



Research paper

Textbooks, students and teachers talk around gender: A new materialist approach to children's agency

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H I G H L I G H T S

- The educators were unaware of the prevalence of gendered discourses in textbooks.
- The introduction of non-sexist curricula is not on its own a sufficient measure for combating sexism in education.
- Textbook revisions need to be accompanied by formal guidelines to discuss gender equality issues in the classroom.
- Post-human performativity enables us to rethink agency and grasp the effects of space and material agents in meaning production.
- Gender intelligibility in school space-time-matterings emerges through the intraactions of non-human agents and heteronormative discourses with children's bodies.

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Theoretically anchored in Butlerian and Baradian approaches to gender performativity, this study scrutinized Athenian elementary pupils' understanding of gender-normative discourses in textbook illustrations and their teachers' capacity to identify such discourses. The findings revealed that educators were unaware of the prevalence of gendered discourses in textbooks and did not make substantive efforts to diminish their harmful effects on pupils' perceptions of gender. Children, however, are agentic subjects who negotiate gender discourses idiosyncratically. This study argues that introducing non-sexist curricula is not sufficient for combating sexism in education; textbook revisions need to be accompanied by in-service gender-training courses for educators.

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1. Introduction

Since the genesis of second-wave feminism, the education system has garnered significant attention in feminist critiques (Freedman, 2003). Specifically, feminists' assertions that pedagogical practices propagate women's inferior societal position (Skelton et al., 2009) have propelled education research on gender representations in textbooks, which are often at the heart of classroom activities. Additionally, in the centralized Hellenic education system, curriculum materials are critical features of formal educational strategies, as textbook content is overseen by the Hellenic Ministry

of Education and required to be taught in all state and private schools (Stamelos et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, feminists have argued that these Hellenic teaching materials fail to deconstruct patriarchy, despite several major revisions since 1982 (Hopf & Hatzichristou, 1999; Maragoudaki, 2007) as part of wider educational reforms to promote gender equality in education. Analogously, scholars have internationally argued that despite positive developments in recent publications (see Lee & Collins, 2009; Namatende-Sakwa, 2019a, 2019b), curriculum materials continue to present children with antiquated, culturally idealized renditions of gender. These gender representations could harm the development of children's gender identities (McCabe et al., 2011) by re-inscribing gender in binary terms and encouraging pupils to endorse such binaries (De la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2022).

Much previous feminist-oriented educational research, in Hellas

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and internationally, on the effects of sexist texts on children's understanding of gender has been predicated on social-learning approaches to gender identity development (Chardalia & Ioannidou, 2008; Jackson 2005) that regard pupils as uncritical recipients of preordained meanings rather than as active learners. Accordingly, the introduction of non-sexist curricula was perceived as a panacea for gender equality in the classroom (Namatende-Sakwa, 2021). Consequently, educators' mediation of texts has been overlooked in much previous research (Tantekin-Erden, 2009), even though teachers can prevent uncritical acceptance of textbook gendered messages by teaching against sexist texts (Barton & Namatende-Sakwa, 2012, pp. 173–190) and “adapting and complementing the material” (De la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2022, p. 11).

This qualitative study aimed to scrutinize primary teachers' perceptions of gender and the impact of teachers' attributes (i.e., gender, age, and in-service or pre-service gender-training) on their capacity to recognize gendered discourses in curriculum materials and conduct gender analyses of textbooks. Drawing on Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity to explore how children negotiate gender-normative discourses in textbook illustrations, it conceived of children as agentic subjects endowed with various degrees of power and capable of positioning themselves within discourses in idiosyncratic ways (Foulds, 2013). Further, this study takes a novel theoretical approach to children's agency by utilizing Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism to explore how gender intelligibility emerges through the intra-actions of non-human agents (i.e., clothes, hair, and muscles) and heteronormative discourses with children's bodies.

This study extends the author's previous work on the influence of gendered discourses in textbooks on children's understanding of gender (see Kostas, 2021; Kostas, 2022a) by illuminating teachers' capacity to conduct gender analyses of curriculum materials. Furthermore, it builds on and expands the author's work on children's agency (see Kostas, 2018, 2021), offering new insights into Butlerian notions of discursive subjectification. Specifically, it retheorizes agency within a post-humanist context by shifting attention away from human intentionality to the relations between humans and matter through which gender intelligibility emerges in specific space-time-matterings. Ultimately, the study's findings are expected to provide policymakers at the national and international levels with a framework for establishing policies to effectively improve educational practices and support educators to mitigate the pernicious effects of gendered discourses on pupils' gender development.

The remainder of this paper is organized into five sections. The following two sections review the findings of previous research on teachers' treatment of texts and children's negotiation of gender discourses and outline the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The methods section describes the methodological approach and provides information on the data collection and analysis methods used. The study findings are then presented in the next section, and the paper concludes with a discussion of the findings and suggestions for future research.

2. Teachers' mediation of gendered texts and Children's sense-making of gendered discourses

Second-wave feminists averred that rewriting textbooks from a gender perspective and exposing young readers to egalitarian gender representations offered a panacea for deconstructing patriarchy and combating sexism in education (Namatende-Sakwa, 2021). This strategy was problematic because it was based on sex-role socialization theories that presupposed a passive reader/learner who uncritically absorbs the gender messages they encounter (Davies, 2021a). Scholars have empirically confirmed

that children are endowed with various degrees of agency and interpret stories according to their existing ideas of gender (Bartholomaeus, 2016). For example, Davies's (1989) seminal study of pre-school children's responses to the feminist fairy tale “The Paper Bag Princess” and a follow-up study (Davies & Banks, 1992) demonstrated that children's preconceived ideas of gender roles precluded a feminist hearing of stories. Analogously, Foulds's (2013) study in Kenyan primary schools argued that students upended the gender-egalitarian discourses promoted by textbook illustrations because they fell outside their cultural experiences.

