

Rohrmann, Tim; Elkarif, Halah; Loudová Stalczyńska, Barbora; Rentzou, Konstantina & Moosa, Shaaista (2025). **Translating gender – Linguistic and ethical challenges in research on intersex children**. Paper presented on the 33rd Annual EECERA Conference, Bratislava/Slovakia, 26.8.2025.

Abstract

This study examines linguistic and ethical challenges encountered in a cross-cultural research project on intersexuality in ECE and explores how these challenges were navigated in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Previous research has addressed methodological complexities in cross-cultural studies (Broesch et al., 2020; Liamputtong, 2008). This study investigates complexities of researching intersexuality in ECE across diverse cultural settings. A picture book on intersexuality was used as subject for a multilingual research process grounded in selfreflection and intercultural awareness (Akpovo et al., 2018; Brody et al., 2021). Researchers from several countries collaborated in translating a picture book on intersexuality into five languages and preparing a cross-cultural research project. Document analysis and reflexive multilingual group discussions were used to identify challenges within cultural and legal contexts. Ethical approvals in five countries revealed complexities arising from national, cultural, and legal differences in language and conceptualizations of sex/gender in ECE. Researchers adhered to the EECERA ethical code while critically reflecting on their experiences and the methodological decisions made to manage these challenges. Three key aspects are analyzed: linguistic challenges, ethical dilemmas, and methodological choices. The results highlight how gender is embedded in language and culture, also evident in ethical approval processes. Findings are analyzed through the lens of social, cultural, and religious assumptions and prejudices, and legal frameworks governing intersexuality and gender in ECE across countries. This study underscores the role of continuous reflexivity in refining research methodologies and offers insights into the sensitivities surrounding intersexuality in ECE, contributing to culturally and linguistically informed practices in crosscultural settings.

Keywords

intersex, language, gender, ethical approval, cross-cultural research

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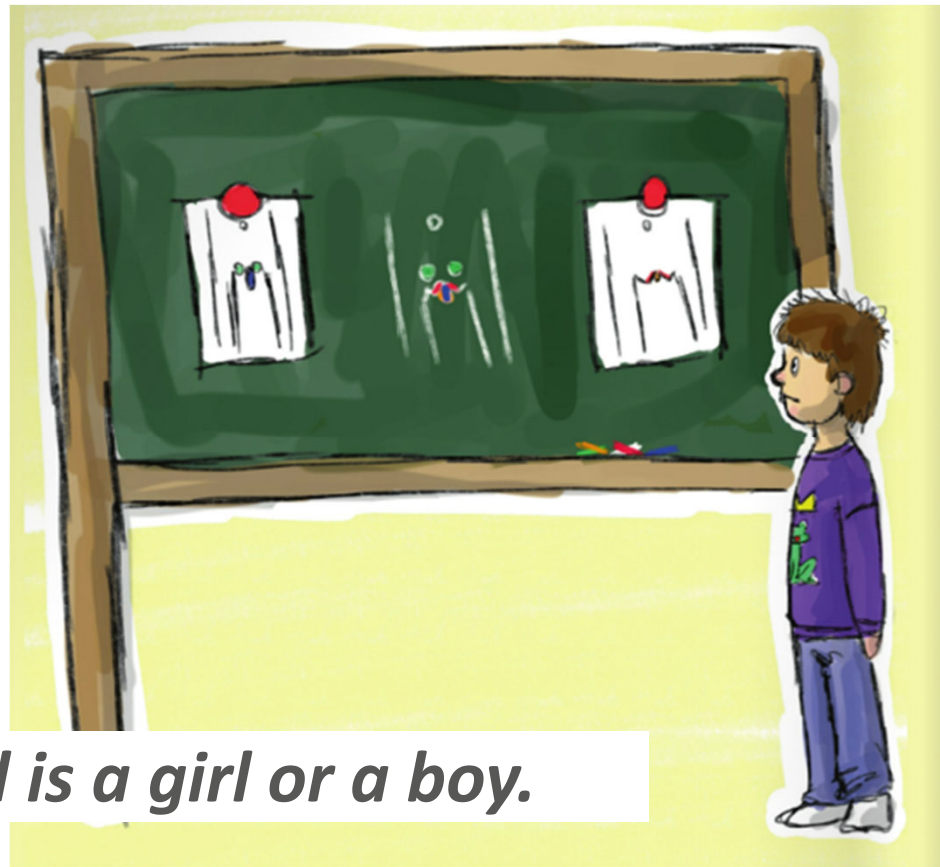
Translating gender: Linguistic and ethical challenges in research on intersex children

Tim Rohrmann, Halah Elkarif, Barbora Loudová,
Konstantina Rentzou & Shaaista Moosa

This is Jill!



The question.



They don't know if Jill is a girl or a boy.



1. Introduction & legal context
2. The picture book project
3. Chances and challenges
4. The translation process
5. Summary and conclusions

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Introduction & legal context

„Restoring biological truth“?



