

31th

EECERA annual conference

30th August – 2nd September 2023



Brody, David; Dayan, Yael & Gordon, Daniel (2023). **Utopia and taboo: Israeli children's suppression of gender talk in an outdoor kindergarten.** Paper presented on the 31th EECERA Annual Conference, Estoril/Portugal, 1.9.2023.

Aims include learning how children in a gender-balanced outdoor kindergarten view teachers from gender perspectives, using sociocultural contexts to understand children's gender perspectives. Societal norms within educational settings suppress teacher and child talk about emotionally-laden topics (Jehng, 2022; Brody & Baum, 2007). This study examines how gender discourse became taboo for children. Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy suggests educators' providing objective views of society. Supporting children's perspectives research, Pascal and Bertram (2009) placed young children at the center of scholarly inquiry. From these two viewpoints we constructed our theory on children's silence about gender. The Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2005) inspired this case-study research. Picture-drawing and child-guided walks stimulated children's narratives about teachers. Parents and teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. We analyzed data thematically using grounded theory. Participants were anonymized and identifying information was suppressed. Ethics Committee of the Hebrew University granted approval. Parents and teachers criticized societal gender norms, viewing the outdoor kindergarten as a gender-balanced utopia. However, kindergarten observations revealed traditional gender roles in daily practice. Children's narratives regarding their teachers avoided gender explanations. This absence of gender references is explained by an unspoken taboo against gender discourse. Alternative explanation is children's sensitivity to adult ambivalence regarding gaps between reality and their ideal regarding the kindergarten setting. Parents and practitioners should consider opening discourse around gender topics to enable children's voices and to learn from children how to align gender realities with practice.

Keywords

gender, children's perspectives, outdoor kindergartens, taboo, Mosaic approach

Presenters:

David Brody, Orot Yisrael Academic College, Jerusalem, Israel

Non-presenting Co-Author:

Yael Dayan & Daniel Gordon, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Utopia and taboo: Israeli children's silencing of gender talk in an outdoor kindergarten

Dr. David Brody Orot Israel Teachers College

Dr. Yael Dayan Hebrew University

Daniel Gordon Hebrew University

האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים
THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM



The context: forest kindergarten

- Staff: male (Yuval) and female (Ayala) work together as co-teachers, plus an aide (mostly female)
- Child population: 12 boys, 6 girls, ages 3-6
- Program based on nature and campcraft
- Upper middle-class highly educated liberal community



Socio-cultural context

Macro

Patriarchal gender attitudes in Israel

Militaristic milieu

Meso

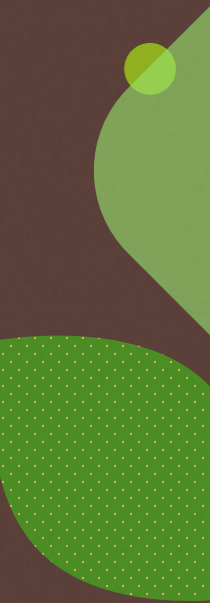
Liberal community

Feminist pushback to gendered militarism

Micro

Ethos of gender equality in the kindergarten

In practice: traditional gender roles are enacted



Methodology

- One researcher spent several weeks in the kindergarten as an observer before collecting data – to engender familiarity and comfort with the children
- A second researcher observed for a day.
- Children were asked to draw their teachers.
- Conversations with the children based on their drawings.
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and parents
- Thematic analysis using grounded theory

Findings



Four approaches to gender were found among the children, teachers, and parents

Ignoring gender

the children

Choice of gender expression

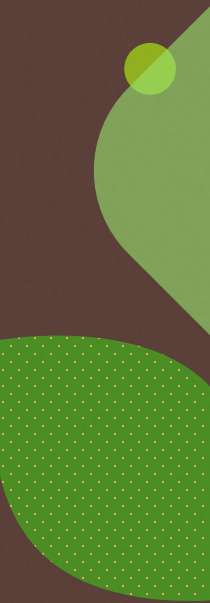
the male teacher

Acceptance of gender differences

the female teacher

Resistance to gender differences

the mothers



Ignoring Gender Differences

The children never mentioned gender when describing their teachers and the activities they enjoy doing with each teacher.



the children

Fire and Cooking

- “Yuval likes to be responsible for the fire.”
- Yuval is “an expert in cooking rice and dahl.”