Further, pupils' negotiation of gendered discourses is catalytically influenced by their gender (Ånggård, 2005). In particular, girls tend to be more predisposed than boys to challenge gender-normative discourses (Davies, 1989), presumably because by upending the hegemonic gender order, girls negate the disempowerment associated with it (Paechter, 2006). Conversely, boys typically engage in “category maintenance work” through which they cast out “the ‘other’” in an endeavor to “establish the I” (Davies, 2006, p. 73). By deprecating characteristics associated with femininity (e.g., emotionality), boys constitute “the coherence and legitimacy of the dominant male” (Davies, 2006). For instance, Westland's (1993) study of British primary-school students documented crucial gender differences in pupils' responses to dominant fairy tales: Unlike boys, who upended female characters' untraditional positioning in fairy tales, girls preferred autonomous heroines.

These studies indicate that non-sexist curricula in schools are insufficient for challenging pupils' views of gender (Davies, 1989; Foulds, 2013; Namatende-Sakwa, 2018, pp. 609–629). Hence, educators have a crucial role in developing children's critical literacy skills (Barton & Namatende-Sakwa, 2012, pp. 173–190). In particular, teaching children to read critically requires a story that children can identify with and an opportunity to critically discuss the gender messages it contains under the teacher's supervision (Wing, 1997, pp. 491–504). In such discussions, educators can use role reversal to teach against sexist texts and prevent an uncritical acceptance of traditional gender roles (Willeke & Saunders 1978; as cited in Sunderland et al., 2001, pp. 251–286). Moreover, where possible, teachers ought to use supplementary materials with gender-egalitarian stories to broaden students' understanding of gender. For example, Yeoman (1999) found that by providing students with critical reading activities involving disruptive storylines (e.g., feminist fairy tales), teachers enhanced their ability to critique traditional gendered texts.

Previous studies in Hellas and internationally, however, have underscored that many educators do not make substantive efforts to counteract the negative effects of sexist materials on pupils' perceptions of gender, as they are unaware of the preponderance of gender-normative discourses in schoolbooks (Dimitraki, 2017; Namatende-Sakwa, 2019a). Specifically, despite a major revision of the Hellenic curriculum materials, male characters continue to dominate illustrations and texts in the reading schemes (Maragoudaki, 2007) and anthology textbooks (Kostas, 2021) of primary education. Particularly, depictions of “the two genders, as far as specific roles, skills, and abilities are concerned, in the family, professional and social spheres” (Gouviás & Alexopoulos, 2018, p. 657) in the revised Hellenic textbooks have remained traditional, with women relegated to so-called low-status occupations, such as teachers and nurses (Kostas, 2021). Gouviás and Alexopoulos (2018) further report that educators were unaware of these patterns of gender asymmetries and thus often failed to controvert the normative discourses contained in textbooks. Moreover, educators frequently undermine progressive texts through their instructional practices, as documented in previous international studies (Cushman, 2010). For example, Namatende-Sakwa's (2021) study in

an Ugandan school showed that progressive texts did not “necessarily inform a progressive classroom” because the teachers did not “necessarily take up gender as constructed in texts” (p. 19).

An array of individual characteristics (i.e., gender, age, and pre-service and in-service training) affects teachers' instructional practices and their capacity to recognize the gender-normative discourses in textbooks. Primarily, a categorical relationship has been established between teachers' age and their gender attitudes, with senior educators typically holding more anachronistic gender-role beliefs than their younger confrères (Cushman, 2010; Ifegbesan, 2016). Similarly, salient differences have been observed (in Hellas and internationally) in male and female teachers' responses to anachronistic gender representations in textbooks, with men typically less determined than women to ameliorate them (Psilou, 2015). For instance, Gouvias and Alexopoulos (2018) asserted that, unlike male teachers, who did not methodically challenge gender-normative representations in Hellenic textbooks, female teachers made substantive efforts in their teaching to diminish their harmful effects on pupils' perceptions of gender. Finally, studies have demonstrated that pre- or in-service gender-training optimizes educators' capacity to identify gendered discourses in textbooks (Bhana, 2009; Malins, 2016) and enables teachers to develop and use gender-responsive pedagogical approaches and teaching methods that mitigate the effects of gendered representations on pupils' understanding of gender roles (Pollock et al., 2021). For example, Jones's (2022) study of Ugandan pre-primary and elementary educators' perceptions of gender revealed that gender-training courses could equip teachers with the skills, strategies, and knowledge required to promote gender equality.

In short, teachers' implementation of a hidden curriculum transmits hegemonic and prescriptive gender discourses (Barton & Namatende-Sakwa, 2012, pp. 173–190; Dimitraki, 2017), which may have a negative impact on children's learning opportunities and future professional aspirations (Kostas, 2014; Sunderland et al., 2001, pp. 251–286). Hence, it is crucial to ensure that educators teach against sexist texts and equip pupils with the necessary skills to thwart gender-normative discourses (Cushman, 2010).

3. Humanist and post-humanist gender performativity

The idea of gender and sex as unproblematic natural categories has been vehemently repudiated by post-structuralist theorists (Sunderland & Litosseliti, 2008). Butler (1990) theorized gender as “a set of repeated acts” that produce the illusion of gender as a static and congealed bodily effect (p. 45). Hence, Butlerian discursive performativity purports that gender is performative, constituted and reconstituted in and through the amalgamation of discourses. Discourses are “historically specific organizations of language” (Butler, 1990, p. 145) that offer individuals various—and often contradictory—subject positions or ways of being in the world. Although these conflicting discourses beget a plurality of gender performances, successful masculinity and femininity are firmly ensconced within the heterosexual matrix, which Butler (1990) defined as “the grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized” and are “hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (p. 151).

Seen through this theoretical prism, textbook illustrations are critical discursive sites within textbook discourse, and supplementary to text-based content that “produce broader social discourses and practices related to gender” (Jackson & Gee, 2005, p. 117). Thus, iconography offers pupils a range of modes of subjectivity, as gender representations therein “can extend meaning beyond the written text or the reader's imagination or they can

even recast the story” (Wason-Ellam, 1997, p. 6). Nevertheless, children's responses to gender-normative discourses cannot be presumed.