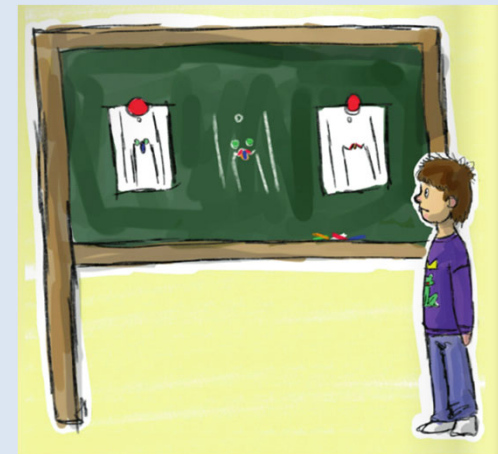
Policy and Definitions.

It is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female. These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality.

Presidential Actions. The White House, January 20, 2025

- (d) “Female” means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the large reproductive cell.
- (e) “Male” means a person belonging, at conception, to the sex that produces the small reproductive cell.

(Trump, 2025)



The truth of biology



Although most people are born *either male or female*, this is not true for all humans.

Intersexuality is a biological fact.

But:

- **The proportion of intersexual children is small –**
0.018%-1.7%, depending on the definition
(Sax, 2002; Bates, Chin & Becker, 2022)
- **There are many variations of intersexuality.**
Not all of these variations are visible
(Hauck, Richter-Appelt & Schweizer, 2019)

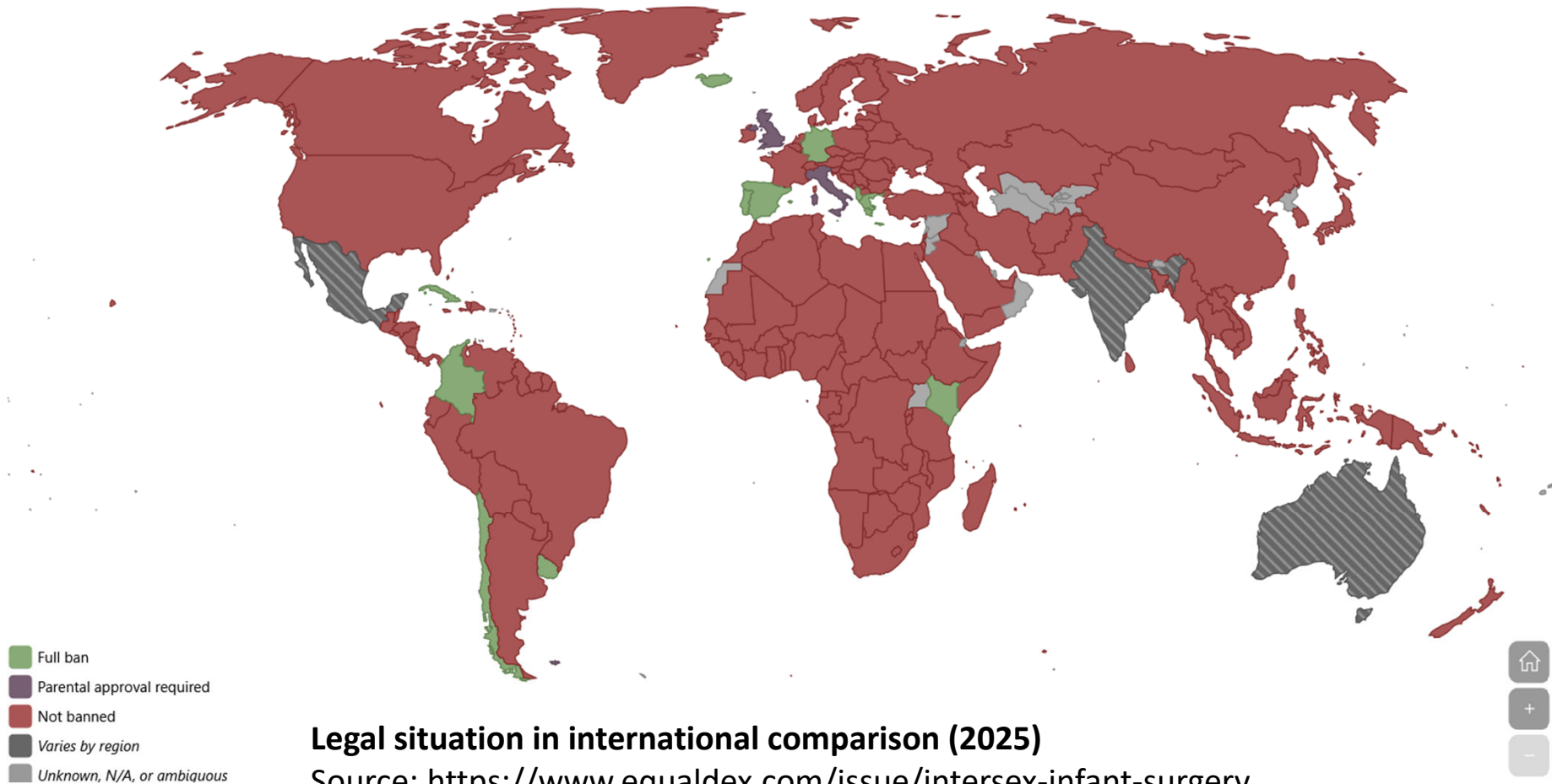
The legal context



- Early childhood intersex issues require approaches that respect children's rights and their future right to self-determination.
- Changes in the legal situations of intersex children are good starting points to ensure the well-being and the free development of intersex children, recognizing their right to bodily integrity.
- Although the legal situation of intersex people remains difficult in many countries, substantial changes have been achieved in several countries during the past two decades.
- Legal discussions regarding the rights and protection of intersex individuals will continue worldwide.