the children

Crafts

- Ayala “is the main one on crafts.”
- “Most of the time, she sits with the crafts.”

the children

First aide kit

- “She always has [the kit] with her because she’s a medic.”
- “[When I get hurt, I go to Ayala] because she’s a medic. She was a medic in the army. And I don’t think that Yuval was [an army medic].”

the children

Choice of gender expression

- “I really like it when they see that their male teacher is building a fire and dragging branches, and a second later I’ve got a tiny little snail in my hand, and you know that in the end most of the messages we get across are not through words.” (Yuval)

the male teacher

Acceptance of Gender Differences

- “Women have a particular nature and men bring something different to this, and in my view, this is ... more complete. I think that it’s nice that there is this possibility that truly gives different colors to the kindergarten.” (Ayala)

the female
teacher

Resistance to gender differences

- “Once or twice I heard [my son] say, ‘pink is a girl color and I really like pink.’ I told him: ‘What is this?! There’s no such thing as a girl color and a boy color. Everybody [has a color] that they like.’ Right away I exploded this ... I won’t allow him to enter into those stupid definitions.” (Rotem, a mother)

the mothers

The kindergarten as a gender utopia

- Teachers educating for gender equality
- Yuval: “[A boy came to me and said]: ‘You have a pink shirt.’ I told him: ‘Yes, pink is for girls. Who am I?’ He answered: ‘You’re a boy.’ I told him: ‘Why should I give pink to the girls? I like all the colors.’ He told me: ‘Ah, okay.’ It’s amazing to see what we do.”

The kindergarten as a gender utopia

- Teachers recognizing children's needs unrelated to gender

Ayala: “So maybe indeed the difference is between children who are *needy* and those who are less *needy*. ... I think that with girls, they come to me more. This is very individual. It's like, those that connect with the male teacher and those that connect to the female, are they divided by gender? Not always. Not always.”

The kindergarten as a gender utopia

Parents appreciate gender flexibility

- Tal (a mother): : “[My daughter is] a tomboy. She is always in motion, and she jumps. She is aggressive sometimes, as though she has a masculine side. So, this kindergarten is made for her. It could be that it’s not a good match for girls who are more refined.”
- Maya (a mother): “For me it’s very nice that there’s a male figure in the kindergarten who is soft, and hugs, and says to my son that he doesn’t all the time need to hold himself in. It’s okay to cry. Like encouraging his soft side.”
-

Gender reality in the kindergarten

Yuval

- Campcraft: fire and cooking
- Active sports

Boys

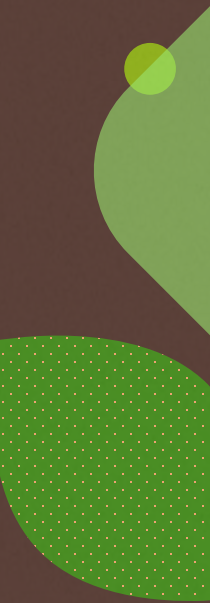
- Help Yuval build the fire and cook
- Play actively with boys and arrows and other traditionally male games

Ayala

- Crafts
- Sedentary activities

Girls

- Socio-dramatic family themes
- Crafts
- Chopping the vegetables for salad



Ignoring Gender Differences

The children never mentioned gender when describing their teachers and the activities they enjoy doing with each teacher.