Butler's (1990) theorization of discursive subjectification provided new ways of comprehending how discursive powers operate to produce individuals' subjectivity. Nevertheless, her conceptualization of subjectivity attenuates the significance of the nexus between material phenomena and discursive practices in the production of knowing (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). The Butlerian approach to gender was broadened by Barad's (2007) theory of post-humanist performativity, which suggests that “discourses and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another” but rather intra-act (p. 149). “Through intra-actions or relations within, rather than ‘inter-actions’ or relations of exteriority, human and non-human phenomena are ... co-constituted” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2020, p. 987). Intra-activity denotes the entanglement of matter with discourse, regulating the construction of meanings (Barad, 2007). Hence, by attributing agency to matter, Barad (2007) radically redefined the idea of performativity as not a mere discursive-linguistic notion limited to human intentionality, but as an act that “incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and non-human and natural and cultural factors” (Barad, 2007, p. 808). Therefore, Baradian post-humanist performativity emphasizes how gender is constituted through non-human agentic matter (e.g., objects) and discursive-material practices (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). It is important to note that post-humanist performativity does not unfold in a void, but rather is emplaced in a space-time-mattering (Davies, 2021b), a concept that denotes how “time and space are produced through iterative intra-actions that materialize specific phenomena, where phenomena are not ‘things’ but relations” (Barad, 2007, p. 149).

Theoretically predicated on Barad's (2007) post-human performativity, this study offers a novel understanding of how gender intelligibility emerges through the practices of mattering, and of how heteronormative gender performances come into being as specific discursive and material phenomena intra-act (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015); this is a domain that remains understudied (in Hellas and internationally). Specifically, this study scrutinizes how successful gender performances materialize through the agential intra-actions between sports, bodies, and non-human agentic matter, such as clothes, hair, and muscles, in two Athenian elementary schools.

4. Methods

Situated within the post-modernist paradigm, this qualitative study examines teachers' perceptions of gender and capacity to identify gender-normative discourses in the curriculum materials for the third and fourth grades. Complementary to the above, it explores pupils' understanding of the gendered discourses promoted in textbook illustrations. The data were collected from two state-funded elementary schools in Athens, whose catchment areas comprise primarily white middle-class families. The school Horizons consisted of six classes (141 students in total), while the school Lighthouse comprised eight classes (189 students in total). The two schools were chosen from a list provided by the Hellenic Ministry of Education. I decided to focus only on the 8–10-year-old pupils of each school because this age group is under-represented in research in this field (Chardalia & Ioannidou, 2008). Accordingly, 80 third- and fourth-grade pupils (40 boys and 40 girls) aged 8–10 years participated in the study. The second phase of the study involved teachers (two women in the school Horizons and two women and one man in the school Lighthouse). Equitable participation of individuals from both genders was not achieved as they were selected because they taught the specific age group (see Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of participants.

	Athena	Costas	Vicky	Catherine	Maria
Sex	F	M	F	F	F
Age	37	40	26	29	42
Teaching experience	14	16	3	4	11
Ethnicity and nationality	Caucasian/Greek	Caucasian/Greek	Caucasian/Greek	Caucasian/Greek	Caucasian/Greek
Qualifications	University degree	University degree	University degree	University degree	University degree

A semi-structured interview protocol was employed in interviewing the pupils and teachers, as it provided the opportunity to probe and ask follow-up questions (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989; Kostas, 2022b). All interviews were administered in the participants' native language (modern Greek). The one-on-one interviews with the educators were conducted over one week, owing to the small sample size, and each lasted approximately 1 h. The teachers selected the interview setting (e.g., school principal's office, empty classrooms), depending on what was most convenient for them. The interviews focused on educators' perceptions of gender, their treatment of textbooks and capacity to identify the gendered discourses contained therein. Sample questions included.

- What do you think about the gender representations in the revised textbooks?
- Do you discuss gender-equality issues in the classroom?
- Have you received any training on gender-equality issues?

Semi-structured group interviews were organized with the children to facilitate gathering large amounts of data (Lankshear, 1993). This type of interviewing promotes interactions among interviewees (Kitzinger, 1994) and “may well prevent the routinised responses by one child sometimes obtained in individual interviews” (Lewis, 1992, p. 417). Further, in group interviews with children, the presence of the group's other members may counteract any trepidation attributable to the researcher's presence when interviewed individually (Lewis, 1992), encouraging children to communicate their ideas spontaneously and candidly. The groups were co-organized with the teachers considering the children's camaraderie with the other members. The interviews were conducted in the headteacher's office during normal school hours (at times conducive to the students) and lasted approximately 50 min. Altogether 20 mixed-gender group interviews were held over six weeks, with each group comprising two girls and two boys (8 group interviews in school Horizons and 12 in school Light-house). A mixed-gender composition typically makes a group more task-oriented and encourages free-flowing conversation (Sikes, 1991), enabling researchers to study participants' beliefs “as they operate within a social network and to explore how accounts are constructed ... and changed through social interaction” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 159). Nonetheless, dominant voices in the group can periodically supersede/marginalize the opinions of others (especially the girls'). Therefore, I strove to ensure that pupils' ideas were challenged in a courteous/respectful manner that fostered debate.

During the interviews with the pupils, their perceptions of the characters' roles, responsibilities, and play activities in selected illustrations from the revised anthology textbooks for the third and fourth grades were explored. These textbooks were published in 2006 and are mandated across all government-funded and private elementary schools in Hellas. They are compendiums of literary works (e.g., poems, novels) by different authors that include a range of themes (e.g., history, family life, environment, religion, culture, sports, and technology). Previous studies of gender representation in the revised Hellenic textbooks of primary education focused almost exclusively on the reading schemes (Gouviyas & Alexopoulos,

2018; Maragoudaki, 2007), with only one study analyzing the revised anthologies from a gender perspective (Kostas, 2021).

Specifically, during the interviews, I showed the pupils two illustrations. The first depicted a group of children whose gender was not identifiable playing football (see Anthologies, 2006, p. 143) and the second showed two girls playing quietly with fruit (Anthologies, 2006, p. 155). The illustrations formed the basis for a wider discussion about children's perceptions of gender and their playground experiences. Sample questions included.

- Who is this person?
- What are they doing?
- Would a girl/boy be interested in this activity?
- Do you ever engage in such activities?
- What kind of games do you play with your friends?