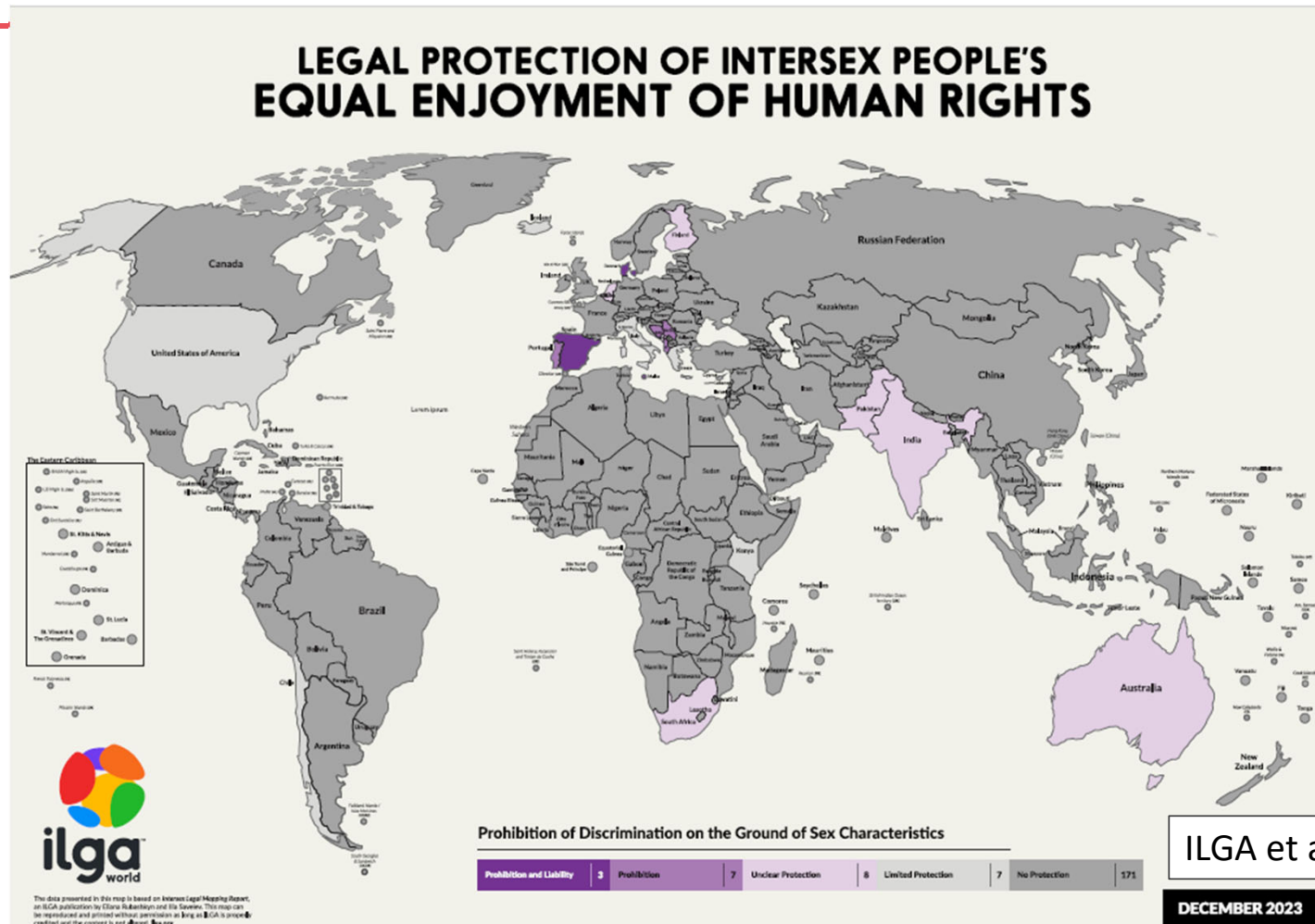
(Bauer, Truffer & Crocetti, 2020; ILGA World et al., 2023; Zeeman & Aranda, 2020)

Intersexuality: Bans of infant surgery





Intersexuality: Protection of Human Rights





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The picture book project

The idea: Translating gender



Discussing intersex with children in diverse linguistic contexts...

...within countries, e.g. with multilingual families

with migration background in Germany

...between countries: An international research project

A non-comparative approach to diversity.



A picture book...



- “Jill is different” is a German picture book by Ursula Rosen,
- exploring the concept of intersexuality within a children's context
 - challenging traditional gender roles that typically categorize individuals into binary genders and overlooking other identities, such as 'intersex' children.