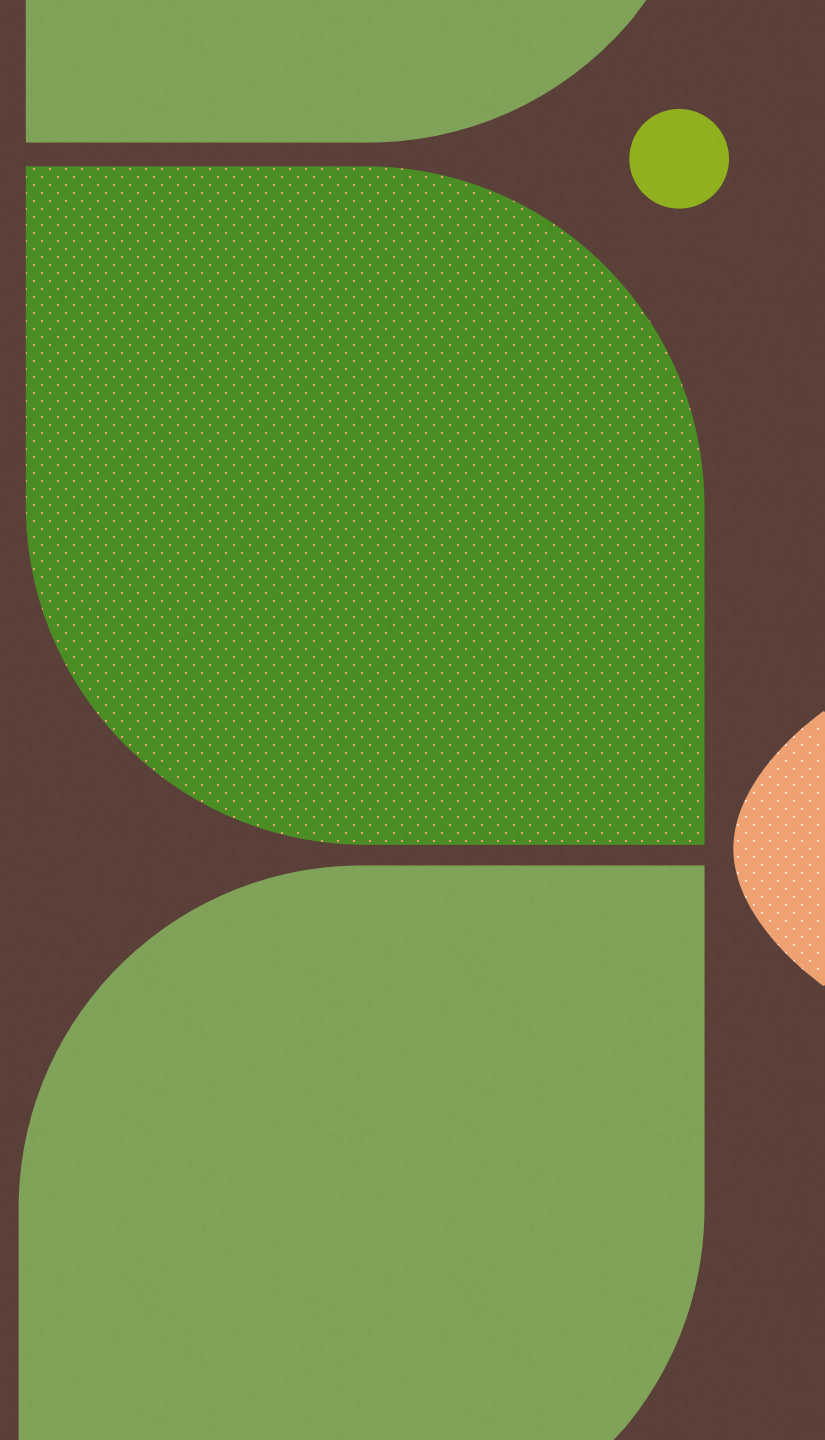
Why?

