

**The Significance of Nonbinary Identities in Shaping Children's Sense of Self**

A thesis submitted by

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in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in Child Study and Human Development

Tufts University

May 2025

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### **Abstract**

Historically, research on gender development has predominantly used a binary framework to examine identity formation in cisgender children. However, contemporary approaches have emerged in recent years, offering frameworks that focus on the development of gender-diverse children. Despite this progress, these frameworks have not fully explored the extent to which a nonbinary identity is significant to a child's sense of self. The current study sought to address this gap by conducting a secondary analysis of transcripts from nine children, examining whether their nonbinary gender is essential to their identity.

*Keywords:* gender identity, gender development, nonbinary children, reflexive thematic analysis

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### **The Significance of Nonbinary Identities in Shaping Children's Sense of Self**

Given the current socio-political climate, which is often hostile towards transgender and gender-diverse individuals, the concept of *sex* should be understood as context-dependent and multidimensional, rather than being reduced to binary terms such as "male" and "female" (Miyagi, Guthman, & Sun, 2021). Instead, *sex* is more accurately defined as a term with flexible associations to various factors, such as genitalia, gametes, or karyotype, depending on the context. With this nuanced understanding, *sex* is distinctively differentiated from the complex nature of *gender*.

In contrast, *gender* is defined as a construct determined by socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes (American Psychological Association, n.d.). According to Bem's (1981) gender schema theory, *gender identity*—referring to a person's internal sense of one's own gender—and *gender expression*—referring to behaviors, clothing, hairstyles, languages, and other forms of presentation that are associated with "culturally appropriate" ways of communicating masculinity and/or femininity—are heavily influenced by societal expectations (Matsuno & Budge, 2017; Rust, 2000). Moreover, through the process of *sex-typing*, boys and girls are encouraged to acquire sex-specific skills, self-concepts, and personality attributes based on culturally-defined definitions of masculinity and femininity (Bem, 1981).

This framework reinforces the traditional gender binary that revolves around *sex*, implying that there are only two sexes—male and female (Eisend & Rößner, 2022). As a result, an individual is confined to their biologically assigned *sex*, restricting their freedom to explore *gender identity* outside of rigid categories. Furthermore, this perspective perpetuates *cisnormativity*, which is defined as the belief that *gender* and *sex* are fixed binaries, solely

determined by the visual assessment of genitals at birth by legal and medical authorities (Bauer et al., 2009; Miyagi et al., 2021; Salinas-Quiroz & Daniels, 2024).

However, the term *nonbinary* reflects the diversity and complexity of gender experiences beyond binary frameworks. It serves as an umbrella term for individuals who self-identify as any gender outside the gender binary and/or who do not completely identify as a boy/man or girl/woman at all times. This broad categorization encompasses a range of labels, including, but not limited to, agender (i.e., having no gender identity), bigender (i.e., having two gender identities), demigender (i.e., more of one gender than another, but not completely as that gender), genderfluid (i.e., fluctuating in gender identity), trigender (i.e., having three gender identities), two-spirit (i.e., relating to Indigenous Native American people who are born with both masculine and feminine spirits), and xenogender (i.e., identifying with concepts, such as plants, animals, or other creatures, that are not typically related to gender) (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023; Sheppard & Mayo, 2013). However, as explored in subsequent sections, nonbinary individuals are often underrepresented or systemically erased in existing research, despite the valuable and unique perspectives they offer to gender development and related fields (e.g., Dev et al, 2021; Morrison, Dinno & Salmon, 2021).

It is important to clarify that throughout this thesis, the terms sex and gender were used interchangeably—particularly in the literature review—as the distinction between these two concepts only emerged in the mid-20th century. Additionally, key terms such as *cisgender* (*or cis*)—referring to an individual whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth—and *transgender* (*or trans*)—referring to an individual whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth—were referenced throughout. Furthermore, the inclusion of nonbinary individuals within the trans umbrella may vary depending on the source. As one nonbinary

blogger describes, “Others consider the trans experience to be nonbinary, because the process of becoming a different gender, even if that gender is man or woman, is to live outside of the binary—by definition, nonbinary” (The Trevor Project, 2021). However, for the purposes of this thesis, nonbinary and transgender were treated as distinct identity categories to emphasize the research that addresses each population individually.