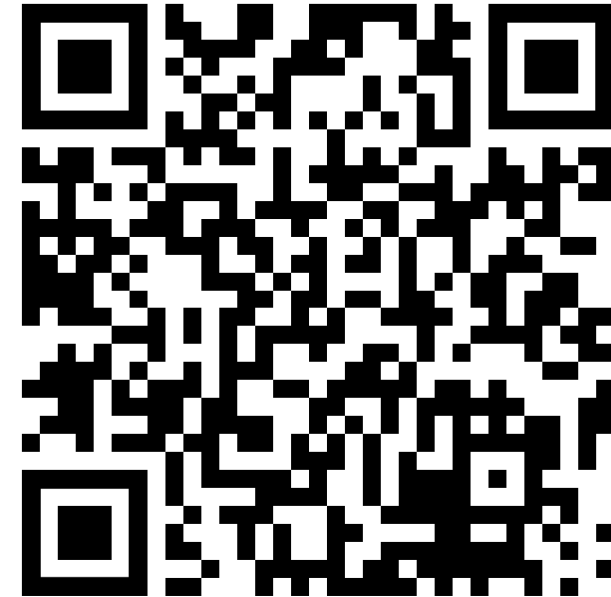
Ursula Rosen



...in many languages



The book is until now available in
13 languages



Point of departure



A “simple” question to start with:

Do children like the book

“Jill is different”?

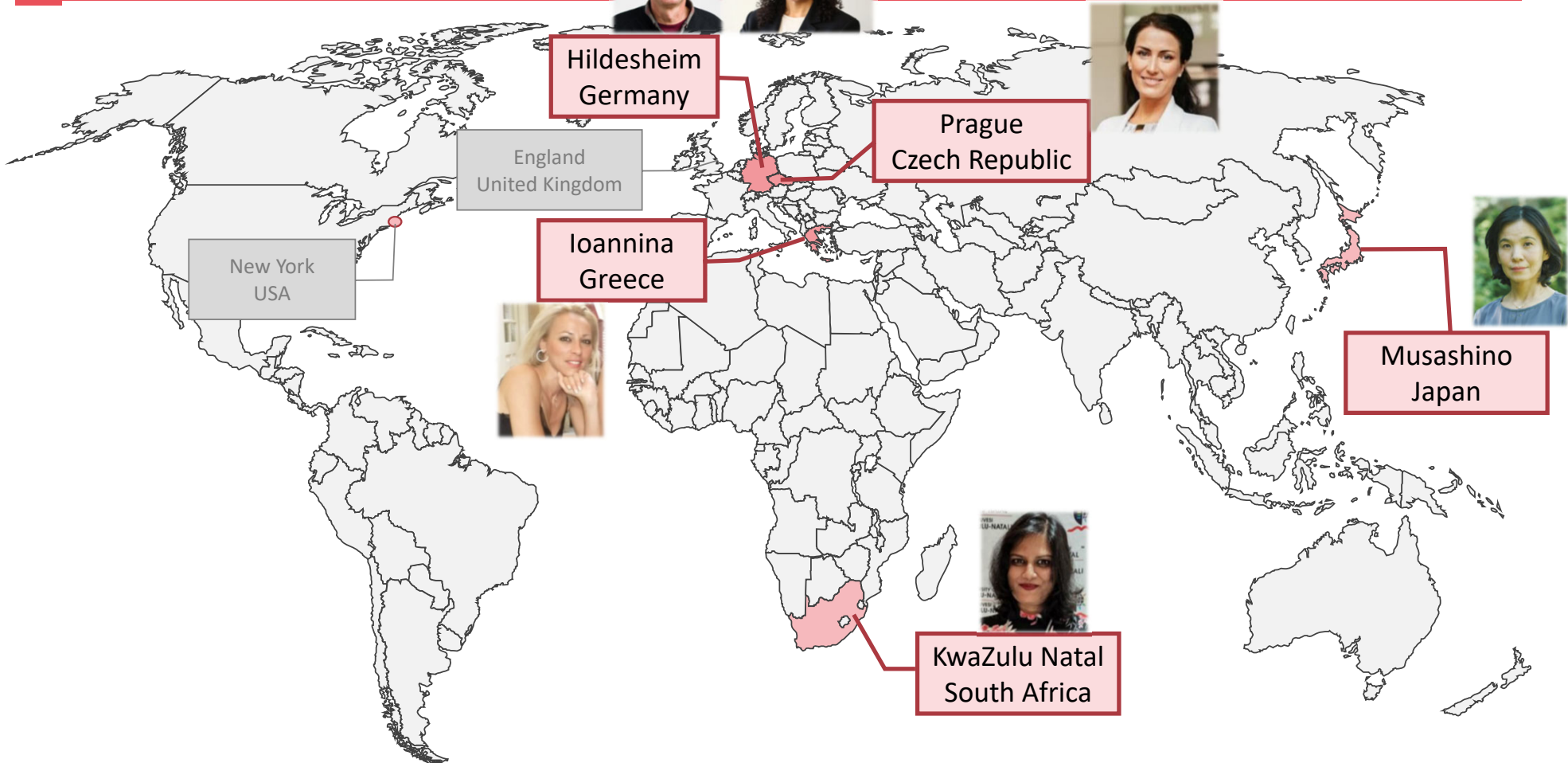
How do they react on the book?