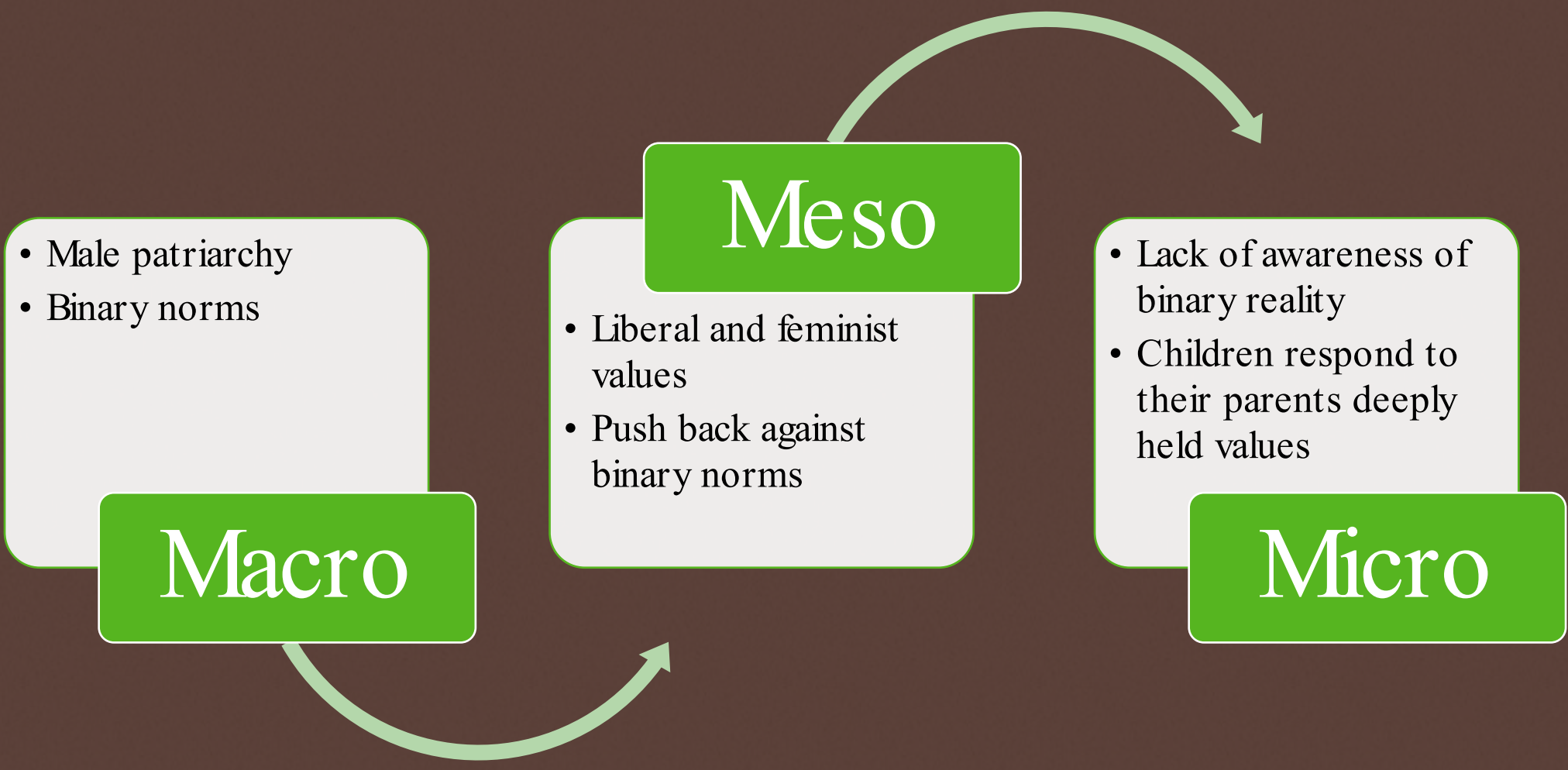


the children

Two possible explanations:

- Children's sensitivity to their parents' expectations about gender equality in the kindergarten.
- The children understand intuitively that there is a taboo against mentioning gender and talking about gender differences in the kindergarten.





- Male patriarchy
- Binary norms

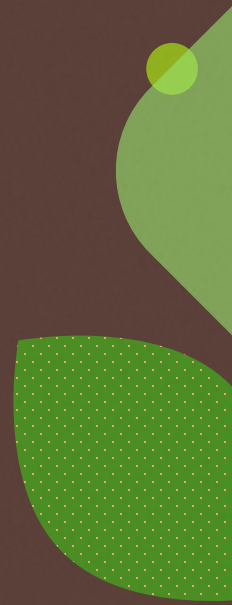
Macro

- Liberal and feminist values
- Push back against binary norms

Meso

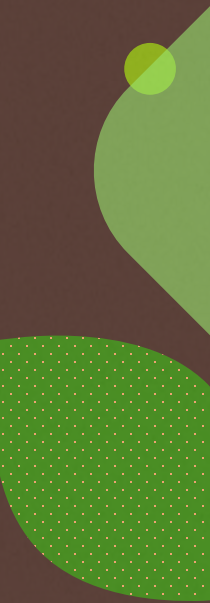
- Lack of awareness of binary reality
- Children respond to their parents deeply held values

Micro



Take-home messages

- Need for teachers to openly talk about gender with the children.
- The benefit of such discourse could be an invitation to the children to express their own thoughts, ideas, and feelings on the topic, and to examine them in conjunction with those of their peers.



Thanks for your attention!

- David Brody davidb55@gmail.com
- Yael Dayan yael.dayan@mail.huji.ac.il
- Daniel Gordon gordondani@gmail.com