The interviews with the teachers and the children were recorded using notetaking as stipulated in the ethical approval by the Hellenic Ministry of Education. At the end of each day, handwritten interview notes were developed into full typed transcripts. Discourse Analysis (DA) was used to explore how the participants used language to construct gender meanings. This approach to data analysis is based on the premise that a pre-discursive self does not exist as meanings and identities are constructed and regulated through discourses. DA also underscores participants' active involvement in meaning production and focuses on the contradictions in talk about gender. These incongruities are symptomatic of the “discursive resources available to the narrator ...” and as such “... offer valuable insights into the wider social and cultural context within which particular experiences are given meaning and the power relations in operation in the process of meaning production” (Throsby, 2004, p. 51). Hence, DA can lay “bare the power relations through which exclusion and its exclusionary effects are achieved” (Throsby, 2004, p. 51).

However, the researcher's interpretation of the data may be influenced by their subjectivity, personal background, and role in the research process (Creswell, 2009). Thus, it is crucial to make my role in the research process and positionality explicit for readers. Specifically, to minimize the potential impact of my subjectivity on the data gathered, I recursively engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process to consider personal biases by examining and reporting on my own “conceptual lens ... preconceptions, and values and how these affect [ed] research decisions in all phases of ... the study” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). Specifically, I approached this project as a researcher and academic who is sensitized about gender-equality issues, but also as a native Greek speaker who was born, raised, and educated in Hellas. In accordance with my epistemological position, this first-person perspective of navigating schooling enabled me to build a rapport with participants and adopt an emic (insider) perspective on the culture group I studied. My understanding of the cultural and social context allowed me to sketch out participants' perspectives and experiences and understand how they attributed meaning to their experiences. Nevertheless, I espoused an etic (outsider) perspective in the data analysis process by using Butlerian and Baradian

performativity approaches as scientific frameworks for understanding participants' perceptions of gender, practices, and behaviors. Consolidating the emic and etic perspectives increased the trustworthiness of the findings.

Other strategies used to ensure credibility in this study included prolonged engagement with participants to build rapport, investing time in familiarizing myself with the specific settings, and member check by feeding data back to adult participants and incorporating their suggestions for adjustment (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). A potential threat to trustworthiness, however, stems from notetaking during the interviews, which can introduce bias and compromise the credibility of the data (Morse, 1999, pp. 435–436). Notes were taken unobtrusively without breaking eye-contact with the participants (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997). Additionally, I cultivated thick description by setting down key phrases that served as reminders of blocks of interview content (Creswell, 2009). All field notes were developed into full transcripts immediately after the interviews to avoid memory lapses.

Last, before beginning the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the Hellenic Ministry of Education and the relevant university ethics committee. The British Educational Research Association's (BERA, 2018) ethical guidelines were also followed throughout the research process. Specifically, access to the settings was obtained via the headteachers. Next, participants and parents/guardians of the children were informed in writing about the study's aims and the voluntary basis of participation. Participants and parents/guardians were assured that withdrawal from the study would not affect them or their children negatively. Written informed consent was obtained from the teachers and students' parents/guardians, and the children's assent was obtained verbally before starting the interviews. To protect participants' confidentiality, all potentially identifying information about the participants (e.g., school name) was removed from the transcripts before being stored in a password-protected computer. Lastly, pseudonyms are used throughout this article for illustrative quotes (BERA, 2018).

5. Findings

5.1. Teachers' perceptions of gender

During the interviews, the educators unanimously contested the binary of the private/public spheres and the identification of the public realm as a male-dominated topography and male bastion of patriarchal privilege.

Researcher: “Women's place is the home.” How far do you agree/disagree with this statement?

Catherine: ... women should work and get help from their husbands with household chores ...

Maria: Women make an important financial contribution to the household ...

While the teachers subverted the discourses of female domesticity, they upheld the binary typology of the masculine/feminine personality, resonating with hegemonic gendered discourses. Costas's response is typical of this finding.

Researcher: What traits characterize men and women ?

Costas: Independence, boldness, leadership skills, competitiveness, ambition, and sloppy appearance are masculine traits ...

Costas: Docility, [a] dreamy nature, and sensitivity are feminine traits ...

For Costas (a 40-year-old male teacher) and three of the female participants (Vicky, aged 26, Catherine, aged 29, and Maria, aged 42), successful masculinity comprises traits such as autonomy, leadership skills, athletic dexterity, unemotionality, and disheveled attire. Conversely, femininity is characterized by submissiveness, emotionality, sartorial elegance, and sporting incompetence. These

findings corroborate those of previous studies (e.g., Bhana, 2009 in South Africa; Blaise & Taylor, 2012 in the UK; Ifegbesan, 2010 in Nigeria), suggesting that educators tend to regard girls and boys as two distinct and homogeneous groups. For instance, Smith et al. (2019) reported that New Zealander primary teachers considered boys more aggressive and less prosocial than girls, while the Ugandan teachers in Namatende-Sakwa's (2019a) study unwittingly positioned students “as gendered subjects informed by a logic of gender difference which predominantly constructed the active, intelligent, courageous, disruptive boy vis-a-vis the passive, shy girl” (p. 89).

Moreover, the adamant gender binaries that regulated the participants' understanding of “boyhood” and “girlhood” were harmonious with those promoted by the revised textbooks for the third and fourth grades. For instance, in the reading schemes and anthology textbooks for the third and fourth grades, male characters assume leadership roles in most of the stories (for a detailed analysis see Gouviás & Alexopoulos, 2018; Kostas, 2021). Additionally, in anthology textbooks, contrastingly to male characters being positioned as unemotional, female characters are portrayed as conforming, sensitive, and caring (see Kostas, 2021). From this, it can be hypothesized that the educators' perceptions of gender might negatively affect their capacity to recognize gender-normative discourse in curriculum materials (Allana et al., 2010; Namatende-Sakwa, 2021), ultimately culminating in teachers unwittingly reinforcing gendered discourses through their treatment of texts and illustrations (a point that will be picked up again later). If we turn to post-human performativity, the teachers' responses divulge the intra-actions between the agential forces of athleticism and sartorial elegance, heteronormative discourses, and children's somata through which successful masculinity and femininity come into being (this aspect will be discussed later).