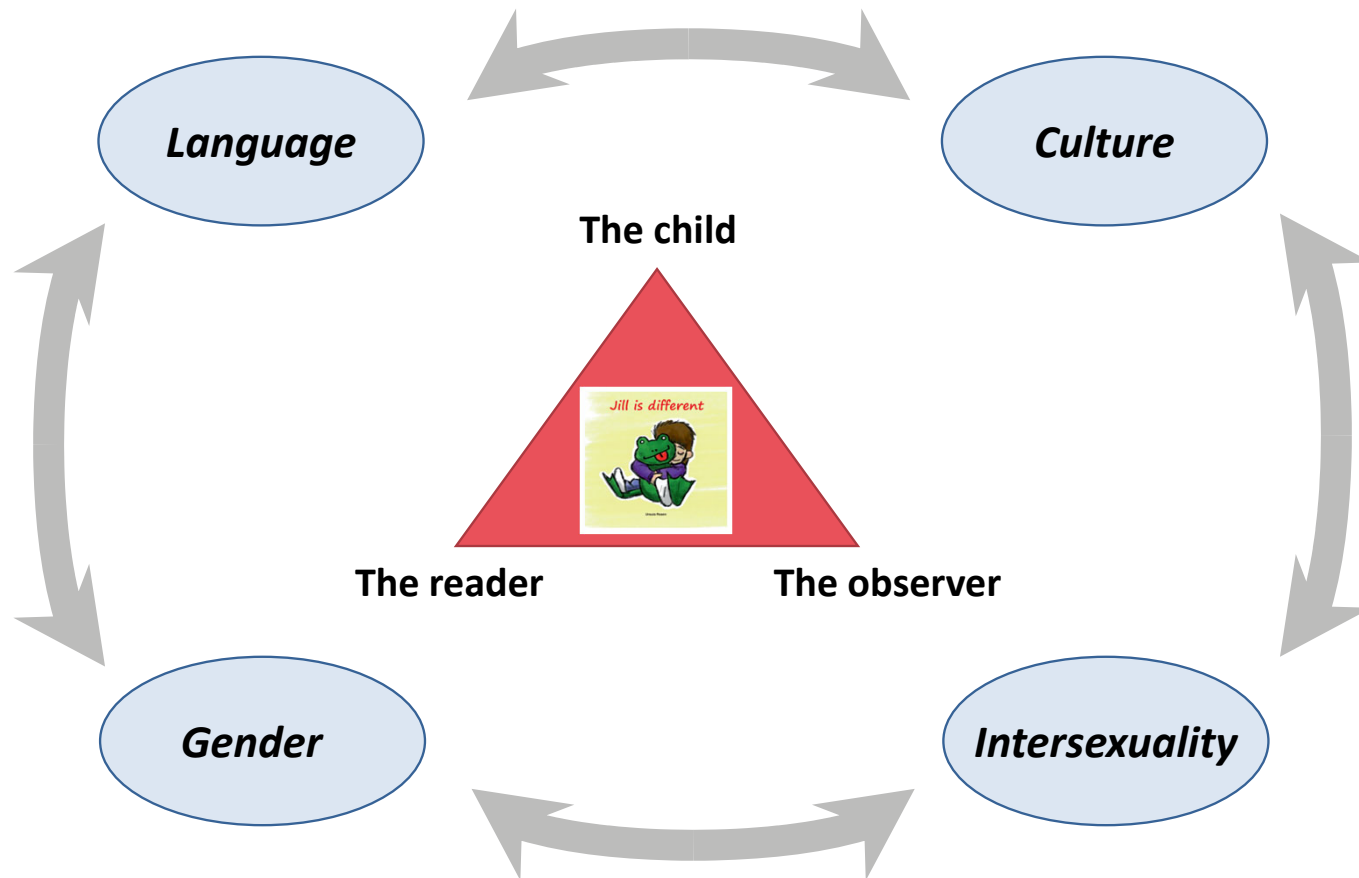
A comprehensive approach:

