

A study of Greek pre-school teachers' perceptions of LGBTQ-themed literature in kindergarten classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present thesis aims to gain an insight into pre-school teachers' perceptions of the relevance of using illustrated books that include representations of same-gender families/relationships and address issues of gender expression that do not follow the normative gender categories in the classroom. The thesis was conducted within the interdisciplinary field of child studies, drawing from a social constructivist viewpoint and having queer theory as a point of departure.

Methods: A small-scale, qualitative study was designed, which included semi-structured interviews with pre-school teachers who educate four to six years old children in Greece. Five participants were interviewed, and the interviews were analysed with the use of thematic analysis. The questions asked in the interviews were oriented around the teachers' reflections on the use of a mentioned book in their classrooms, upon possibilities or difficulties in relation to the use of this kind of literature and finally, their ideas about children, gender and sexuality.

Results: The pre-school teachers did not discuss the implementation of pedagogical practices that are driven by interrupting heteronormativity, neither positively nor negatively. They did discuss an unwillingness to address topics about sexual minorities or gender non-conformity within their classrooms, because of the following difficulties: unreadiness, children's insensibility towards sexual minority topics, societal normative values. Finally, they discussed gender understood as synonymous to sex and through the binary of male and female.

Conclusions: The findings of the thesis support the ongoing silencing of some forms of sexuality or gender-related topics in early childhood education. Furthermore, they provide an insight into the difficulties pre-school educators come across when they face the dilemma of addressing topics that challenge heteronormativity. Moreover, the results of the study problematise dominant discourses about children, gender and sexuality. Consequently, this study presents in-depth qualitative knowledge of a small group of pre-school teachers and motivates further research on gender education that Greek children receive.

Keywords: interrupting heteronormativity; gender; preschool; LGBTQ-themed books; queer theory

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INTRODUCTION

New non-traditional types of parents and families begin to emerge both in reality and in book representations, especially after the legalisation of gay marriages in many countries (Yiannikopoulou & Sakellaki, 2011, p. 1). Yiannikopoulou (2013, p. 179) notes that original or translated books, that address homosexuality, as well as theoretical texts on homosexuality in children's and teenagers' literature are absent in the Greek reality, with only a few exceptions. In an attempt to discuss the absence of same-gender parents in Greek illustrated children's books Yiannikopoulou and Sakellaki (2011, p. 1) argue that LGBTQ-themed books sometimes meet an enthusiastic reception, and sometimes a fierce reaction, most of the time before they are even read, echoing the attitudes of adult readers towards homosexuality in general. This is how two opposing sides are formed: on the one hand, the homosexual community decides to stop hiding and on the other the advocates of a traditional morality who predict the damage of children. In both cases, it is evident that there is a tendency of children's literature to be judged based on ideological criteria instead of its aesthetic quality (Ibid).

Until recently, the lack of Greek laws and provisions that were relevant to gender non-conformity was apparent. On December 2015, a bill allowing civil partnership agreements between same-gender couples passed (Maltezou and Kalovyryna, 2015). Also, in October 2017, the Greek Parliament voted on legal gender recognition, granting people in Greece the right to reform their legal gender without prior medical interventions (BBC News, 2017). The same law grants minors above 15-years-old the same right (Ibid). Issues about sexual minorities are currently present within political discourse. Thus, there is an ongoing process of establishing sexual minority rights.

Moreover, the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs (2016) announced that a thematic week would take place during the school year in order to inform adolescent students about issues such as sexual orientation and gender identity. Current discussions in media reproduce that several political parties and the powerful Orthodox church have been strongly opposing those policies and practices (for instance: Psarra, 2017). It is argued that concepts that are out of the scope of heteronormativity oppose the patriotic and religious perceptions of Greek society strongly (Sailakis, 2018, p. 80). Furthermore, teachers argued that they were not ready or educated to address issues related to children, gender and sexuality (Psarra, 2017). As a result, the discussion on sexual minority issues and heteronormativity interruption has been getting publicity on Greek media and is at the centre of attention.

Despite this new addition to the Greek curriculum for secondary education, there is no change made in the curriculums for other stages of compulsory education, that is early childhood education and

primary education. According to the Greek Curriculum for the Kindergarten school (2011, p. 67), pre-school teachers should address issues that are related with children's personal and social development and should offer opportunities for children to learn more about themselves and the others, and educate them on sexuality issues and the ways they should manage their relations with people who are close to them (Ibid, pp. 79 - 80). To specify, the Greek Curriculum for the Kindergarten school states that pre-school teachers should work with issues related to sexuality (2011, p. 80), in terms of the establishment of a healthy relationship with issues related to children's own sexuality, self-protection and respect for the limits set by the rights of the other (Birbili, 2014, p. 140). However, neither the curriculum nor the guidelines' book (Birbili, 2014, p. 128), that complements it, include details of what kind of sexuality-related topics should be addressed. Considering the lack of information and guidelines about the issue, it might thus be proved challenging for pre-school teachers to gain knowledge about how to do this or what should be included or excluded when sexuality is addressed in the classroom. That is why it is essential to conduct more research about pre-school teachers experiences and reflections around this issue in order to understand what the requirements in the curriculum mean in the educational practice. This research intends to make a specific contribution to the field of gender and sexual minority education.

Considering the raised awareness about sexual minority issues, and that children's understanding of gender expression may be influenced since their very early years, this study concentrates on investigating the pedagogical potential to addressing LGBTQ-themed illustrated books in the kindergarten classroom. Overall, my interest is focused on young children in pre-school settings, and hopefully, this study will contribute to the research upon the gender and sexuality minority education they receive. Books with illustrations of adults and children who do not respond to society's norms of gender, constitute the most controversial category of children's books summarised under the general term LGBTQ¹ – themed books (Yiannikopoulou, 2013, p. 175). Hence, I will refer to this kind of literature as LGBTQ-themed in this text. According to Yiannikopoulou (2013, p. 71), LGBTQ-themed books can be an important topic of study as it highlights many of the fundamental issues of society such as the consideration of what is appropriate for children and who is the one who will define it.

¹ In this study the acronym LGBTQ will be used. LGBTQ is an abbreviation form that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS

This study aims to examine how pre-school teachers reflect on and implement pedagogical approaches that address issues related to gender non-conformity. More specifically, the focus is to report pre-school teachers' perceptions of using illustrated books that include representations of same-gender families/relationships and address issues of gender expression that do not follow the normative gender categories. The present interview study seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do Greek pre-school teachers perceive the use of LGBTQ-themed resources in their classrooms?
- What possibilities or difficulties do they describe in relation to the use of LGBTQ-themed literature?
- What ideas about children, gender and sexuality are construed in the teachers' reflections?

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is a small-scale qualitative study that draws on the field of interdisciplinary child studies and has a starting point within the theoretical perspective of constructionism and queer theory. Discourses related to children as engaged in the construction of their worlds; adult's sexuality; gender; and children's sexuality as made sensitive, together with the concept of heteronormativity provided a theoretical framework for the present study. In this section, I will introduce the previous research and theory that were important to the framing of this study.

Interrupting heteronormativity in education

There is significant research of gender, children and childhood in relation to the deployment of LGBTQ-themed resources in classroom or upon challenging heteronormativity in education (see DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; DePalma, 2013; Killoran & Pandleton Jimenez, 2007; Rooke, 2010; Ryan et al., 2013 as cited in Martino & Cumming-Putvin, 2016). As already mentioned, heteronormativity will be discussed as a basic concept of the study. In fact, I will present research concerning heteronormativity within the context of early childhood education with a focus on interrupting heteronormativity. The term heteronormativity is used to position heterosexuality as normal (Surtees, 2008, p. 11), natural and unquestionable (Gunn, 2011, p. 280). Heteronormativity concerns the processes and practices through which ideas about heterosexuality are normalised (Warner, 1993, cited in Blaise, 2009, p. 457). According to these processes, heterosexuality is centred as normal, and its function depends on the existence of homosexuality as abnormal (Surtees, 2008, p. 11).