Unlike her confrères, Athena upended these rigorous gender binaries by asserting that “these traits can be either masculine or feminine.” Athena was a 37-year-old woman with 14 years of work experience. While she had never attended any formal in-service gender-training programs organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Education, she sporadically attended seminars and workshops on gender equality, which might somewhat explain why she upended the binary construction of masculinity and femininity. By contrast, the other participants (apart from Vicky, who had pre-service training during her undergraduate studies) had not attended any gender-training programs, suggesting that informal in-service training might have a gender-equalizing impact on teachers' views of gender. This conjecture is supported by previous research, reaffirming the significance of gender-training in sensitizing teachers (de Lange & Mitchell, 2014; Malins, 2016) and increasing their capacity to conduct gender analyses of textbooks (Namatende-Sakwa, 2019a). For example, Jones (2022, p. 1) has argued that gender-training courses provided the Ugandan elementary teachers in her study with the knowledge and skills to “explore and gain deeper insight into understandings of gender and gender-based issues ...” Nevertheless, despite having received pre-service training, Vicky upheld the traditional categorization of personality traits into masculine and feminine. While this does not discount the gender-equalizing effects of pre-service training (Tantekin-Erden, 2009), it might be indicative of the endemic problems that undermine the success of educators' pre-service training courses (Airtton & Koecher, 2019; Blair & Deckman, 2019).

Although the participants were sensitized to the importance of galvanizing girls to pursue male-dominated professions, they supported the traditional division of the labor market when asked to recommend appropriate professions for two of their highest-achieving male and female pupils.

Athena: one of the boys ... something related to education ...

the other economics ... one of the girls ... something related to languages ... the other ... social services.

Costas: The boys ... one doctor and the other ... computer sciences ... The girls ... education, I think ...

Athena thwarted dominant discourses of so-called male-appropriate professional roles by positioning boys in a traditionally female-dominated domain. However, the girls' positioning in the topography of the labor market was rather conventional, given that the roles of social workers and teachers can be regarded as manifestations of women's caring nature in the public sphere (Ullah & Skelton, 2013). Costas presented a more outmoded gender division of occupations, positioning boys in high social prestige professions (such as doctors) and envisioning girls in teaching roles (this was rather remarkable, considering that Costas was a male teacher). This finding corroborates previous international research postulating that male teachers hold more traditional views of gender than female teachers, especially regarding professional roles (Almutawa, 2005; Osman, 2021; Tatar & Emmanuel, 2001).

Analogous ascriptions of certain occupations as more masculine than others are propagated through the textbooks for the third and fourth grades (Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2018). For instance, Kostas (2021) posited that the anthology textbooks “normalize males' superior ... intellectual capabilities and relegate women to low-status, traditionally female occupations ...,” while the “only intellectual role permitted, for women ... [is] that of the teacher” (p. 60). Since educators' perceptions of gender-appropriate roles conform with the discursive positioning of femininity and masculinity in textbooks, it can be hypothesized that their views of gender might negatively affect their capacity to recognize the gendered discourses contained therein, precluding a critical appraisal of textbook content (Cushman, 2010; Namatende-Sakwa, 2021).

However, Vicky and Catherine (the youngest among the participants, aged 26 and 29 years, respectively) endorsed a more egalitarian organization of the labor market that subverted the traditional gender categorization of occupational roles by envisaging female students in high-skilled professions, such as lawyers and scientists.

Vicky: Both boys ... something related to education and the girls one law and the other something related to sciences.

While this finding cannot be extrapolated and should be interpreted with caution owing to the small sample size, it suggests that in addition to the participants' gender, age might be a predictor of gender biases. This finding aligns with previous research, which postulates an inverse synergy between age and egalitarian perceptions of gender roles (Ginsburg & Kamat, 2009). For example, studies on Ghanaian (Osman, 2021) and Nigerian (Ifegbesan, 2016) pre-service teachers' perceptions of gender have revealed that senior educators typically hold more gender-normative perceptions than their younger colleagues. Nonetheless, this was not a consistent finding in this study.

5.2. Teachers' capacity to recognize gender-normative discourse in curriculum materials

Previous studies of Hellenic textbooks have reaffirmed that the revised curriculum materials predispose children to accept an anachronistic gender order (see Kostas, 2021; Maragoudaki, 2007). For instance, Gouvias and Alexopoulos (2018) pointed out that in the revised reading schemes for the third and fourth grades, women are permitted a limited number of low-status occupations, while men are given roles that carry power and authority. Despite these gender asymmetries and the symbolic obliteration of female characters in the narratives, which are outnumbered 3:1 (Kostas, 2021), the participants unanimously stated that the revised textbooks promoted a gender-balanced view of the world.

Costas: In the anthologies, male and female characters are represented in a positive way ...

Athena: I have not spotted any [stereotypes] ...

Catherine: ... men and women are portrayed positively ...

These examples demonstrate the educators' inability to recognize the gendered discourses in the textbooks, corroborating previous studies that found that teachers use textbooks uncritically in the classroom (Barton & Namatende-Sakwa, 2012, pp. 173–190; Biemmi, 2015). For example, previous Hellenic research has shown that educators were unaware of how gender is cited in the revised elementary reading schemes and could not recognize gendered discourses “even in their most conspicuous form [s]” (Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2018, p. 653). It can be hypothesized that a critical appraisal of the textbooks' discursive content may have been precluded since the Hellenic Ministry of Education oversees the textbooks—that is, as textbooks are mandated by the government, this can shut down critical appraisal. The participants accepted the gender representations at face value (especially following the ministry's latest revision), reflecting previous findings that teachers regard textbooks as authoritative and ignore gender portrayals in them (Namatende-Sakwa, 2019a; Sikes, 1991; cited in Barton & Namatende-Sakwa, 2012, pp. 173–190).

In parallel, the dearth of in-service gender-training courses for educators might have hindered participants' ability to recognize sexist bias in textbooks (Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2018; Namatende-Sakwa, 2021). Athena was also unaware of these patterns of gender asymmetry, notwithstanding her periodic attendance of gender-training programs, which were notably neither organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Education nor focused on sexism in education. Hence, although Athena was sensitized to gender-equality issues, she was not more equipped than her confrères to identify sexist bias in textbooks. Nonetheless, while this finding cannot be extrapolated to all primary teachers and might be limited to this sample, it suggests two hypotheses: (1) sporadic attendance of gender courses might have a limited impact on developing educators' capacity to conduct a gender analysis of curriculum materials; and (2) for gender-training programs to be effective, emphasis must be placed on providing teachers with the skills required to identify gender stereotypes in textbooks.