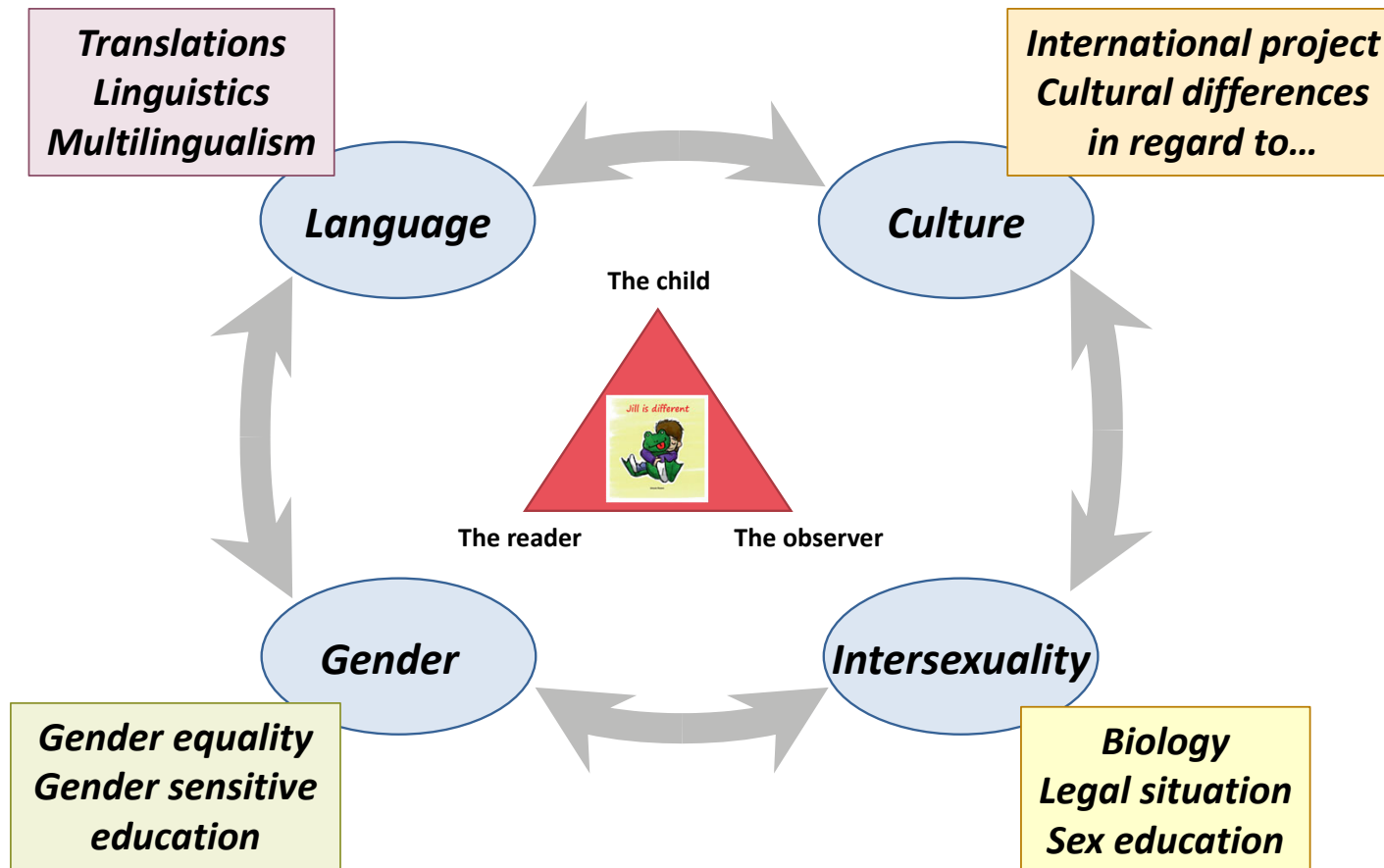
Let’s try to find an answer to this question in different cultural and language contexts.



The project team









- Document analysis of legal contexts with contributions of all research partners
- Translations and multilingual linguistic analysis of the picture book

Multimethodal approach, combining

- structured observations of “read alouds” with small groups of children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds
- reflections of practitioners, parents and within the international research team
- Documentation of reflections and meetings

Reading picture books with children



- Explore children's reactions to the book.
 - Identify children's comments, questions, and overall perception of the book.
 - Determine if the book leads to irritation among the children or is received as any other book.
- Assess how ECE educators/students perceive children's reactions to the book.
 - Determine if educators anticipated certain reactions from the children in their social and cultural context, and compare it with the findings.
 - Explore if educators received feedback from other adults, including parents, preschool directors, and the teaching team.



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Chances and challenges

Sex education – a sensitive issue



Two colleagues decided to discontinue taking part in the project.

I am very sorry to inform you that I have to withdraw my participation. This decision is mainly based on the cultural tensions regarding sexuality education in my country.
By participating in this project,
I would be putting my future career at risk.



Ethical challenges



Ethical approval was achieved at all participating universities...
... expect one international acknowledged university in the UK.

I have some difficulties in terms of the ethics application in the UK. There is a new guidance on relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) in England which will **ban teaching sex education to children under nine.**



***Update 2025:** Fortunately, the new guidance was revised; however, talking with pre-school children about sexual issues is still seen as problematic.*



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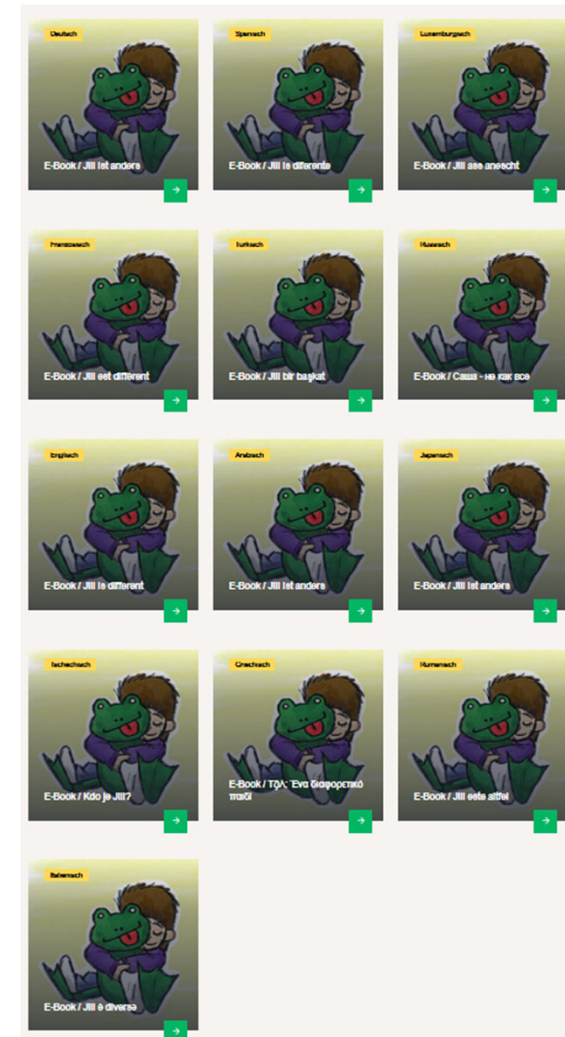
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The translation process

Overview on translations



- By author and colleagues, without further scientific reflection:
English, Spanish, Luxemburgish, French, Romanian, Hebrew, Japanese
- First project in Germany (2023):
Turkish, Arabic, Russian – most spoken second languages in Germany
- Current international project (2024-2025):
Greek, Czech, isiZulu
Every translation in the project was double-checked by bilingual experts.