Sumara & Davis (1999, p. 202) suggest that normalised forms described by heteronormativity can be interrupted, for example, by LGBTQ-families becoming more visible and more represented in media or literature. In relation to that, heteronormativity has been reported as a social phenomenon that is actively negotiated (Robinson, 2005, p. 20). For example, gay and lesbian parents and families are often excluded from definitions of what is considered a family (Ibid, p. 19). Therefore, heteronormativity has often been critiqued as being ultimately about power (Ibid) and that it draws attention away from current social, economic and political discourses. Accordingly, I use the term gender instead of sex, in this study, on the ground that it is gender rather than sexuality that is visible to others. Drawing from a comment in Surtees and Gunn (2010, p. 43), I find this necessary, in order to avoid the tendency, to use the two terms interrelated within a heteronormative worldview.

Drawing back to previous literature that has been produced in relation to interrupting heteronormativity in educational settings, Martino & Cumming-Putvin (2016, p. 812) have generated a series of case studies that address the complexity of using LGBTQ-themed resources in the elementary classroom and offer an extensive literature review upon addressing interrupting heteronormativity in education (Ibid). In one of their studies, Martino & Cumming-Potvin (2015, p. 79), discuss a case study of how a teacher deploys a reading practice that could address the thinkability of gender variant in an elementary classroom and argues that it could be challenging to address sexual and gender minority issues in elementary school. They further argue that teachers may find it especially challenging to develop a pedagogical plan with the appropriate resources due to personal perceptions of gender performativity (Ibid, p. 94), or due to “the dominant discourses that position children as sexually innocent and vulnerable to dangerous knowledge” about the sensitive theme of sexuality (Ibid. p. 80).

Blaise (2009, p. 457) explores sex, gender and sexuality in the early childhood classroom and notices that with young children, heterosexual norms are viewed as regulatory when both parents and preschool teachers encourage children to maintain stereotypical gendered roles. Moreover, Gunn (2011, p. 281) draws on data from research of heteronormativity and early childhood education to highlight that heteronormativity draws attention to practices that “contribute to understandings and assumptions about one’s gender, sexuality and close interpersonal relationships”. Hence, heteronormativity concerns constructions of genders, of sexualities and of the family form that preserve heterosexuality as normal (Ibid). Also, practices in early childhood education are often informed and shaped by notions of family, that together with teacher’s persistent work to promote partnership between education settings and homes contributes to the production of heteronormativity within the early years’ teachers’ work (Ibid). In my study, I draw on previous research about heteronormativity within the early childhood classroom and the line of arguments that suggest that there are practices in early childhood education that produce children as gendered and as heterosexual. This line of arguments is essential

in this study in order to examine not only how pre-school teachers in Greece view the deployment of material that does not follow gender conformity but also how they are constructing notions of children, sexuality and gender in their reflections.

In Greece, research on children, gender and sexuality with a scope on interrupting heteronormativity within early childhood education does not correspond to the relevant situation of the international research. There has been research about gendered identities within education. For example, Kogkidou (2012, p. 1) argues that within education, students negotiate their identities, teachers' gendered subjectivities also influence school life through various behaviours. Pre-school teachers' perceptions upon the use of LGBTQ-themed material in the early stages of education has not been addressed thoroughly within the Greek context. Though, findings of Greek research upon social inequalities and gender development within education is in correspondence with research that was presented before about how heteronormativity is preserved within early childhood education (Kogkidou, 2012, Vekri & Vryonidis, 2010). In Greece, Yiannikopoulou (2013, p. 179) discusses the absence of original or translated LGBTQ-themed books in the Greek context and argues that there are a few studies that generally highlight issues of gender expression in children and teenagers' books, but only some exceptions that address interrupting heteronormativity within children and teenagers' books (see Kanatsouli, 2000; Kostopoulos & Karasavvidou, 2011; Yiannikopoulou & Sakellaki, 2011 as cited in Yiannikopoulou, 2013, p. 179). Yiannikopoulou and Sakellaki (2011, p. 5) note that the absence of homosexual characters from Greek books for children is due to the exclusion of sexual diversity. The question of sexual orientation has been considered inappropriate for children's books (Ibid) with the grounds of that in the protection of young children (Ibid, p. 6). In the following part, I will share historical views on sexuality *in general* and children, gender and sexuality *in particular* in order to understand heteronormativity as a basic concept for this research.

Historical views on children, gender and sexuality

There is a considerable amount of literature on children, gender and sexuality. Much is known about sexuality as being considered spontaneously natural and that it gives us our identities (Weeks, 2003, p. 3). However, another approach to sexuality is more suitable for this study's viewpoint. Weeks (2003, p. 6) points out to sexuality as a product of social and historical forces and defines it as a complex meaning that has been continuously changing (Ibid, p. 3), though without denying that biology or mental processes have posed limits to elements of it (Ibid, p. 7). Foucault's (1990, p. 23) studies into sexuality showed how the construction of normal heterosexuality in the West occurred within different public discourses beginning in the 17th century such as religious, political, scientific and medical discourses. In this study, I approach the structure and ranking within the heterosexual-homosexual binary as socially constructed (Robinson, 2005, p. 20), with the terms marking particular

positions. That is, the first term is normative, and the second a deviation (Surtees, 2008, p. 11). Gunn (2011, p. 281) cites Foucault's work and explains the construction of this binary:

Following the construction of non-heterosexual acts as illegal and of homosexuality as immoral, the science and medicine of sexuality marked non-heterosexual sexuality as pathologic and abnormal, achieving in this process a 'new specification of individuals' whose sexuality diverged from the norm. The homosexual was born and he, with his afflicted sexuality became other to the heterosexual. Thus notions of normalcy associated with heterosexual sexuality position heterosexuals with their 'normal' form of sexuality as ascendant.

Understandings of children's gender and sexuality have been challenged within the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. James and James (2012, p. 60) describe the key concept of gender both from a developmentalist and a social constructionist's theoretical point of view. Developmentalism is a theoretical perspective that is central to both developmental psychology and the biological model of childhood (James and James, 2012, p. 41). The social constructionist point of view that is foundational to this study is critical towards developmental psychology. This comes from the challenge made in sociology that emphasizes childhood as a social rather than developmental construct (Ibid, p. 42). In relation to children and gender, research with a locus in developmental psychology has argued that children go through a gender process where they start developing concepts of gender around age two and most children are aware if they are a boy or a girl by the age of three (Aina & Cameron, 2011, p. 11). After children develop gender awareness by being rewarded for gender-appropriate behaviour (James and James, 2012, p. 60), they get in the process of understanding their identity and consequently begin to develop stereotypes that they apply to themselves and others (Aina & Cameron, 2011, p. 11). The reason I explain developmentalism is because its implications have posed strong influence both in early childhood education practices and pre-school teachers' beliefs.

From a social constructionist's point of view, it is reminded that there are many different childhoods (James and James, 2011, p. 42), instead of a universal and normalized process where behavioural psychology depicts children as unformed and unreasoned (Hawkes & Egan, 2008, p. 450). Research framed by social constructionism argues that children take on gender roles through observing and then imitating the behaviour of adults (James and James, 2012, p. 60). Drawing on findings of research conducted within the field of early childhood education, it seems that gender is a dynamic practice built and shaped by ongoing interactions (Ibid). According to sociocultural research, the acquisition of gender identities in childhood has been approached in three ways: Firstly, approaches that view children as actors in the gendering process, who are seeking information and appropriate it

into their patterns of behavior in order to make sense of their worlds; secondly, there have been approaches that view gender as coming from outside and becoming encoded into children's future behaviour; thirdly a few approaches that view children as constrained by gender norms, although they are actively participating in the re-negotiation of their enactment (Risman and Myers, 1997 cited in Kehily, 2013, pp. 221 - 222).

Historically, children have been understood as becoming sexual adults rather than being sexual children. Adults traditionally problematise young children's and adolescents' sexual agency (Hawkes and Egan, 2008, p. 459; Robinson, 2013, p. 91). This means that children's sexuality is often discussed in the context of children as becoming healthy, well-socialised, reproductive, heterosexual adults (Hawkes and Egan, 2008, p. 461) and thus, as predictive of sexual stability in the future (Ibid, p. 460). On the contrary, some recent criticism defines children's sexual agency as:

being in control of their own bodies, being supported in understanding and exploring different ways of expressing gender and sexuality, being confident in challenging peer pressure, having an awareness and understanding of their rights, and learning to take responsibility for making their own decisions (Robinson, 2013, cited in Karagrigori, 2018, p. 5).