### **Positionality Statement**

As a master's student on a thesis track, I was fully aware that my identity, background, and lived experiences shaped the way I approached this research and interpreted its findings. Being a Black, cisgender woman from a middle-class family, these aspects of my identity informed my perspectives and the framework I chose to use to analyze the data. Moreover, growing up in an East African culture has had a profound impact on my worldview, particularly in relation to gender identity development. Namely, I believe that gender has always been a more prominent part of my life. Growing up with three sisters, I initially saw little difference between myself and other children. However, as I entered school, I became more aware of the strict gender divides present in society—distinctions in clothing, toys, and activities—that did not always align with how I understood gender identity.

Initially, my exposure to gender diversity came through television and social media, where I was introduced to identities and experiences that were never respected in my upbringing. In my home community, conversations about gender nonconformity were often seen as the result of excessive Western freedoms or even as moral failures. These narratives troubled me, prompting me to challenge these misconceptions via education. Specifically, I realized that the best way to address these issues was through academia—by arming myself with the knowledge and tools to correct misinformation and foster more inclusive discussions about gender identity.

This realization led me to take every gender-related course available to me and to pursue the “Identity in Global Context” concentration when applying to the Eliot-Pearson Child Study and Human Development Department at Tufts University.

My personal experiences with race are somewhat different. For much of my early life, race was not something I thought much about, as I was raised in a place where everyone, including myself, was Black. It was not until I moved to the United States for my undergraduate degree that I began to truly grasp the complexities of racial identity. Suddenly, I was placed in the position of a racial minority, an experience that became especially prominent in my academic environment, where I soon realized that I was one of the few Black students in a small town in central Pennsylvania.

However, given my personal history and deep interest in its complexities, I chose to primarily focus on gender—rather than race—for my master’s thesis. Still, I want to mention C. Riley Snorton’s *Black on Both Sides* (2017), a work that discusses the profound interconnectedness of race and gender throughout U.S. history. In his analysis, Snorton examines how the intersections of Blackness and transness have been shaped by systemic oppression. One section of the book stood out to me as it looks at how enslaved individuals used gender transgression, like women dressing in men’s clothing or vice versa, as a means of escaping their enslavers. This concept of gender transgression as a means of liberation resonates with the feelings shared by many of the children in my study, who described their nonbinary identity as a freeing experience. Ultimately, Snorton’s book encourages us to think about race and gender in more fluid and nuanced ways, rejecting rigid categories in favor of an approach that considers both historical context and intersectionality.

To summarize, I believe that the semi-traditional norms and practices I was exposed to have likely influenced both the research question I had asked and the way I engaged with data from this study. To minimize any bias, I intended to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process, ensuring that I did not distort or misrepresent the voices of my participants. By staying critically aware of my own perspectives, I aimed to conduct ethical, transparent, and inclusive research that amplifies the diverse experiences of those involved.

## **Literature Review**

### **Foundations of Gender Development Research**

#### *Historical Perspectives*

Blakemore and colleagues (2009) provide a comprehensive overview of the history of gender development, offering a summary of the various approaches within this field of study. They note that, before the early 20th century, scientific research on sex and gender development was largely atheoretical. Researchers at the time lacked the guidance of well-established theories, failing to organize their findings effectively. As a result, psychologists at the time focused on topics such as the sexual dimorphism of the human brain, the maternal instinct, and the concept of variability—namely, the belief that men display a greater variability in traits than women.