Finding a gender-neutral name for Jill



The European name **Jill** derived from **Gillian/Julian**, used for both gender in 17th century.

Jill it is mostly used for girls, whereas **Gil** it is used for boys.

In Hebrew, **גיל** is a boy's name, whereas in Hindi, **नाम** is a girls name.

Some translations decided to keep the name **Jill** as an unknown name, so readers do not connect a specific gender to it.

Other translations decided for a name in the respective language which can be used for both gender, e.g. Russian **Саша (Sasha)**.



Grammatical challenges

- Languages differ in regard of how much, and in which linguistic contexts, words (articles, pronouns, adjectives...) are gendered.
- This was a challenge in all translations, although to different degrees.
We discussed such issues in multilingual teams and had to find individual solutions in every translation.
- The binary structure of sex/gender is deeply rooted in many languages' linguistic structures. Some languages do not allow to express non-binary forms of gender (identity).



Grammatical gendering of persons

Different concepts of grammatical gender of persons:

- In English, personal pronouns are gendered: *he/she*, but there is no gendered definite article.
- In German, a „child“ can be gender-neutral: *das Kind* - *es* („it“). However, gendered definite article are used: *der/die*
- In Arabic, you cannot use a person's name – like Jill – without gendering it.
- In isiZulu, personal pronouns are not gendered. „U“ is used as a personal pronoun for both genders.



German



Page	German
7	Neutral (es)
9	---
11	---
13	---
15	---
17	---
19	---
21	---
23	Maskulin (er)
25	---
27	---
29	Both (sie – er)
31	Maskulin (er)
33	---
35	---
37	Feminine (sie)
39	---
41	---
43	---
cover	Neutral (kind)

In most of the book, Ms. Rosen used **gender-neutral language**.

In some pages, in order to attract the reader's attention and interaction with the issue, she **switched between the feminine pronoun and the masculine pronoun** to express Jill's gender.

Linguistic differences



English



Page	German	English
7	Neutral (es)	Neutral (its, it)
9	---	---
11	---	---
13	---	---
15	---	---
17	---	---
19	---	Feminine (herself)
21	---	---
23	Maskulin (er)	---
25	---	---
27	---	---
29	Both (sie – er)	Both (she – he)
31	Maskulin (er)	---
33	---	---
35	---	---
37	Feminine (sie)	Maskulin (his)
39	---	---
41	---	---
43	---	---
cover	Neutral (kind)	Neutral (child)

Linguistic differences



Arabic



Page	German	English	Arabic
7	Neutral (es)	Neutral (its, it)	Maskulin
9	---	---	---
11	---	---	---
13	---	---	---
15	---	---	---
17	---	---	---
19	---	Feminine (herself)	Feminine
21	---	---	---
23	Maskulin (er)	---	Feminine
25	---	---	---
27	---	---	---
29	Both (sie – er)	Both (she – he)	Both
31	Maskulin (er)	---	Maskulin
33	---	---	سيتها للتشكيل ---
35	---	---	---
37	Feminine (sie)	Maskulin (his)	Both
39	---	---	Maskulin
41	---	---	---
43	---	---	---
cover	Neutral (kind)	Neutral (child)	Maskulin



Gender in the Arabic language

Arabic has a two-gender system that classifies all nouns as either masculine or feminine.

This gender system is grammatical rather than being strictly tied to biological gender, and it plays a huge role in the grammatic structure of a sentence. Since each noun is either masculine or feminine, this gender assignment affects the forms of associated words, such as adjectives, pronouns, articles and verbs.

**du/
you**

الطفل ذهب الي مدرسته حاملاً حقيبته
الطفلة ذهبت الي مدرستها حاملةً حقيبتها

**es/
it**

The child went to the school carrying the bag

An example from the first page



German:

Die Kinder der Regenbogengruppe sind aufgeregt, denn heute kommt ein neues Kind in ihre Gruppe. **Es** heißt Jill und sieht lustig aus mit den kurzen strubbeligen Haaren und den blitzenden Augen.

English:

The children in the Rainbow-Group are excited, because a new child will join their group today. **Its** name is Jill, and **it** looks funny with its short-tousled hair and shiny eyes.

Arabic:

??

There was no linguistic space in Arabic to express binary gender.

أطفال مجموعة قوس قزح متحمسون اليوم للغاية. إذ سينضم إلى
مجموعتهم طفل جديد يدعى "جيل" ويبدو مرحاً مع شعره الأشعث
القصير وعيناه اللامعتان.



The cultural traditions and connotations

Many terms in the array of sexuality carry mixed or negative connotations, *specific for cultures and sub-cultures*.