A key problem with much of the literature on children's sexuality is that children's sexuality is made sensitive within early childhood education. Considering the tensions concerning LGBTQ-issues in the Greek society, children and sexuality can be understood as a subject that is framed as culturally sensitive (Sparrman, 2014, p. 292). It has been suggested that the framing of the subject as sensitive has led to a lack of focus on children's own perspectives in research concerning children and sexuality (Robinson, 2013, p. 91), and that this has made it challenging for researchers to include children as participants in research in sexuality and children (Sparrman, 2014, p. 292). In this study, I am, therefore, critically engaging with how children's sexualities are constructed from the perspectives of adults. This is important because teachers' understandings of children's gender and sexuality may influence the way they are carrying out the work in the early childhood classroom around issues related to the concepts of gender and sexuality.

Sparrman (2015, p. 127), who used children's voices as a foundation for her research, understands sexual agency is distributed among networks of co-dependency. This means that sexual agency is neither fixed or owned (Ibid, p. 137), but flows within human, material, or immaterial subjects (Ibid, p. 130). On the ground of that, my study is situated within the network of the early childhood classroom where children also negotiate their sexual agency, and therefore I pose the question of the introduction of resources that are representative of sexual minorities. Following, I focus on the theoretical perspective of social constructionism and queer theory because of their relevance to my thesis.

Social Constructionism

Within the field of child studies, children are perceived to have the capacities to express themselves and change their social worlds (James & James, 2012, p. 4). Although I am not researching children's own perspectives, I am critically engaging with understandings of children and childhood that position children as engaged in the construction of their sexual subjectivities. Conducting this research from a social constructionist perspective serves as a basis to use gender as a culturally constructed notion (Butler, 1999, p. 9), and challenge the gender binary (Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2016, p. 807). Constructionism serves as a basis to analyse ideas about gender, children and childhood as socially constructed categories. Bryman (2016, p. 30) defines constructionism as an ontological position that "invites the researcher to consider the ways in which social reality is an ongoing accomplishment of social actors rather than something external to them, and that totally constrains them". According to James and James (2012, p. 117), social constructionism can explain how the ideas of children and childhood that are found in different discourses impact on children's everyday lives and experiences. In this study, the focus is more specifically on the role of pre-school teachers in the pedagogical procedures and eventually, the gender education children receive.

Drawing from social constructionism in this study, I understand gender as a constructed concept. Judith Butler's concept of performativity has made a significant contribution to the current perception of gender as culturally constructed. Butler challenged the sex-biology / gender-culture binary and how the concept of gender is understood (Wells, 2015, p. 48). In Butler's theory, sex is often mirrored by gender (Butler, 1999, p.10), opposing beliefs that depict sex as a natural and biological process (Ibid, p. 11). Butler discusses the construction of gender in terms of a controversy over the body (Karagrigori, 2018, pp. 1 - 2):

On the one hand, the body is a medium on which diverse cultural meanings are inscribed according to anatomical differences. On the other hand, the body is perceived as an instrument through which one can choose a gender, but always under cultural compulsion to become one. One cannot be only defined by gender since gender intersects with modalities of identity such as race, class, and ethnicity. Gender is always a doing, thus performative. The definition she points to is that it is a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance. This performance creates gender instead of the opposite.

The core of Butler's thinking about gender and sexuality is that in order to become a part of human culture as it is configured in her time, subjectification is necessary (Wells, 2015, p. 48). Moreover, her second contribution to the theories of gender is that gender identification cannot be separated

from the normalization of heterosexual desire (Ibid). Previous research has shown that children's gender performativities interrelate with heterosexual discourses at a very early age (Boldt 1996, 2002, cited in Wells, 2015, p. 49). After discussing social constructivism as a fundamental theory to understand gender, I draw on queer theory that also proved well-suited to the framing of this study.

Queer Theory

In this study, I draw on queer theory as an approach that provides an insight to teachers' pedagogical interventions, with regard to exploring the cultural logic of gendered and sexual normativities in them (Martino & Cumming Potvin, 2016, p. 808). Sumara & Davis (1999, p. 202) notes that if we come to agree that heteronormative structures are setting limits to more interesting forms of thinking, interrupting heteronormativity becomes a way to broaden perception, to complexify cognition, and to amplify the imagination of learners. In order to explore the pedagogical interventions that are committed to interrupting heteronormativity, Britzman (1998, cited in Surtees, 2008, p.12) suggests the need to think against conceptual foundations and to study skeletons of learning and teaching. The term queer is often used as an umbrella term to describe people who identify themselves outside society's normative male / female dichotomy (Hidalgo & Barber, 2017). Queer theory is concerned to deconstruct sexual categorisation processes and argues that any natural sexuality is impossible (Surtees, 2008, p. 12). "This both highlights the incoherence in the terms sex, gender and sexuality, and demonstrates the ways they function to license heterosexuality as normative" (Jagose, 1996, cited in Surtees, 2008, p. 12). Queer theory aims not to abolish gender, but to destabilise it and revise it. Every aspect of identity, for example gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, should be defined within a society, based on the rules and institutions that serve the social system. However, each subject has a personal identity which s/he tries to make it acceptable within society. It would be crucial to specifying that queer theory does not require pedagogy to become sexualised, but to interpret the way it already is sexualised (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 192). Overall, it seeks to continually interrupt and re-narrate constructions that support heterosexuality, rather than define identities in strict reference to particular bodily acts (Ibid).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

With gender expression in relation to children and education being challenged by Greek society, I wanted to listen to what pre-school teachers say about introducing topics that interrupt heteronormativity. Thus, I have designed a study that aims to generate insightful empirical knowledge upon pre-school teacher's perceptions upon the use of LGBTQ-themed resources when working with pre-schoolers. Given the lack of available literature that focuses on gender education during the early

years of education in Greece, this study uses an LGBTQ-resource to investigate the pedagogical possibilities or the demands in relation to addressing sexual minority issues and gender non-conformity as part of the Greek Curriculum for the Kindergarten school.

DATA COLLECTION

The data for this study consists of interviews with five pre-school teachers in Western Greece. The pre-school teachers had current or previous experience working in early childhood education settings and were invited to talk about the use of LGBTQ-themed resources when working with preschoolers in their groups/classrooms.

Recruitment and participants

In order to find informants, I talked to the managers of two early childhood education settings within a Greek city in order to spread the information about my study among their employees. I got permission to post information sheets for the study (see Appendix 2) on the announcement boards of the two institutions. The information sheets asked for pre-school teachers with experience working in public or private early childhood education settings with children between the ages of four and six years old. This age limit was set because of my research focal point that derived from the vague guidelines given in the national curriculum for compulsory early childhood education, which is provided to children at this age group, in order that they take preparatory courses just before enrolling in primary schools. Since the early steps of the research preparation, I received feedback from pre-school teachers that it would probably be challenging to find participants because pre-school teachers would think of LGBTQ-issues in education as irrelevant to their work or a sensitive topic to discuss. In order to decrease that risk, the snowball sampling technique seemed like a suitable method to find participants (Bryman, 2016, p. 415). Hence, when contacting me to set up an interview, the participants had the chance to ask for further information and to suggest other colleagues who were willing to participate in this kind of research. These mean that a third party always was involved in recruiting informants, and I did not need to ask pre-school teachers personally.

After finding five participants that fit the research criteria, I conducted interviews with them in a place of their choice. Before starting the interviews, the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix 3), and they also had the chance to ask more questions. Both the consent form and the information poster were translated into the Greek language since the interviews would be conducted in that language. Following I will shortly present the pre-school teachers, who participated in this study.

Alex has been working as a pre-school teacher for approximately fifteen years. He has provided care and education to children aged from zero to six years old. For this study, he was asked to focus on his experience working in kindergarten classrooms with children from four to six years old.

Maria has been teaching for two years in a daycare centre, having the same group of children since they were 3 years old.

Anna and Lena have worked for over ten years. Both have worked in several early childhood education settings in different areas of the country, and each of them is currently working in kindergarten schools located in rural areas.

Niki is unemployed in the time of our interview, but she has previous experience working as a pre-school teacher in daycare centres for three years.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured, individual interviews with five participants. I chose this method of data collection as the most suitable in order to ensure comparability and encourage flexibility and participants' elaboration (Bryman, 2016, p. 469). The semi-structured interviews helped me both stay focused on my research questions and follow the participants' narrations concerning the topic of discussion. An interview guide (see Appendix 1), consisting of open-ended questions (Ibid) was designed beforehand by dividing the questions into three parts. First, I included some questions about the teachers' experience in order to get to meet them. Then, I continued with questions about the pedagogical approaches that the pre-school teachers would deploy with a specific LGBTQ-themed resource, and finally, I included some questions to evaluate the interview process.