G. Stanley Hall is widely regarded as the founder of the scientific study of child development (Blakemore et al., 2009). In 1883, he pioneered the use of questionnaires to investigate the emotional, physical, and intellectual development of preschool-aged children. While his contributions to the field were foundational, Hall's views on gender roles and education have been widely criticized as offensive by modern standards. He believed that boys and girls had inherently different roles and abilities (e.g., Hall believed that girls were more feeling than thinking and had less patience for science or invention) and advocated for separate

educational systems to better support their health and development (i.e., Hall believed that boys needed the freedom to express their more savage impulses without the presence of girls).

Although these beliefs are considered to be stereotypical and/or controversial now, Hall made significant contributions to developmental psychology, including the establishment of key institutions such as the *American Journal of Psychology* and *The Pedagogical Seminary*.

Furthermore, his outdated perspectives prompted a more systematic approach to studying sex differences in children, thereby influencing the direction of gender development research.

For instance, Blakemore et al. (2009) describe Edward Lincoln's doctoral dissertation in 1927 as one of the first to thoroughly examine sex differences in children's behavior and development. As an educational psychologist, Lincoln examined the differences between boys and girls within an academic context, focusing on physical growth, cognitive abilities, and educational achievement. His research found that, while boys and girls exhibited differences in specific areas (e.g., the girls in Lincoln's research outperformed boys in verbal tasks and fine motor skills, whereas the boys excelled more than the girls in mathematics and spatial reasoning), there were no significant differences in general intelligence. In addition, he noted that variability in abilities did not differ consistently between sexes, concluding that the existing sex differences were relatively small compared to the individual variability within each sex.

Therefore, Lincoln advocated for coeducation as he believed that integration in classrooms prepared both genders for the diversifying workforce of the early to mid-1900s.

Evidently, early scientific research into gender development primarily centered on sex differences within the educational context. It was not until the early 1930s that prominent theories, such as Freud's psychoanalytic theory, began to explore other aspects of gender, including the development of gender identity and gender roles.

### *The Psychoanalytic Theory*

Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory, first published in 1920, was one of the first to examine the psychological development of boys and girls (Blakemore et al., 2009; Lyon, 2013). It focused on the unconscious mind and its effect on behavior, portraying the unconscious personality—the id, ego, and superego—as an iceberg under the surface (Freud, 1937). During infancy, the id is unconscious and responsible for basic instincts such as hunger, aggression, and sex. The ego develops shortly after infancy and acts as a mediator between the id and the superego by bringing satisfaction to the desires of the former while meeting the demands of the latter. The superego develops during what Freud dubs the “phallic stage” (i.e., when the boy's focus is on their penis and a girl's focus is on their lack of a penis) and is related to the social development of a child, particularly in shaping their understanding of gender roles and societal expectations associated with their gender. Given its significance in gender identity formation, this section will focus on the superego in this stage, as described by Blakemore et al. (2009).

During the phallic stage, Freud theorized that boys develop castration anxiety when they realize that girls have different genitals than they do and assume that girls' genital organs have been removed via castration. This newfound anxiety works in tandem with what Freud describes as the Oedipus complex, where a boy begins to feel sexual attraction towards his mother and perceives his father as a threat. Fearing his father's retaliation through castration, the boy, then, unconsciously adopts his father's traits—a process Freud termed identification with the aggressor. Through this defensive identification, the boy internalizes masculine gender roles as his superego develops (Freud, 1937).

Ultimately, Freud's psychoanalytic theory proposes that children develop masculine and feminine traits through the process of *identification* (i.e., relating to the parent of the same sex), a concept adopted by subsequent social and cognitive theories of gender development.

### ***Cognitive Theories of Gender Development***

Building on Freud's psychoanalytic theory, cognitive theories of gender development highlight the role mental processes play in the development of gender identity, arguing that children are active players in the construction of their gender as they grow. Furthermore, these theories suggest that gender development happens in stages or structured processes, where children acquire gender-related knowledge before they exhibit gender-typed behavior. For instance, Kohlberg and Maccoby (1966) argued that children's cognitions about their gender identity precede their behavior. For example, a child might say, "I am a boy, so I like to do boy things." This suggests that cognitive development drives gender-role understanding (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002).

**Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development.** As Huitt and Hummel (2003) note, Jean Piaget is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in developmental psychology during the 20th century. Although Piaget's work is not directly relevant to the focus of this thesis, his stage theory has been widely adopted and expanded upon by other researchers, influencing the larger field of developmental psychology (Miller, 2022). Notably, Kohlberg (1966) expanded upon Piaget's ideas in his cognitive developmental theory, which will be discussed in the following section.

Piaget (1971) focused primarily on how children think and construct their understanding of the world, leading him to propose four sequential stages of cognitive development. The first stage—the sensorimotor stage—begins in infancy and focuses on how intelligence is

demonstrated through motor activities and mobility. During this stage, children grasp the concept of *object permanence*—the understanding that objects continue to exist even when they are out of sight. The second stage—the pre-operational stage—occurs in toddlerhood and early childhood. This stage emphasizes the use of symbols, particularly language, and marks the beginning of memory and imagination development. Children in this stage also start to exhibit *egocentrism*, which is the inability to understand that others have different perspectives, thoughts, and feelings than their own.

The third stage—the concrete operational stage—typically occurs during elementary school and early adolescence. In this stage, children develop logical thinking skills and begin to understand the concept of *conservation*, which is the ability to understand that certain properties of an object remain the same even when its appearance changes. For example, they recognize that the amount of water in a short, wide cup is equal to the amount of water in a tall, slim cup. Finally, the formal operational stage, which begins in adolescence and continues into adulthood, is characterized by the use of logical thinking, deductive reasoning, and an understanding of abstract ideas. For example, teenagers in this stage engage in deductive reasoning by considering different scenarios and potential outcomes of a problem.

**Kohlberg's Cognitive Developmental Theory.** Piaget's stage-based approach influenced various cognitive theories of gender development, including Kohlberg's cognitive developmental theory (1966). As deMayo et al. (2022) comment, "One of the first psychological accounts of gender development that emphasized the importance of cognitive factors was Kohlberg's (1966), who closely aligned with the Piagetian stage-like approach to developmental theory" (p. 219). At its core, Kohlberg's theory is based on the concept of *gender constancy*—the

understanding that there is an invariance of gender, which resembles Piaget's idea of conservation in the concrete operational stage (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002).

Typically, Kohlberg's theory of cognitive development is represented by three stages. The first stage, gender identity, occurs around the ages of 2 to 3, when a child recognizes themselves as male or female. The second stage, gender stability, occurs around the ages of 3 to 5, when a child understands that gender remains consistent over time. The third stage, gender consistency, occurs by the age of 5 to 7, when a child realizes that gender does not change based on external factors, such as clothing. Upon reaching the final stage, Kohlberg (1966) argued that children place greater significance on gender categories, which in turn affects how they respond to gender norms, develop gender-related attitudes, and guide their gendered behavior.

### ***Social Theories of Gender Development***

As Miller (2016) asserts, social theories of gender development suggest that gender differences between boys and girls are a byproduct of the differential treatment they receive from their social environments. These theories emphasize the role of *socialization*—the process by which individuals learn and internalize gender-related societal expectations and norms—which influence the development of their identities and behaviors. Additionally, they highlight the pervasive gender stereotypes children are exposed to in their everyday lives.

**Mischel's Social Learning Theory.** A foundational perspective within this framework is Mischel's (1966) social learning theory, which emphasizes the role of environmental factors, such as rewards and models, in shaping gender identity. Additionally, Mischel highlights the role cognition plays in this process, illustrating how a child might hold the belief that "I have been rewarded for doing boy things, I must be a boy" (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002, p. 904). Notably, his theory introduced two key concepts that have been widely adopted by subsequent

research: sex-typing, as previously discussed, and *sex-typed behaviors*, referring to patterns of behavior that are differentially reinforced for each sex (Blakemore et al., 2009; Mischel & Maccoby, 1966).