Further, the participants reported without exception that gender-equality issues were not covered in the classroom, predominantly owing to time constraints:

Researcher: Do you discuss gender-equality issues in the classroom?

Maria: Unfortunately, there is no time to discuss gender issues ...

Athena: Sometimes ... but not really in depth ...

Remarkably, despite having attended some informal gender-training courses and being more sensitized to gender inequality, Athena only periodically and superficially challenged the gendered discourses in the textbooks through classroom discussions/activities. This finding is consistent with previous studies in Hellas and internationally, implying that educators do not discuss gender-equality issues in the classroom (Biemmi, 2015; Gouvias & Alexopoulos, 2018). For instance, Barton and Namatende-Sakwa (2012, pp. 173–190) found that Ugandan elementary teachers failed to use texts critically in the classroom and “as a vehicle for promoting gender-inclusive attitudes” (p. 184). Similarly, Namatende-Sakwa (2019a) postulated that pre-school and primary educators in a New York elementary school focused exclusively on the “storyline and themes in the curriculum” and ignored gender as constructed in the texts (p. 88). This lack of classroom discussions might have limited the opportunities for teachers to critically engage with textbook content, which might constitute further evidence why the participants were unaware of the gendered

discourses promoted by the textbooks. The findings highlight not only the need for a revision of textbooks from a gender perspective (Maragoudaki, 2007), but also the need for tangible guidelines to address gender-equality issues in the classroom (Malins, 2016). Nevertheless, the dearth of such guidance, in conjunction with the absence of formal in-service gender-training programs, might have greatly hindered teachers from sufficiently embracing measures to promote gender equality (Pollock et al., 2021).

Despite this, the participants unanimously believed that the schools and current educational policies effectively mitigate the pernicious effects of gendered discourses on young readers' perceptions of gender. For instance, Vicky maintained that: "The textbook revision has addressed the issue of gender stereotypes in textbooks ..." Only Athena emphasized the void in contemporary educational policies, and stressed the pressing need to organize in-service gender-training courses for educators: "They should organize seminars on gender equality for teachers ... many [teachers] have never attended any ..."

Despite the educators' self-professed sensitization to gender-equality issues, the data showed that the participants were unaware of the prevalence of gender-normative representations in the textbooks and did not foster classroom discussions on gender-equality issues (Gouviás & Alexopoulos, 2018; Namatende-Sakwa, 2019a). This might be symptomatic of the participants' conscious attempt to express egalitarian views of gender as a matter of principle (Pollock et al., 2021). In addition to the absence of specific policies to address gender-equality issues and the lack of provision for in-service gender-training opportunities, teachers' individual characteristics (i.e., age and gender) might also influence their perceptions of gender (Ifegbesan, 2016; Osman, 2021). Specifically, the two participants in their 20s subverted a gender-normative categorization of professional roles into masculine and feminine to a greater extent than the three participants in their 40s. Moreover, the male teacher endorsed a less egalitarian labor market organization than the females. However, teachers' gender or age does not appear to affect their capacity to recognize gender-normative discourses in textbooks, for without exception, the participants were unaware of how gender was cited in them. Furthermore, the participants unanimously refrained from facilitating discussions about gender issues in the classroom. Since none of the participants had attended formal in-service gender-training courses, these findings reaffirm the importance of gender-training in sensitizing teachers (de Lange & Mitchell, 2014; Malins, 2016) and increasing their capacity to conduct gender analyses of textbooks (Stake, 2006). However, these findings should be interpreted with caution because, given the study's small sample size, they might be limited to the specific population.

5.3. The pupils' perceptions of gender-appropriate activities

Analyses of the pupils' responses to the gendered discourses promoted by iconography revealed some crucial gender asymmetries concerning boys' and girls' understanding of gender-appropriate play activities. In addition, the findings revealed the role of corporeal agents (i.e., hair) and sports in the construction of successful masculinity and femininity. Specifically, the pupils were shown an illustration depicting a group of children playing football (Anthologies, 2006, p. 143). Despite the characters' genders not being discernible in the illustration, the boys (18 third- and 16 fourth-grade boys) almost unanimously believed that the players were male.

Researcher: What makes you think they are boys and not girls?

Nikitas: They are boys ... because they have short hair ... girls can't play football ...

Theodore: Boys play football and run ... girls just talk ...

Manolis: ... from the trousers and the hair.

These boys drew on normative discourses of gender-appropriate sports and picked some ostensible markers of masculinity (i.e., athleticism, hair length, physical strength, and trousers) to make sense of the illustration. This finding is consistent with previous research, suggesting that texts and illustrations are polysemous, for children actively participate in constructing meaning and subjectively negotiate gender discourses (Foulds, 2013). These boys' responses corroborate previous studies showing that masculinity is discursively constructed around physicality (Bhana, 2008; Bhana & Mayeza, 2016) and "athleticism, which is inextricably linked to the body in the form of strength, power, skill, fitness and speed" (Swain, 2003, p. 302).

Similarly, the boys rejected sedentary activities when shown an illustration of two girls playing quietly with fruits (Anthologies, 2006, p. 155).

Researcher: Would a boy be interested in this activity?

Manos: No ... boys wouldn't like this ... This is boring ...

Theodore: Girls play these silly games ...

By drawing on discourses of physicality and the gender binary of sensibility/silliness, the boys upheld the gendered division of games/activities to demarcate their differences from girls. This signals that most third- and fourth-grade boys constructed the two genders as oppositional categories. Specifically, femininity was viewed as the antipode of masculinity and defined in the absence of physicality, strength, and football skills. Therefore, the girls' exclusion from football (where speed, athletic dexterity, and strength are required) was considered natural, probably because their participation would endanger the game's association with masculinity (Swain, 2000). For example, studies conducted in South African elementary schools (Mayerza, 2018) and in Portuguese and Spanish pre-schools (Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020a, pp. 199–212; 2020b) have argued that girls' ostracism from football serves the purpose of maintaining the sport's association with masculinity.