The pre-school teachers who agreed to participate in this study were given time to familiarise themselves with a suggested LGBTQ-themed resource during the interviews. Taking into account the absence of relevant resources, I considered the use of a book that is designed for young children and addresses LGBTQ issues as a prompt in this study. The participants were asked to preview an officially translated version of the book "The Great Big Book of Families" (see Image 1), originally written by Mary Hoffman and illustrated by Ros Asquith, translated in Greek during 2016. Then they were asked to reflect on whether or not they could imagine using this book in their classrooms. This book was chosen as a resource for the following reasons: First, this book is one of the few LGBTQ-themed books that has been translated into the Greek language. Second, it is a book about family structure and the wide varieties of family life. It contains images that depict family life within different contexts. For example, the varieties of hobbies that people can have, or the varieties of pets that people can own, or various kinds of jobs that parents can have are pictured. Among those, there are

images that talk explicitly about same-gender households (see Image 2). This book addresses LGBTQ-families among topics like family life, hobbies, jobs and houses and therefore may open possibilities of interrupting heteronormativity within the early childhood classroom. I should sound a note of caution with regard to the choice of the “The Great Big Book of Families” as a prompt since I am aware that a different choice could impact the results of this study.



Image 1: Book cover²

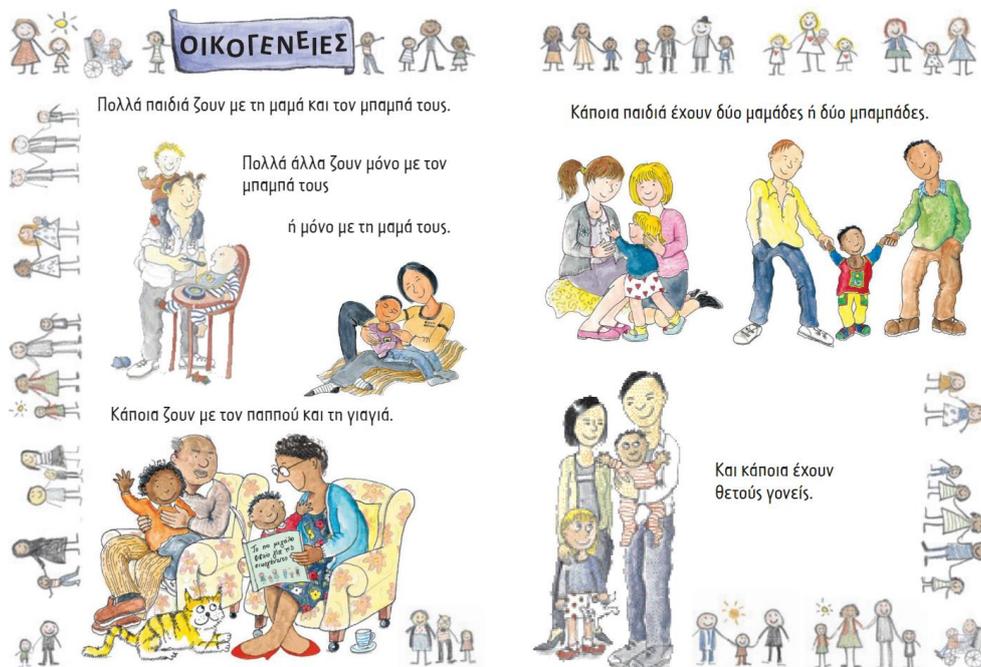


Image 2: Pages 8-9³

^{2,3} From the “The Great Big Book of Families” by Mary Hoffman illustrated by Ros Asquith published by Frances Lincoln Children’s Books, an imprint of The Quarto Group, copyright © 2010. Reproduced by permission of Quarto Publishing Plc. Online images available at: <https://issuu.com/ikarosbooks/docs/9789605721183> [Accessed 14 Apr. 2019].

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and the Greek language was used. Moreover, every interview was audio-recorded, giving me the chance to stay concentrated in the discussions and also have accurate transcriptions (Bryman, 2016, p. 479). Interviews were transcribed and anonymised with any identifying information being removed and participants' names being changed into pseudonyms (Farvid, Braun and Rowney, 2017, p. 549).

DATA ANALYSIS

Following constructionism, an interpretive approach will be used in order to grasp the subjective meaning of the teachers' narratives (Bryman, 2016, p. 26). I find the epistemological position of interpretivism as the most suitable to present concerns and reflections of participants, in terms of their interpretations of gender and heteronormativity (Ibid, p. 28). Within a constructionist framework, what pre-school teachers say, is approached as a context in which stories are told, in a particular way, for a particular purpose (Farvid, Braun and Rowney, 2017, p. 549).

Therefore, thematic analysis was chosen as an adequate method since participants' reflections and concerns can be interpreted as themes that are identified during the analysis of the data (Bryman, 2016, p. 584). Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 79) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data". Moreover, the thematic analysis allowed me to be flexible and open towards various and sometimes unexpected themes that occurred from the participants' answers (Ibid, p. 91). In line with the chosen theoretical framework, I have been going back and forth between the research material and theory, while analysing the data. In conclusion, my results derived by analysing the given answers and generating them into themes that appeared repeatedly and were related to the research questions.

Processing and analysing data

Braun and Clarke (2006, cited in Karagrigori, 2017, p. 13) offer a systematic guide to thematic analysis of data derived from qualitative research. The six phases of thematic analysis were followed in the present thesis:

1. become familiar with the data,
2. generate initial codes,
3. search for themes,
4. review,
5. define and name these themes, and finally,
6. produce the report.

Familiarisation with the data started already while obtaining the data, and when transcripts were translated into English by the author. During the transcription of the data, initial codes were generated.

Those codes consisted of pre-school teachers' reflections on addressing gender-related topics and deploying LGBTQ-themed resources when working within a group of preschoolers. The focus was on codes that helped me to approach the research questions. I chose the codes that matched participants' repeated ideas and then organised them into themes, as literature on thematic analysis suggests (see Braun and Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2016; Vaismoradi et al., 2016, cited in Karagrighori, 2017, p. 13). After the themes were developed and revised, relevant literature was studied in order to relate themes into theory. More literature was also accessed according to keywords that represented the generated themes (Karagrighori, 2017, p. 13).

ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

The processing of personal data and ethical considerations

The present study has been conducted as part of a master's programme at the Linköping University of Sweden, and therefore ethics approval was granted by the Ethical Vetting Board of the programme according to the relevant Swedish legislation on ethical vetting. Farrell (2005, cited in Karagrighori, 2017, p. 14) suggests that ethical considerations in research and the relevant legislation may differ between countries. Since the data were collected in Greece, the Greek legal basis of ethics in research was also explored. According to Boumpoukas (2010, cited in Karagrighori, 2017, p. 14), ethics commissions established by Universities and other research centres formulate their codes of ethics based on Community legislation and international conventions or declarations.

Sparman (2014, p. 292) discusses how the topic of sexuality can be sensitive to others. Likewise, I am aware that sexuality and especially LGBTQ-sexuality that I am researching is made sensitive in the discussions within Greek society. Therefore, I draw on Bryman's (2016, p. 120) suggestions on research that ethical issues may arise at a variety of stages of research and should be a topic of concern during the research process (Ibid, p. 121). In this study, ethical considerations have been made by reflecting on my personal motivation for studying this subject and on how the research questions are relevant to the studied discipline.