**Bussey and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory.** Bussey and Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation posits that a child's cognitive qualities and environmental experiences affect their gender development, particularly in relation to the development of gender roles and sex-typed behaviors. They suggest that beliefs about gender and role-related behaviors are shaped by a wide range of social factors, including family dynamics and the various societal systems that individuals interact with daily. In essence, Bussey and Bandura theorized that children develop their gendered behaviors, interests, and beliefs by imitating same-sex models, experiencing consequences from mimicking that behavior, and learning about "sex-appropriate behavior" from adults or peers. For example, a young girl who observes her female peers being praised for playing with dolls may engage in similar play because she perceives this type of behavior as appropriate for her gender.

**Bem's Gender Schema Theory.** Sandra Bem's (1981) gender schema theory argued that children, as early as 2 to 3 years old, begin learning about gender roles and gender expectations from their environment. They form a *schema*—a cognitive structure that organizes a network of associations and guides an individual's perceptions—which influences their understanding of gender and guides their behavior. For instance, a child may observe their mother performing household chores while their father works outside the home and begins to associate women as homemakers and men as providers.

Additionally, Bem (1981) coined the terms *gender-schematic* and *gender-aschematic* to describe different types of cognitive processing and thinking. Using the example above, gender-

schematic individuals are more likely to form similar associations, as they view gender as a primary lens for understanding social roles and expectations. Meanwhile, gender-aschematic individuals are less likely to form that association, as they tend to focus on individual qualities and traits rather than relying on gender stereotypes.

**Martin and Halverson's Gender Schema Theory.** Building on Bem's (1981) gender schema theory, Martin and Halverson (1981) proposed that young children develop gender-based *in-group* (group or groups a child identifies with) and *out-group* (group or groups a child does not identify with) schemas. They argue that children develop their gender identity by identifying themselves as members of a particular gender category, gaining a deeper knowledge of what is for boys and what is for girls, and paying attention to what information is associated with their sex and what information is associated with the other sex. Therefore, Martin and Halverson (1981) suggest that this process influences both gendered behaviors and sex stereotypes.

To examine their theory, Martin and Halverson (1983) conducted an experiment where children viewed pictures of males and females performing a variety of activities that were consistent and inconsistent with their sex. A week later, the children were asked to recall the activities they were shown and the sex of the actors performing them. As predicted by the researchers, children in this study tended to distort information by changing the sex of the actor in the sex-inconsistent pictures while accurately recalling the sex of the actor in the sex-consistent pictures. Moreover, the children demonstrated greater confidence in their ability to recall sex-consistent pictures compared to sex-inconsistent pictures. As Martin and Halverson (1983) conclude, these findings suggest that schematic processing contributes to the development and maintenance of sex stereotypes.

**Additional Social Theories.** Other theories within this perspective include Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory, which proposes that a child's development should be viewed in a cultural and historical context (i.e., gender is influenced by a child's family, neighborhood, school, and other social institutions); Eagly's (1987) social role theory, which suggests that gender differences are a direct result of gender differences in roles (i.e., the idea that men and women play different roles in society) and gendered stereotypes (i.e., children are expected to act in a gender-appropriate way); and West and Zimmerman's (1987) social constructionist theory, which suggests that knowledge is socially constructed and gendered behaviors arise through social construction, emphasizing that people do not have gender, they do gender.