Moreover, through an agential post-humanist lens, Manolis's response shows how the discursive (masculinity) is constituted via the material (short hair; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Specifically, the material-discursive force of short hair (an agentic matter) intracts with football, muscles, speed, trousers, heteronormative discourses, and the non-human aspect of the football pitch to create a hetero-masculine embodiment (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). The material-discursive effects of these corporeal materialities become evident when considering how the absence of muscles and football skills creates an unintelligible/non-heterosexual boyhood.

George: Boys like football ... if you are not strong and can't run, you can't play football ... you are a girl.

Specifically, the absence of corporeal capacities required in football (namely physical strength and speed) can invoke a sense of homosexuality as they intra-act with boys' somata, football, and heteronormative discourses (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Previous studies in the UK (Renold, 2013; Swain, 2006), South Africa (Mayerza, 2018), Hellas (Gerouki, 2010), and Australia (Bartholomaeus, 2012) have also demonstrated that elementary-school-age boys who lack capacity for masculine sports (i.e., football) are regarded as effeminate by their male classmates. This is symptomatic of boys' efforts to demean "the weak, the dependent, and the feminine" to establish "the coherence and legitimacy of the dominant male" (Davies, 2006, p. 73).

If we turn to post-human performativity, George's response unravels the material-discursive intra-actions between speed and the capacity for football with heteronormative discourses and boys' somata (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Through these intra-actions, an unintelligible gender performance materializes in the specific school space-time-matterings. Extrapolating from this finding, it

can be hypothesized that understanding episodes of gender and sexual bullying in school space-time-mattering requires the adoption of a more-than-a-discursive approach, which can enable us to grasp the effects of space and material agents in the production of these forms of bullying (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015).

Analogously, most third- and fourth-grade girls asserted that the illustration depicted a group of boys playing football. Nevertheless, their explanations varied widely.

Nana: They are boys ... girls don't play because it is tough.

Niki: ... because boys don't let them play ... they don't let us play either.

Researcher: Why?

Xenia: Because they are silly and only want to play with boys ...

Except for a few third- and fourth-grade girls (5 and 8, respectively) who upheld the discursive nexus between football and masculinity, most of the girls (12 third-grade and 8 fourth-grade girls) argued that football is a suitable sport for girls. This is symptomatic of girls being more predisposed than boys to participate in the disruption of gendered discourses so as to upend the disempowerment imposed upon them, as demonstrated in previous studies (Paechter, 2006). However, while making sense of the illustration, these girls concurred with their classmates that all the characters were male, as boys would not have permitted girls to join in. Niki's and Xenia's responses suggest that the girls drew from their playground experiences and negotiated the illustration subjectively, making it fit into their preconceived ideas of gender and lived experiences (Foulds, 2013; Namatende-Sakwa, 2021). The exclusion these girls experienced on school playgrounds is well-documented in international literature. In particular, several studies have suggested that schoolyards are dichotomized into rigid gender zones where boys occupy the largest area in the playgrounds (Mayeza, 2017; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020) and use playground spaces "... as a way of asserting dominance over girls" (Shilling, 1991, p. 24).

Paradoxically, although most of the girls (17 and 16, respectively) challenged the association of football with masculinity, they reproduced, to a certain extent, the identification of femininity with the absence of physicality. This was evident when we discussed the girls' activities in the second illustration, which depicted two girls playing quietly with fruits.

Researcher: Would a boy be interested in this activity?

Nana: No this is more girly ... boys are silly and play only football.

Niki: Girls like to talk ... boys are silly and don't like to be quiet ...

Drawing on the discourse of silliness, these girls reproduced the binary of sensible femininity/silly masculinity in elucidating boys' passion for physically demanding activities (especially football). These girls sustained a traditional categorization of activities into feminine and masculine and constructed girlhood and boyhood as oppositional categories (Francis, 1998). Contrariwise, a few third- and fourth-grade girls (3 and 4, respectively) pointed out that although the characters' genders were unclear, the illustration most likely showed a gender-heterogeneous group. Medea's response is a typical example of this: "They could be boys and girls ... I play football with boys" This group of girls, like their female classmates, drew on their playground experiences to make sense of the illustration (Bartholomaeus, 2016). However, since their experiences differed significantly from those of the rest of the girls (as these girls frequently played football with boys), their interpretations differed. Since physicality played a central role in these girls' performance of femininity, they negated girls' activities in the second illustration because they were not physically demanding.

Medea: I don't like it ... I am a tomboy.

Cleopatra: No... I like to play football and run.

By embodying physicality, these girls delineated their differences from their female classmates (and girly femininity; Mayeza, 2018; Renold, 2008) and claimed power (Bhana, 2005). Especially, Medea's self-identification as a tomboy (an identity that, as her response implies, was discursively constructed around physicality in the form of speed and participation in football) captures a critical moment that sheds light on children's varying degrees of agency. Specifically, it is symptomatic of how some children negotiate and perform gender idiosyncratically (sometimes even against dominant socio-cultural expectations) in school settings (Mayerza, 2017).

In addition to embodying atypical qualities of girls (i.e., sporting dexterity), these girls upended traditional binaries of clothing (i.e., skirts/trousers).

Medea: ... I do not like dresses because I can't play football in a dress ...

Maria: I do not wear girly trousers either ...

Cleopatra: ... you can't run in a skirt.

We can see how these self-identified tomboys upended discourses of gender-appropriate attire, as they felt trapped by the material force of the dresses/skirts that they rejected in an effort to throw off the yoke of disempowerment associated with them (Robinson & Davies, 2010). In terms of post-human performativity, these examples also underscore that skirts/dresses (or even so-called girly trousers) constitute material-discursive phenomena, exerting "a signifying (discursive) and real (material) force upon the wearer" (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015, p. 17). Specifically, the reverberations of the intra-actions between dresses, skirts, and even girly trousers with dominant discourses of femininity regulate what girls' bodies can do (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). As such, the performative intra-actions between skirts, girls' somata, and heteronormative discourses normalize girls' exclusion from certain activities (i.e., football). This leads to the creation of gendered zones on school playgrounds, as found in previous studies (e.g., Mayeza & Bhana, 2020 in South Africa; Swain, 2003 in the UK). Thus, the material-discursive work of clothes may install "gendered practices" (Taylor, 2013, p. 699) and uphold hegemonic gendered power relations.