In order to protect the participants of the study, I provided them with detailed information about the study and the interviews during different stages of the research (see Silverman, 2015, Karagrighori, 2017, p. 14). Specifically, they were introduced to the purpose of the research through information sheets (see Appendix 2) during the recruitment and were asked to sign an informed consent form before the interviews (Bryman, 2016, p. 131). Essential information like the purpose of the study, description of the data collection process, and the conditions of participation were included and familiarly described to them (Farrell, 2005, cited in Karagrighori, 2017, p. 14). Before and during the interviews it was made clear to them that they could withdraw whenever they wanted without stating

any cause, and that anonymity and confidentiality would be ensured by using broader descriptions and pseudonyms (Bryman, 2016, p. 127). The storage of the personal processing data was done according to the guidelines of Linköping University for the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). According to basic principles of the GDPR upon processing of personal data that is done as part of a student's work, I safely stored the data, so that no unauthorised people would have access to it until the thesis received a passing grade.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This thesis focuses on pre-school teachers' sayings about the use of LGBTQ-themed literature in early childhood education and both the possibilities and difficulties they describe in relation to this. According to the findings of this study, pre-school teacher's perceptions of LGBTQ-themed literature in kindergarten classrooms can be discussed in relation to the following themes as they emerged from the thematic analysis of the data:

- A. Absence of positive reactions,
- B. Pre-school teachers' unreadiness,
- C. Children's insensibility towards LGBTQ-topics,
- D. Societal normative values, and
- E. The construction of gender

Specifically, I will first discuss the absence of positive reactions (Theme A). Overall, the pre-school teachers did not discuss the use of this material in a positive manner but focused on discussing LGBTQ-related issues as something that should *not* be addressed in early childhood education. Secondly, I will discuss the difficulties in implementing these resources, as they were described by the pre-school teachers who participated in this research. These difficulties will be discussed through the following themes (Themes B, C, D): Pre-school teachers' unreadiness; children's insensibility towards LGBTQ-topics; and societal normative values. Thirdly, I will analyse how pre-school teachers construct gender in their reflections about LGBTQ-themed literature (Theme E).

Theme A. – Absence of positive reactions

If I decided to speak about homosexuality, I would say that this book is good. -Niki

I could have it in the library of the classroom. I do not know if I would use it. -Maria

I will say both yes and no. It depends on a significant number of conditions. -Anna

Although this study aimed to focus both on possibilities and difficulties in the use of LGBTQ-themed literature in early childhood education, it was challenging to find positive aspects when analysing the material. What is notable is that the pre-school teachers reflected neither positively nor negatively

about using LGBTQ-themed literature *in practice*. The extracts above are some of the pre-school teachers' answers to the question if they would use the book *The Great Big Book of Families* by Hoffman and Asquith. During the interviews, they rather spoke about the difficulties they would face if they used the book they were presented with or a similar book, but never stated clearly that they did not want to or that they could not make use of the book. On the contrary, most of them liked the book, with some of them showing interest in where to find it. Moreover, when I asked them what they think about the illustrations of same-gender families in the book, all of them answered that they did not find any of the illustrations offensive.

Although discussions about sexuality and children set an important asset into the framing of this study, sexuality-related themes were not what I was looking for. However, the participants were continually bringing up sexuality. Therefore, sexuality is discussed in different parts of this analysis as a concept itself or in relevance to homosexuality or the sex/gender binary. Likewise, this finding further supports research into sexuality-related topics in early childhood education that has shown that there is an ongoing silencing of sexuality that is considered non-normative within educational practices with children (Surtees & Gunn, 2010, p. 42). According to Epstein and Johnson (1994, cited in Surtees & Gunn, 2010, p. 42), this silencing is due to the heterosexual presumption. This assumption is also represented by heteronormativity, where sexualities other than heterosexual sexuality are understood as perverse, remarkable or dangerous (Ibid). However, the participants of this study did not actively frame LGBTQ-issues or people as perverse, remarkable or dangerous, but because they were not questioning heteronormativity or arguing for more diverse representations of sexuality and gender the silencing of non-normative representations can be interpreted as being reproduced anyways. The understanding of the absence of clearly stated positive or negative reactions regarding the use of the suggested material in the narrations of the participants of this study as a form of silencing of non-normative representations of gender and sexuality can be discussed both in relation to; 1) teachers lack of knowledge about how to use the material, and 2) the silence that exists in the Greek society. Both these reasons suggest that it would be difficult for pre-school teachers to interrupt heteronormativity even if they would want to do that.

This study has not confirmed previous literature on interrupting heteronormativity within early childhood education that has investigated the possibilities of addressing sexuality and gender-related topics. For instance, Sumara & Davis (1999, p. 202) discuss the possibility of educators to interrupt heteronormative thinking and to stop reading straight. This desire is forced by the wish to eliminate the destructive homophobia and heterosexism that pervades all social forms (Ibid). In contradiction to researchers who have highlighted the possibilities in interrupting heteronormativity within early

childhood education, the findings of this research illustrated some of the difficulties in implementing practices that draw from interrupting heteronormativity.

Theme B - Pre-school teachers' unreadiness

I would approach such topics if I found the way, the right way [...] The way may not be available yet, as sexuality is a taboo subject that is not easily approached. -Niki

The participants portrayed themselves as being unready or incompetent to address LGBTQ-topics with children in early childhood education. This was evident in all responses and kept arising in different parts of our discussions. Moreover, even though my questions were relevant with the possibilities of addressing issues of gender expression that do not follow the normative gender categories, the pre-school teachers seemed to interpret LGBTQ-topics within the context of sexuality continuously. This could possibly depart from the absence of gender discussions within early childhood education, together with sexuality as made sensitive within the Greek curriculum for Kindergarten Schools. Expressly, sexuality is framed as one sensitive issue within the curriculum, and thus the pre-school teacher should be prepared for comments that children can make and should not avoid answering on any question (Birbili, 2014, p. 139). Specifically, sexuality is among the issues that may embarrass the teacher who feels unready to address them or even finds it difficult to manage them himself/herself and thus are depicted as sensitive issues (Ibid). As mentioned in the introduction, sexuality is among the topics that should be addressed in kindergarten school but neither what issues are included within the topic of sexuality is defined, nor particular guidelines or resources are given. When ethical issues in relation to sexuality are raised, the official guideline towards pre-school teachers is that s/he should not take a position out of respect for the different views of the parents (Ibid, p. 140). In line with this finding and the official guidelines posed here, this study provides some evidence on how pre-school teachers reflect on the views of parents, that is in theme D. Following, I have included some extracts of the pre-school teachers' reflections when they were asked about the curriculum.

We are given theory, but they (*refers to those responsible for the curriculum*) are not telling us what to do in practice. -Maria

The manual (*refers to the curriculum and guidelines' book*) has a lot of vague information. Each of us (*refers to the pre-school teachers in general*) teaches as s/he understands it. -Lena

However, a significant issue with this kind of guideline concerns the reasons why we are discussing sexuality and for whose sake. The Curriculum for Kindergarten Schools is taking a position stating that discussing sexuality should be done in kindergarten schools. Within the national curriculum, one of the goals when teaching about sexuality is to *respect the limits set by the rights of the other*. What does this mean then if the teachers are supposed not to take a position? If all of the different views

that parents have are supposed to be respected and *valid*, then that also allows heteronormative or even discriminatory views on non-normative forms of sexuality and gender. How can pre-school teachers, for example, protect possible LGBTQ-children or children with LGBTQ-parents if they cannot take the position that everyone regardless of sexuality should always be respected and discrimination against someone because of their gender or sexuality should be eliminated?

One unanticipated finding was that even though the discussion was about gender non-conformity and LGBTQ-related issues, the pre-school teachers' answers are focused on homosexuality. That is, LGBTQ tends to be translated into just LG, that is the acronyms for Lesbian and Gay. A possible reason for this could be that homosexuality has gained more attention than other groups under the LGBTQ-umbrella and other groups. In the pre-school teachers' reflections, homosexuality was framed as something that cannot be easily addressed in the early childhood classroom, and there is the need of specific educational tools or strategies that they have not been given to them yet, or they have not searched to find them. A question that arises in relation to this is; if the pre-school teachers are talking about themselves as unready to educate children about homosexuality, is it possible that they are even more unready to teach about other LGBTQ-groups?

I do not know if I would do it correctly. I believe that in order to assess a topic I must be sure that I have predicted, in a large percentage, how I will manage upcoming questions [...] Similarly if I wanted to approach such a topic, I would feel exposed, because I would not have thought about all the factors. [...] I do not feel ready to answer any questions about homosexuality. Without this readiness, I know that I would be irresponsible as a teacher. -Alex

Children are so observant that I have to be ready (*to answer questions*) if I use this book. - Anna

[...] I do not have an answer for homosexual families. I should have an answer. I do not have an answer, because I never looked for one. -Lena

In the last extracts, the teachers' feelings of not being competent enough to address such topics seem to connect with ideas about children as curious and able to come up with any question. This indicates that the pre-school teachers in these instances understand children as having a considerable amount of knowledge about gender and sexuality that makes them capable of coming up with questions. This result raises the question if the pre-school teachers' feelings of not being competent are connected to a lack of support and guidelines. DePalma and Atkinson (2009, pp. 849 - 850) argue that teachers of primary schools feel more confident to plan projects that would include LGBTQ-related topics if they have adequate information and supplies, for example children's books; other support materials; training focusing on LGBT equalities complemented by follow-up support. In an attempt to break the

silence around LGBTQ-topics within early childhood education, the same resources might make a significant impact.