### ***Biological Theories of Gender Development***

Biological theories of gender development describe the development of gender from evolutionary, genetic, hormonal, and brain perspectives. For example, evolutionary theories, such as that proposed by Buss and Schmitt (1993), posited that sexual selection—where traits that increase an individual's chances of mating and reproducing are favored—accounted for differences in sex-typed behaviors (e.g., a boy's preference for trucks over dolls). In addition, genetic theories suggest that genes on the X chromosome may influence sex-typed behavior, such as spatial abilities (e.g., Eliot & Fralley, 1976). Meanwhile, hormonal studies, such as that by Geschwind and Galaburda (1985), indicate that *androgens*—hormones that play a role in puberty, sexual function, and body development—are involved in masculinizing behaviors, particularly activity levels, and interest preferences during the prenatal period (Blakemore et al., 2009). However, many of these early theories, including evolutionary theories, have been largely disproved in recent years, leading to a shift in research focus.

### **Critique of Foundational Theoretical Frameworks**

Foundational frameworks on gender development predominantly focused on cisgender children, often shaped by the traditional gender binary (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023). As a result, these early models fail to capture the experiences of gender-diverse children and largely view gender nonconformity as pathological. Indeed, as deMayo et al. (2022) state, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition (DSM-III) classified gender nonconformity as a gender identity disorder (GID) in 1980 and rebranded it as gender dysphoria (GD) in 2013. Consequently, throughout the mid-to-late 1900s, children exhibiting gender-nonconforming behavior were sometimes admitted to clinics by parents and other adults who were concerned about their gender expression or identity. Boys were significantly more likely than girls to be referred, with one study by Zucker, Bradley, and Sanikhani (1996) reporting a referral ratio of 6.6:1. This disparity was likely influenced by the greater social intolerance toward cross-gender behavior in boys than in girls, as expressed by both peers and adults during that period (Zucker, Bradley & Sanikhani, 1996). In these clinics, parents received instruction on how to modify their children's behavior to conform to gender norms and prevent future LGBTQ+ self-identification. As one might anticipate, such treatment could be harmful to the well-being of this group of children.

Considering these concerns, deMayo et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive review, "Gender Development in Gender Diverse Children," to examine how these foundational developmental theories of gender development compare to the identity development of gender-diverse children. As they discuss, in the 1960s and 1970s, children assigned male at birth who expressed a desire to be girls, such as frequently wearing traditionally feminine clothing or preferring stereotypically "girl" activities, and those assigned female at birth who consistently

exhibited traditionally masculine traits were referred to as "*gender-referred*" children (e.g., Green & Money, 1960; Green & Money, 1961; Stoller, 1966; Zuger, 1966). Broadly, this term described children whose behaviors and interests, such as toys, dolls, games, and activities, were aligned more closely to the other binary gender as opposed to their sex assigned at birth (deMayo, Jordan, & Olson, 2022). Therefore, identities such as transgender, nonbinary, gender-conforming, and others may be reduced to this outdated category, but only for the sake of clarity in this section.

In their review, deMayo et al., (2022) note that various researchers have studied gender-referred children extensively. For instance, Fridell et al. (2006) found that gender-referred boys and girls favored peers of the other binary gender, while studies like Zuger (1966) found that gender-referred children preferred to wear clothing stereotypically associated with the other binary gender. However, more recent studies suggest that gender-diverse children are not significantly different from their cisgender peers in terms of preferences. For example, Gülgöz et al. (2019) found that both transgender and cisgender children demonstrated similar preferences for toys that are traditionally associated with their gender. Additionally, both groups of children in this study did not differ significantly in their preference for same-gender peers, and transgender children displayed only a slightly stronger preference for gender-typed clothing.

Reflecting this shift, research on the biological determinants of gender development has evolved beyond early, now-outdated theories, such as evolutionary perspectives. Recent neurobiological studies investigate how brain structure, hormonal influences, and genetics contribute to the formation of gender identity. For example, Bao and Swaab (2011) examined how prenatal hormones impact the sexual differentiation of the human brain, which affect gender identity, sexual orientation, and vulnerability to certain neuropsychiatric disorders. In addition,

Joel et al. (2015) analyzed over 100 brains, revealing that human brains are a "mosaic" of features common in both sexes. Their findings demonstrate that human brains should not be reduced to two binary categories of male and female, advocating for the recognition and inclusion of gender-diverse identities in research.

