g. age, years of experience, educational level) showed **no strong pattern**, though younger educators were slightly more open

Overall finding:

Willingness is shaped more by **institutional culture**, professional preparation, and perceived **support**, than by individual demographics

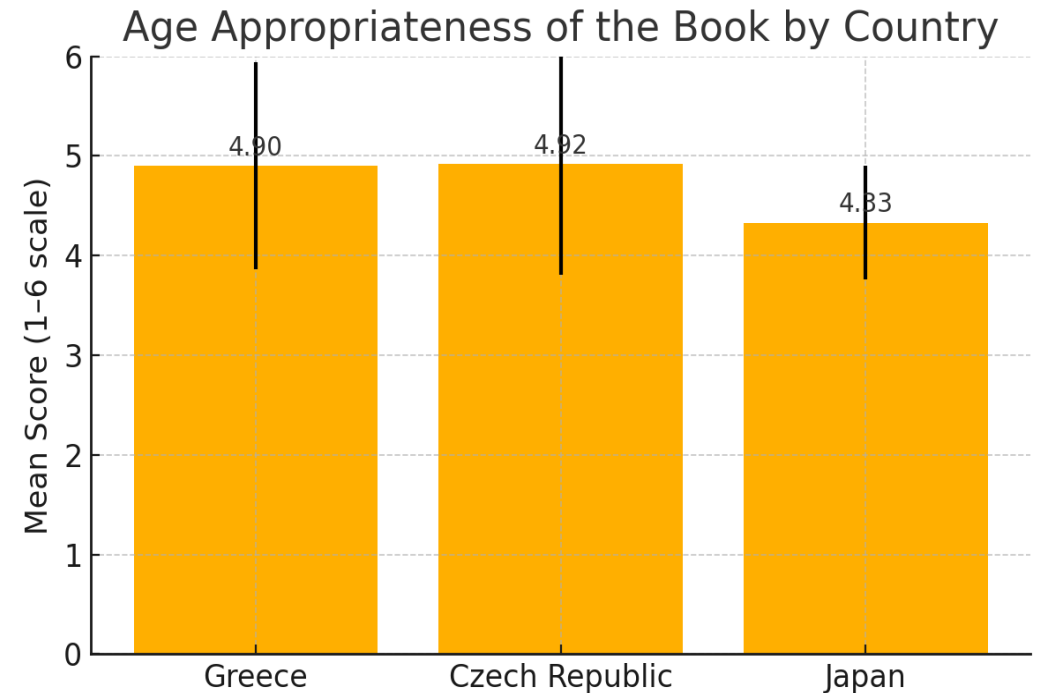
Results

RQ2: What similarities and differences can be identified in educators' perspectives on intersexuality across participating countries?

Institution's level of involvement in sexual education for children

On a 1 to 6 scale, the level of involvement is **low for all three countries** ($\bar{x}=2,22$), with Greece having the lowest level of involvement with children's sexual education and Czech republic having the highest level.

Participants across three countries believe that the **content and writing style of the book** is **appropriate for children** ($\bar{x}=4,85$).



Results RQ2 – Cross-country differences

CZECH REPUBLIC



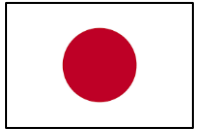
- Generally open to the book but cautious
- Concerns about **parents' reactions**, children's understanding, and terminology
- Emphasis on the need for **follow-up discussion** and preparation

GREECE



- Strong awareness of the **importance of diversity education**
- Book seen as a useful **starting point** for inclusion-related topics
- Some hesitation due to **lack of experience** or training

JAPAN



- Positive but **reserved reflections**
- Focus on how the book aligns with **existing values** (e.g. harmony, social sensitivity)
- Expressed **need for guidance** on using the book in practice

Across all countries:

- Educators appreciate the book's message
- Hesitations reflect cultural and institutional contexts
- Successful implementation depends on teacher preparedness and parental communication

Results

RQ3: What kinds of support and resources do educators see as necessary for addressing intersexuality in their practice?"

Institutional support

„ I have concerns about misunderstanding by other teachers (older ones) and parents (we are a village pre-school).“ (CZE respondent)

Targeted training, personal knowledge and confidence

„I realized that because of my limited knowledge, it's essential for anyone reading this picture book to first understand its content well.“ (JAP respondent)

Clear communication strategies with parents

"If I planned to read the book, I would send it to the parents in advance, explaining why I was reading it and warning them that the children would probably talk about it at home. Anyone who didn't want the book to be read could say so, and the child would not take part in the reading." (CZE respondent)

Conclusions

- *RQ1 Jill is Different* seen as a valuable tool for **empathy and inclusion**, but with concerns about age-appropriateness, terminology, and parental reactions.
- *RQ2 Institutional culture and teacher preparedness* shape willingness more than individual demographics.
- *RQ3 Educators highlight the need for institutional backing, clear guidelines, training, and communication with parents.*





Closing Reflections: Supporting Every Child

- Identity formation: challenges and resilience
- Social stigma: bullying, isolation, and discrimination
- Mental health: higher rates of anxiety and depression
- Need for supportive and informed educators



Resources

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