Finally, the third- and fourth-grade boys and girls unanimously liked the gender representations in the textbooks and considered them normal. Theodore's response is typical: "I like the stories ... men and women in the textbooks are normal." Paradoxically, although some of the girls challenged how the female characters were positioned in the illustrations, they concurred with their classmates that the gender roles in the textbooks reflect women's contemporary position in Hellenic society. According to Medea, "Women's roles are normal."

It can be hypothesized that the lack of classroom discussions on gender-equality issues precluded a critical appraisal of gender representations in the materials. However, the findings signal that children are endowed with various degrees of agency and can make sense of illustrations subjectively to make them fit into their existing ideas of gender and lived experiences (Foulds, 2013; Namatende-Sakwa, 2021). Nevertheless, children's gender appears to shape their sense-making of gender discourses, for the girls in this study were consistently more predisposed than the boys to participate in the disruption of discourses (Davies, 1989), hypothetically "because of the empowerment gained by distancing" themselves from normative femininity (Kostas, 2021, p. 64).

6. Discussion

Despite their self-proclaimed gender sensitization, the educators almost unanimously regarded boys and girls as two distinct and homogeneous groups as regards their personality traits and

prospective professional roles. This could have crucial implications for children's learning experiences, as previous studies have postulated that teachers' differential expectations of children based on gender frequently culminate in boys and girls being treated differently in the classroom (Skelton et al., 2009). In line with the above conjecture, the study's findings emphasize the lack of formal in-service training programs for educators, and of official government guidelines for addressing gender-equality issues in the classroom as critical factors that could explain why the participants failed to recognize the gender-normative discourses in textbooks. Additionally, the dearth of such guidance could also explain why they unanimously disregarded classroom discussions on gender-equality issues (regardless of their gender or age). However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously owing to the small sample size.

Inasmuch as the teachers proclaimed that they made no efforts to mitigate the deleterious effects of the gender-normative discourses contained in the textbooks, they might have deprived their students of the opportunity to broaden their intertextual knowledge of gender-egalitarian discourse (Yeoman, 1999). However, this does not suggest that pupils are passive recipients of pre-determined meanings, since the data show that the pupils actively participated in constructing meaning and positioned themselves idiosyncratically within the discourses. Specifically, the children relied on dominant gender binaries and their experiences of gender and/or intertextual knowledge to make sense of the gender messages imparted in the illustrations (Namatende-Sakwa, 2021). Nevertheless, their way of negotiating gender discourses was catalytically influenced by their gender, as the girls in this study were more predisposed than the boys to challenge anachronistic discourses of gender. Hypothetically, by upending the hegemonic gender order, "they reject [ed] the disempowerment that comes with it" (Paechter, 2006, p. 257). As Westland (1993) reported, the boys engaged in "category maintenance work" to perceive themselves meaningfully within the known gender order (Davies, 2006, p. 73).

7. Conclusions and implications

The study's findings have theoretical and practical implications for practitioners, government officials, policy makers, and future researchers. At the theoretical level, this study offers insights into Butlerian notions of discursive subjectification by illustrating how this process emerges from performative repetitions of heteronormative discourses. Nevertheless, the children's responses revealed that this discursive focus is theoretically and practically limited in scope (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015) as it disregards the role of matter in meaning production. By adopting a post-human performativity lens, this study builds on the Butlerian approach to gender and attempts to open up thinking about classroom texts and students' and teachers' talk around gender to a Barad-inspired new materialist analysis of children's agency. Specifically, Barad's approach rethinks agency by shifting attention away from the individual and human intentionality to a wide range of intra-acting agents (e.g., clothes, hair, and muscles), materialities, and heteronormative discourses through which gender intelligibility materializes in school settings. In this sense, "... agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity ... it is an enactment, not something someone says or does" (Barad, 2007, p. 144).

At the practical level, this study highlighted the role of matter in the production of gender subjectivities and sexual/gender bullying phenomena in school space-time-mattering. Specifically, it revealed how the absence of corporeal capacities required in football through their intra-action with heteronormative discourses and the football pitch can invoke a sense of homosexuality.

Furthermore, it accentuated the material-discursive force of dresses/skirts upon the wearer, which intra-act with girls' somata, the non-human aspect of the playground, and play activities to regulate what girls can/cannot do. Although these findings cannot be extrapolated and should be interpreted with caution owing to the small sample size, they suggest that efforts to eradicate sexism in education must address multiple features and dimensions of schooling concurrently. First, government officials should review school policies that implicitly or explicitly idealize normative forms of masculinity and "celebrate the fit, heroic masculine body in physical education to the detriment of other forms of being boy" (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015, p. 29). Additionally, the study findings can challenge school uniform policies that ignore the material-discursive force of school uniforms upon their wearers and do not accommodate diversity and inclusivity.

Furthermore, official educational policies for teaching materials must include sufficient measures to promote gender equality. In their current form, the textbooks considered in this study reinscribe gender in binary terms and encourage pupils to endorse such binaries (Kostas, 2021). Nevertheless, introducing non-sexist curricula is not a sufficient measure for challenging pupils' views of gender (Eriksson Barajas, 2008). Textbook revisions need to be accompanied by a) formal guidelines to discuss gender-equality issues in the classroom and b) effective gender-training programs that expose "teachers to more theoretical and practical approaches in attending to gender" (Namatende-Sakwa, 2018, p. 626) and equip them with the necessary skills to conduct gender analyses of curriculum materials (Barton & Namatende-Sakwa, 2012, pp. 173–190). It is also crucial to ensure that progress in promoting a gender-sensitive classroom is regularly reviewed and monitored by school committees (Jones, 2022). Lastly, this study argues that the post-human performativity lens can reframe research practices by helping us re-evaluate the "agency of material actors" (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015, p. 11) in ways that challenge the discursive focus in the production of gender subjectivities in school settings.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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