In contrast to pre-school teachers describing themselves as unready in relation to children's questions if they would introduce LGBTQ-related topics, they were also discussing children's interest in LGBTQ-related topics and generally in gender-related topics as non-existing. Next, I will discuss this finding.

Theme C - Children's insensibility towards LGBTQ-topics

The fact that I would be willing to talk about gender issues does not mean that the child would want to hear about them. Like I told you before, we follow the children's interest. -Niki

In this quote, the pre-school teacher is framing pre-school children's interest in gender issues as non-existing. This pre-school teacher was not the only one of the participants who argued that children between the ages of four and six years old are not interested in hearing about gender, but it came up in several of the interviews. This result differs from what the literature on children, gender and sexuality suggests, that is children's attention is substantially occupied by understanding their own and others' gender, during their early years (Gunn, 2011, p. 281). That makes the early years of education a critical period to deal with gender stereotypes (Aina & Cameron, 2011, p. 11).

Remarkably, the participants started framing children as uninterested or immature in relation to describing an unwillingness to address LGBTQ-issues in the classroom. Questions can be raised about the reasons that the pre-school teachers frame children as uninterested; is it possible that children were framed as uninterested because of the teachers own feelings of unreadiness? As seen in previous literature, practices in early childhood education are strongly affected by heteronormativity and are therefore continuing to reproduce heteronormativity. Further on I have included some extracts where pre-school teachers frame children as uninterested, particularly in relation to LGBTQ-issues.

Most children do not have those images (*refers to the representations of same-gendered parents in the book*) yet. I can easily get past it. -Lena

This pre-school teacher seems to acknowledge same-gendered families' presence in a general sense, that is, they exist. However, she frames them as a non-existing idea in children's lives, and therefore, children have no interest in learning about them. In this case, addressing non-conformity and sexual minorities within early childhood education can be interpreted as important in the way of *dealing with* children's ideas about these issues *when* they become aware of them.

I would speak about LGBTQ-issues if I knew that this kind of situation is represented in the classroom. I do not think that any child would be interested in that if s/he has never interacted with it -Alex

[...] However, I would not speak about homosexuality in my classroom and especially if there was no reason. One reason could be that there is a child who is coming from this type of family in the classroom, and other children highlight that. Then, we would need to talk about it. -Maria

Similarly, the pre-school teachers above construct people representing the LGBTQ-community as not present and therefore, LGBTQ-issues as topics that are out of children's scope of interest. LGBTQ-people are constructed as absent in the teacher's perceptions, and that gives the impression that there are no LGBTQ-children or children with same-gendered parents in the classroom in general. There are similarities between the position expressed by these pre-school teachers in this study and those described by Yiannikopoulou & Sakellaki (2011). The last (Ibid, p. 9) argue that, as far as Greece is concerned, LGBTQ-people are presented as absent from the children's environment, because in most classrooms neither a child comes from a same-gendered couple nor knows if one of his/her parents' gender or sexual orientation does not follow the normative values of society. In general, discourses about family in the Western world tend to privilege the family form that consists of opposite-gender parents who are or are assumed to be children's biological or legal parents (Surtees & Gunn, 2010, p. 43). Interestingly, another possible explanation here is that LGBTQ-issues are depicted as of interest for the individuals who belong to the LGBTQ-group and not the society in general. That is, LGBTQ-issues are not framed as important in terms of raising general awareness about these issues in order to create a society that is open to LGBTQ-people but could rather be understood as important *if and when* LGBTQ-persons themselves were present. While I want to make this interpretation with caution, I think it would be an interesting finding to draw on for further research about this subject.

My first thought is that I would not speak about homosexuality in a kindergarten class. One reason is the children's innocent thinking. If we overanalyse some issues, we raise questions, we confuse them (*refers to the children*), without them being confused from the beginning. [...] I do not know how this (*refers to the use of the book*) would help the team. I do not find it necessary for the child to recognise this part of identity. Children have a picture of their sex since they are young, but not of their preference. -Alex

I would not approach it because of their age. Introducing new information is good, but it has stages. I cannot give them a piece of information that they will not be able to process. -Maria

I think it is a delicate topic for an early age. We are talking about equality and rights, but not about gender. [...] It is not considered necessary to talk about it, because children are very young. -Anna

In order to depict children's interest as non-existing, the participants often introduced children as innocent or very young. Discourses of children as innocent derive from Christian views about the sinless condition of the child (Surtees & Gunn, 2010, p. 43). In line with what the participants say, researchers have described teachers' desire to construct a protected environment, away from the cor-

rupted world, for the young and pure child (Ibid). Dominant discourses of children's assumed innocence, construct children as naive, with little knowledge about gender and sexuality (Blaise, 2010, p. 1). Hence, participants' representations of children as very young and unable to process information about LGBTQ-issues can be problematised for constructing children as lacking sexual knowledge and sexual agency due to their age. These representations can also be read in relation to developmentalism. Developmentalism has been reinforced in early childhood education through practices that are based exclusively in developmental psychology and approaches children through the notion of the naturally developing child (Blaise, 2009, p. 451). This development is understood as leading to a stable heterosexual sexuality, and a fixed gender identity (Surtees & Gunn, 2010, p. 43). These theories that are dominant in the field of early childhood education require teachers to deny knowledge about adult concepts (Surtees & Gunn, 2010, p. 44).

I teach in a kindergarten school. If I was teaching in a university, for sure, I should address the issue (*refers to homosexuality*). -Maria

This pre-school teacher's instance illustrates that LGBTQ-related topics can be seen as an example of what could consist an adult concept. According to the pre-school teachers' perceptions, heteronormativity is not interrupted, since they construct children as immature and therefore avoid addressing topics related to sexuality and gender, generally or topics related to LGBTQ, particularly.

Societal norms may also influence teachers' practices. In the following theme, I present how societal normative values are perceived as another indicator that makes it difficult to address LGBTQ-related issues in early childhood education.

Theme D - Societal normative values

As a society, we are not prepared to accept homosexuals and therefore, talk about them to children. As teachers, we are very much exposed to parents. -Anna

Obviously, in Greece, it (*refers to homosexuality*) is still a taboo subject. Therefore, it exists theoretically but not in practice in the classroom. [...] Many years will go past until such an issue is put into education. -Maria

The participants described society, including parents, as conservative and therefore not accepting towards issues that do not follow gender-normative values. According to what the participants say, LGBTQ-people's presence and ideas around them are acknowledged, but they are considered as being somewhere out there rather than possibly being present in the classroom. This finding of the current study supports literature that describes that Greek society has normative values about gender and identity; gender discrimination has been constructed based on biological and social structures, and

any deviations from this dichotomy are not considered legal and are understood as deviations from normal (Sailakis, 2018, p. 28).

Last year I heard a parent's objection; a boy goes with his (*female*) teacher to the bathroom. Can't a girl go with her (*male*) teacher? This shows that we are in a society that is not ready to discuss simple things (*about gender*). -Alex

The last extract comes from a male pre-school teacher and demonstrates what kind of struggles he as a male pre-school teacher faces within a pre-school setting. In this quote, it is not only the children's gender that is discussed but also the teachers' gender. It is apparent from this instance that even if heterosexuality is normalized, it becomes problematized in relation to male pre-school teachers specifically. In Greece, early childhood education settings are mostly occupied by female teachers. That follows the social assumption that women are more suited to teaching young children (Kogkidou, 2012, p. 9). With this example, Alex is depicting Greek society as hesitant towards gender issues regarding a person's occupation. In consequence, he problematizes that LGBTQ-issues can be discussed at this point. On the ground of this teacher's reflection, it seems that certain practices become problematized because of the relation between the children and the teacher's gender. Moreover, a gender-driven curriculum should be designed before pre-school teachers reach the point of teaching about sexual minority issues.

According to these extracts, people who are involved in children's early childhood education like their parents and their pre-school teachers are stakeholders when it comes to the discussion of topics that do not follow heteronormativity as society has constructed it. Gunn's research on early childhood education (2011, p. 288), attests methods in which the repetitive constitution of heterosexuality is experienced as taken-for-granted, imposed upon others, assumed and expected norm. This finding also indicates that it is difficult for pre-school teachers to disengage themselves or anyone from the effects of heteronormativity and this can be connected to how prominent notions of gender, of sexuality and of family are in the field of early childhood education (Ibid).