Examples:

- Hermaphrodit / hermaphrodite
- “Zwitter” (German)
- Kuntha (Arabic)



In the picture book, the rainbow fish is used as example for a hermaphrodite animal.

Born female, some individuals change sex to become male.



The cultural traditions and connotations

Talking about “sexual issues” with pre-schoolers is not common in most ECEC settings - depending on the cultural background.

- Is it allowed to speak with children about sexual issues at all, and specifically about details of anatomic differences ?
- Which terms/words can be used with children? How can you describe e.g.
 - an enlarged clitoris
 - testicles in the abdomenin child appropriate language?





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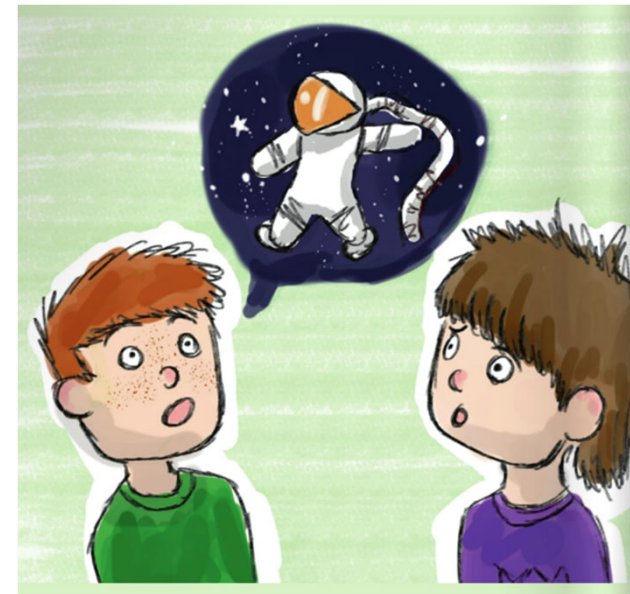
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Summary and conclusions

Conclusions



- Languages shape realities.
- Linguistic structures of gender shape gendered realities.
- Sensivities around intersexuality call for continuous reflexivity in refining research methodologies.
- International & multilingual exchange opens up new perspectives.





Questions for debate

So many questions!

Here are some:

- How do linguistic structures of languages shape our understanding of sex and gender?
- How can we talk with children about intersexuality?
- How can we overcome cultural barriers when discussing issues of sexual diversity (with children)?
- **What do children and educators think?**

A final quote



That's just what translation is, I think. That's all speaking is.
Listening to the other and trying to see past your own biases
to glimpse what they're trying to say.
Showing yourself to the world, and hoping someone else understands.
Kuang (2022, chapter 33)

German translation:

„Ich glaube, genau darum geht es beim Übersetzen. Darum geht es beim Sprechen. Einander zuhören und versuchen, an den eigenen Vorurteilen vorbeizugucken, um einen Blick auf das zu erhaschen, was der andere einem sagen will. Ein Stück von sich preiszugeben und hoffen, dass jemand anders es versteht.“

Kuang, Rebecca F. (2023). *Babel*. Köln: Eichborn. S. 722

... so this is just the beginning.



*Dialogue is essential
for further development.*





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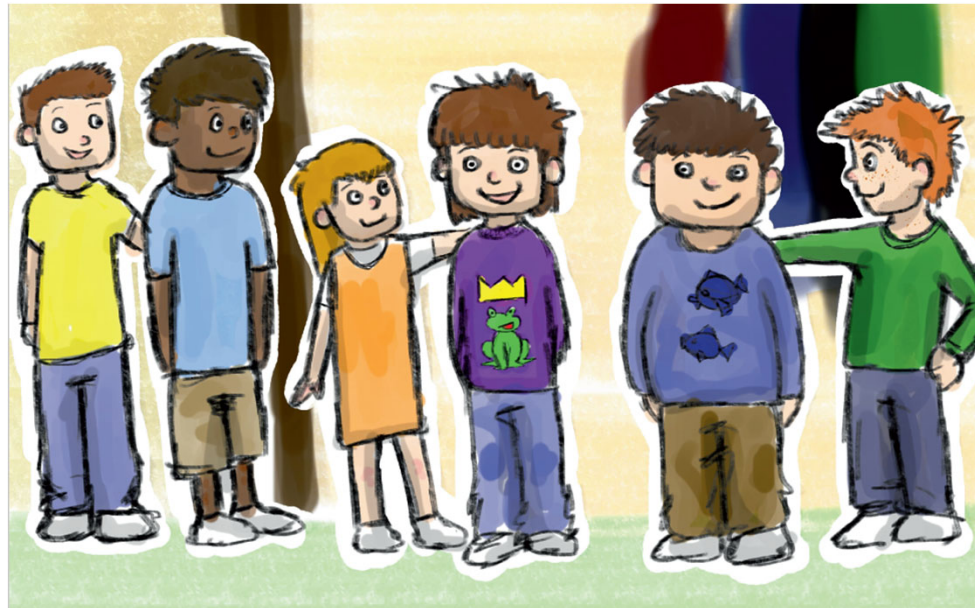
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Acknowledgements



Thank you for your attention!

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Images from Jill is different: Alina Isensee, © Salmo Verlag & Ursula Rosen



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