It will hardly be acceptable by colleagues, parents, and everyone to speak about it (*refers to interrupting heteronormativity*) openly. [...] It is a taboo subject and let us not forget the role of religion. -Niki

To speak the truth, in Greece, there is a mainstream perception of how a family should be. For this reason, I would not bring up an issue that contradicts that. If it comes up, most of us (*refers to teachers*) try to avoid it. [...] There is not enough information about sexuality, gender and identity in the curriculum. I believe this has to do with the close relationship between the state and the church. I think that there would be a strong reaction. Church often interferes in more simple things. [...] Change will come with a delay. -Lena

The previous extracts, coming from two other participants, add the role of religious beliefs in the discussion about the difficulties pre-school teachers can face while addressing this kind of topics. In line with this finding, discourses of sexualities as dangerous and risky connect with morality and religious beliefs (Surtees & Gunn, 2010, p. 43). Even though the curriculum is not explicitly based on religious beliefs, the role of religion in the Greek society becomes important when the teachers are carrying out the requirements of the curriculum *in practice*. This is consistent with the Greek context where religion is institutionally integrated into the public administration of the Greek state through the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. The interesting thing, in this case, is that religion acquires political characteristics, and the educational process is framed by specific religious-political ideology (Karamouzis, 2015, p. 161). Thermos (2015 cited in Sailakis, 2018, p. 72) reports that Greek Orthodox church is critical to queer theory, that could serve as a basis in educational practices that include gender and sexuality, considering it unethical and being opposed to normality.

Taken together, the difficulties that the participants of this study describe, support the complexity of addressing LGBTQ-issues within early childhood education while sexuality and gender education are still under consideration. For once again it is evident that the concept of sexuality keeps being apparent in the pre-school teachers' extracts. In this study, the analysis of pre-school teachers' perceptions raises questions upon who is responsible for the task of discussing sexuality and gender. Now it seems that the task is assigned to the pre-school teachers, but they do not get support and resources by the state, who is in charge of the curriculum. Then, the state is not really making the task *valuable* if they do not even help the pre-school teachers to carry out the task. Although sexuality and gender education is attempted within the curriculum, this should be targeted based on the elaboration of empirical data, which will reflect what is needed. That requires taking into account the perceptions of all the involved parties, that is the Greek society, the Greek state, pre-school teachers and children, but also incorporate the different theoretical perceptions that could frame the method or the contents of the pre-school teachers' practices.

Concluding, I have structured this section in order that one theme leads to another. Although the last theme within this analysis is not about the difficulties upon which pre-school teachers reflect, it is in line with societal norms that influence teachers' practices.

Theme E - The construction of gender

Each of the themes described before corresponded to teachers' perceptions of the difficulties to deploy LGBTQ-themed literature in preschool. Following my last research question, the analysis also offered an understanding of what ideas about gender and children are construed through the teacher's

arguments. This finding provides a further explanation of the reason that pre-school teachers kept bringing up sexuality in our discussions about LGBTQ-related topics.

If I wanted to speak about sexuality or gender, I would speak about the body. How women and men are different. [...] For me, there are two different sexes. Mainly, it has to do with our external characteristics. [...] This how we distinguish between each other. -Maria

We use the word sex clearly to distinguish men and women, I mean genital based. I do not think it is based on anything else. -Niki

It is male and female. It is a law of nature. -Lena

While discussing with each participant, they repeatedly interpreted gender through its biological definition. Towards the end of our interview, they hesitated to describe the term gender when they were asked. Finally, they defined gender through the binary of male and female. At this point, it will be reminded that the interviews were conducted in the Greek language. In Greek, there is only one term for sex and gender. As long as the participants construct gender within a biological definition, I used the term sex within their narrations, in order to offer a clear depiction of what is being said.

As mentioned previously in the analysis, although the interview questions were focused on gender non-conformity and LGBTQ-related issues, it is illustrated in the teachers' reflections that the pre-school teachers highlighted sexuality over gender. In accordance with this finding, Sumara & Davis (1999, p. 195) remind Foucault's words about sexuality being primarily associated with a kind of identification linked with attraction to same or opposite sex, called sexual orientation. In this usage, sex is understood as gender and is synonymous with the distinction made between male and female (Ibid, pp. 195 - 196).

Within this dichotomized thinking about gender, it is made possible to acknowledge homosexuality as a sexuality minority form but more difficult to acknowledge transgender, queer or other groups under the continuously growing LGBTQ+ umbrella. Initially, I wanted to gain an understanding of how pre-school teachers reflect on and implement pedagogical approaches that address issues related to sexual minorities and gender non-conformity. However, my analysis revealed that pre-school teachers tend to bring up sexuality and talk about it more explicitly. In addition, they talk only about the L and G in the LGBTQ. Eventually, this kind of thinking can be interpreted as making bisexual, transgender or queer issues even more invisible than gay and lesbian issues. It can thus be assumed that in case that pre-school teachers were willing to deploy practices that interrupt heteronormativity in the classroom, they would probably focus on LG-issues.

In the following section, I will overview what the reported findings show, according to the research questions of the present study. Then, I will present the limitations of my research before I finish with some suggestions for further research (Karagrigori, 2017, p.22).

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I have explored pre-school teachers' perceptions of the potential use of illustrated books that include representations of same-gender families/relationships and address issues of gender expression that do not follow the normative gender categories. For this, I approached the subject from a social constructivist viewpoint using concepts from queer theory. Specifically, I designed a qualitative study, where I used semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. In this study, I tried to examine how Greek pre-school teachers reflect on the potential use of LGBTQ-themed resources in their classrooms, what kind of possibilities or difficulties they describe in relation to the use of this kind of literature and finally, how pre-school teachers construct ideas about children, gender and sexuality. The method I used to analyse my data was thematic analysis, according to which I ended up with five themes: a) "Absence of positive reactions", b) "Pre-school teachers' unreadiness", c) "Children's insensibility towards LGBTQ-topics", d) "Societal normative values", and e) "The construction of gender". Based on the analysis of these themes, I have come to the following conclusions. The following section is divided into three main paragraphs, each of which presents the results relating to one of the research questions.

This study aimed to address the research question of how Greek pre-school teachers reflect on the use of an LGBTQ-themed children's book that was presented to them in their classroom. The pre-school teachers did not discuss the use of the LGBTQ-themed illustrated book, and consequently the implementation of pedagogical practices that are driven from interrupting heteronormativity, neither positively nor negatively. The evidence from this study supports the ongoing silencing of some forms of sexuality or gender-related topics in early childhood education. Moreover, the analysis of the data supports the claim that in the accounts of the pre-school teachers there is a tendency to discuss LGBTQ-issues in relation to sexuality more explicitly rather than discussing gender expression for example within family life.

Another research question was what possibilities or difficulties pre-school teachers describe in relation to addressing LGBTQ-related issues. Contrasting researchers who have highlighted the possibilities in interrupting heteronormativity within early childhood education this study provides an insight into the difficulties with which early childhood educators come across when they face the dilemma of addressing topics of gender non-conformity and sexual minorities, that challenge

heteronormativity. The pre-school teachers who participated in this research reported unwillingness to address LGBTQ-related topics within their classrooms. Their negative reaction was supported by the following difficulties, identified as themes within their narrations. First, they framed themselves as unready or incompetent to address LGBTQ-related issues in early childhood education. Then, they supported that children are uninterested towards these issues and that this is due to their innocence. Finally, they presented existing societal normative values as an obstacle to addressing this kind of issues in a pre-school classroom. As demonstrated in previous research on the field, “heteronormativity in early childhood education readily resides in dominant constructions of genders, sexualities and the family form” (Gunn, 2011, p. 288). The findings of this study appear to support a critical review of the curriculum for early childhood education that seems of not providing resources and guidelines upon issues of sexuality to the pre-school teachers who have to implement it in classroom. However, a closer inspection should be conducted with regard to such findings.

Concluding, the third question in this research was about how pre-school teachers construct ideas about children, gender and childhood. The current study found that there was no ambivalence in their discourses regarding their construction of gender being understood through the binary of male and female and being synonymous to sex. In addition, this study produced results which indicated that other groups of people than gay and lesbians are not visible. It seemed possible that this result is due to this dichotomized way of thinking about gender.

While planning a study design, one cannot eliminate unexpected factors or predict unexpected data. Thus, a number of significant limitations need to be considered. First, this study was unable to come up with possibilities when pre-school teachers deploy LGBTQ-themed resources since there was no positive answer to that. Secondly, this was also the reason why the theme of silence arose. That allowed me to study literature upon forms of sexuality that are often silenced within the classroom. However, the result was unexpected, and therefore, more questions that could address the issue in more detail could have been stated. Thirdly, the study was limited in several ways, for example, a strict timeline that was imposed by university guidelines. Despite certain limitations, I hope that the study will successfully contribute to the field of gender education for young Greek children.

This brings us to suggestions for further research. My focal point through this study was to gain an insight into what pre-school teachers think upon the deployment of LGBTQ-themed material while they teach and play with pre-school children. Previous literature has not addressed this research field within the Greek context. My research cannot be representative of the general perceptions of early childhood teachers in Greece but has demonstrated evidence that shed light into what difficulties they mention when they think of addressing LGBTQ-issues. Drawing from further questions that emerged

while I was analysing my data, it is recommended that further research be undertaken regarding the following questions: what kinds of methods pre-school teachers use to investigate children's interest upon different topics; how sexuality is made sensitive within discourses in an early childhood classroom; what remains silent or absent within the early childhood classroom. Moreover, further research could investigate the usefulness of discussing gender non-conformity and sexual minorities as located in children and their interest, in contrast with discussing them as inclusive ideas with which a teacher should begin. In addition, case studies of projects or practices that interrupt heteronormativity in Greek preschools, or ethnographic studies that explore how pre-school teachers interact with representations of children's gendered activities would probably shed light into practices that interrupt heteronormativity within early childhood education.

The findings of this study have a number of important implications for future practice. I hereby have included some proposals for the elimination of practices that preserve heteronormativity informed practices. Dominant discourses that position children as vulnerable to dangerous knowledge about gender and sexual minorities (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2015, p. 80) preserve practices that produce heteronormativity within early childhood education. To reduce gender-based inequity is required that teachers question what they think they already know rather than show tolerance to theories that position children as incapable of dealing with gender-related matters (DePalma, 2013, p. 13). Getting informed by expertise and supplied with LGBTQ-themed material can also make a significant impact (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p. 850). Moreover, it is probably time to redefine the concept of family, neither with biological criteria, nor with legal, but with emotional ones (Yiannikopoulou & Sakellaki, 2011, p. 3). Finally, understanding children, gender and sexuality through biological structures often ignores sexuality and preserves the belief that children develop through stages, that are predefined, into sexual adults later in life (Blaise, 2009, p. 452). Fausto-Sterling (2000, p. 101) envisions a future in which gender variation is accepted. In spite of historical review which shows that the introduction of a multiple sex system would not be progressive (Ibid, p. 109) and although elements that could help this vision become a reality are contemporary existent (Ibid, p. 114), heteronormativity is still dominant. The role of the family, the society and the school to allow children to explore all possibilities rather than restrict them to explore only what correlates with their biological sex would be fundamental for children's well-being and the gender health of the society (Ehrensaft, 2013, p. 10).

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1

Interview guide

The questions below serve as guidance for a semi-structured interview (duration of 30 mins), which will provide data for my second-year master thesis on “Pre-school teachers’ perceptions of LGBTQ-themed literature in kindergarten”. During the interview, I will use phrases that will help me clarify what is said or will ask questions that will help me understand in-depth what is being said.

[Warm-up questions] In the beginning, some questions to get to know more about the participants.

- How many years are you teaching in a kindergarten?
- Are you currently working with children in a kindergarten class?
 - If not, when was the last time you were working with them?
- What kind of topics do you discuss in the pre-school class?
 - Where from do these topics derive?
- Have you ever talked to the children about gender and identity?
- [If not] Would you address gender issues? (examples: gender-equality, strict gender binary, interrupted heteronormativity)
 - [If yes] Why?
How would you do that?
 - [If no] Why not?
What is the struggle?
- Are you familiar with the book “The Great Big Book of Families”?
[Present the book] This book is translated into Greek and addresses different types of families, including those with gay parents.
- What do you think of introducing this kind of book to your group of children?
- What kind of topics can be addressed through that book?
- Is there anything you would avoid talking about?
- How do you find the representation of LGBTQ-people?
- [If they are not willing to use it] Why? What is the problem here?
- According to the relevant curriculum, gender and sexuality issues should be addressed in kindergarten, but no further details are given, why do you believe there is no extended reference on how to address that learning area?
- Here is a list of books in English that are LGBTQ-themed. It was not possible to find a similar list with books in Greek. What are your reflections on this?
- How would you describe the term gender?
- [Evaluation of the interview] Is there any question you would wish I had asked you about?
- How was the interview?

APPENDIX 2

Information sheet for participants

Teachers of the (*name of preschool*) pre-school institution,

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Please read the following information carefully and do not hesitate to ask me any question before you decide to participate.

I am Foteini Karagrigori, and I am a postgraduate student at the University of Linköping, Sweden. My master's programme is related to children and childhood, and the aim of my thesis dissertation is to investigate what pre-school teachers say about the use of literature that addresses issues of gender expression that do not follow the normative gender categories of men and women.

Therefore,

I am looking for 4-6 pre-school teachers who have current or previous experience working in classes with children between 4 and 6 years old and are willing to participate in relevant individual interviews with me.

Your participation will be voluntary, meaning that it is your personal choice whether to participate or not. In case you participate, you may stop the discussion any time you want, without stating any cause.

The interview will be an open discussion where you will be asked about your thoughts upon using LGBTQ-themed literature as a pedagogical tool and is designed to last approximately 30 minutes.

Anything said will be confidential, and no one than me will have access to it. During transcription, your name and any personal information will be altered so that anonymity will be retained.

Contact Information:

You can contact me anytime you wish for further clarifications or anything you might need. My full contact details are:

[name, telephone number, e-mail]

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

APPENDIX 3

Informed consent form

You are invited to participate in a research on pre-school teachers' perceptions of LGBTQ-themed literature in kindergarten classes. The research is conducted by Foteini Karagrighori as part of her postgraduate thesis.

This form consists of two parts:

- The first part has information about the study.
- The second part is where you signify your consent to participate.

Part One: Research Information

Introduction:

I am Foteini Karagrighori, and I am a postgraduate student at the University of Linköping, Sweden. My master's programme is related to children and childhood, and my thesis aims to investigate pre-school teachers' perceptions of using literature that addresses issues of gender expression that do not follow the normative gender categories of men and women.

This form contains research information and the conditions for participation in the interviews.

Type of Research Intervention:

A qualitative survey was designed with the use of semi-structured interview, to analyse pre-school teacher's reflections on using LGBTQ-themed literature as a pedagogical tool. The data will be analysed by me and will be presented to a committee at Linköping's University.

Participant Selection:

You were chosen to participate in the study after you responded to my request and after we confirmed that you are a pre-school teacher in a kindergarten class.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation is voluntary. It is your personal choice whether to participate or not. In case you participate, you may stop the discussion at any time, without mentioning any reason.

Procedures:

If you accept to take part in an interview with me, the interview will be held in a place where you think it is convenient. The interview will be audio-recorded and then will be transcribed by myself. Parts will be translated into English to be included in the study.

Duration:

The interview will be an open discussion and is designed to last 30 minutes. The timeframe may get increased if you feel you want to talk more.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

The information you will share will be completely confidential, and no one than me will have access to it. During transcription, any personal information (for example, your name) will be changed. Anonymity is going to be retained in any published text.

Sharing the Results:

Once the study is completed (June 2019), I can contact you to send you a digital copy or an abstract in Greek.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw:

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and includes the right to withdraw. You can interrupt the discussion and even stop it whenever you wish (during or after the end of the interview), without the need to state a cause.

Contact Information:

You can contact me for further clarifications or anything else you might need. My full contact details are:

[telephone number, e-mail]

Thank you,

Foteini Karagrigori

Part two: Certificate of Consent

- I have read the given information.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I had, have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that excerpts of my replies can be used anonymously in future publications.
- I know that the interview will be audio-recorded.
- I understand that I can withdraw whenever I want without stating a cause.
- I am aware of all the above, and I voluntarily consent to participate in the research.

Full Name

Signature

Date