### **Understanding Gender Development Across Different Groups**

As previously discussed, early theories of gender development have largely centered on cisgender children. In response, recent research has expanded its scope to include the experiences of those who identify beyond the gender binary. The studies discussed in the following section challenge traditional assumptions about gender identity formation and highlight the key factors, such as medical intervention and social support, in the identity development of transgender and nonbinary children.

However, despite these advancements, nonbinary children remain largely overlooked in developmental research compared to their transgender peers. Therefore, this section explores key findings on gender development in cisgender and binary transgender children before shifting focus to the experiences of nonbinary youth. Additionally, this section integrates concepts from the aforementioned theories, as well as emerging frameworks, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender development across different groups of children.

#### ***Gender Development in Cisgender Children***

As previously discussed, it is important to recognize that many of the studies highlighted below were conducted during a time when transgender, nonbinary, and other gender-diverse identities were either not acknowledged or were examined through a predominantly cisnormative framework. For instance, Kohlberg's (1966) theory of gender development was formulated without consideration of trans or nonbinary individuals, limiting its applicability to cisgender

children. Moreover, Kohlberg's theory fails to address the reality that gender-diverse individuals exist, thereby challenging Kohlberg's assertion that gender is consistent and stable over time, and studies such as Quinn et al. (2002) do not account for the influence of trans or nonbinary caregivers on the gender development of children. Nevertheless, this section highlights a few key studies to illustrate how earlier research, influenced by a cisgender lens, defined "typical" gender development.

Previous research has demonstrated that, by 3 to 4 months of age, infants are able to distinguish between male and female faces, demonstrating a preference for the gender that acted as their primary caregiver. For example, Quinn et al. (2002) found that infants raised by female caregivers tend to favor female faces, whereas infants raised by male caregivers tend to favor male faces. By 10 months, infants begin to form gender-related categories, associating female faces with stereotypically feminine objects (e.g., frying pans or blow dryers) and male faces with stereotypically masculine objects (e.g., hammers or footballs) (Levy & Haaf, 1994). By 9 to 12 months, infants can also categorize male and female faces based on sex-typical features, such as facial features and voices (Leinbach & Fagot, 1993).

These early gender-specific milestones can be understood through the lens of *gender socialization*—the process by which children internalize societal beliefs and expectations about gender roles and begin to identify with a particular gender (Stockard, 2006). Several theories explain this process, including Mischel's (1966) social learning theory, which posits that children acquire sex-typed behaviors through reinforcement from others, particularly parents, who encourage activities and behaviors that align with societal expectations for each sex. Moreover, research has consistently shown that parents reinforce gender differences by promoting sex-

specific toys and play activities (e.g., Block, 1984; Fagot & Hagan, 1985; Fagot & Leinbach, 1987; Fagot, Hagan, Leinbach, & Kronsberg, 1985; Huston, 1983).

Meanwhile, cognitive theories suggest that children play an active role in gender socialization by applying cognitive processing and understanding to this process. For example, Kohlberg (1966) hypothesized that children begin to develop gender-typed behaviors when they grasp the concept of gender constancy. Similarly, Martin and Halvorsen (1981) highlight the role of gender schemas in gender socialization, particularly by utilizing the concept of in-groups and out-groups. Additionally, a *culture of childhood*—a pattern of games, activities, roles, norms, jokes, folklore, and more that are passed down from generation to generation with little involvement by adults—can explain why boys and girls tend to behave differently depending on whether they are in a same-sex, other-sex, or mixed-sex peer group (Stockard, 2006).

In addition to socialization, children develop their gender identity through *gender segregation*, referring to the tendency to separate individuals based on gender or sex, often driven by behavioral similarities and gender-based cognitions. This pattern typically emerges around the ages of 2 or 3, when children begin to show a preference for same-sex playmates in school settings (Martinez et al., 2020). Additionally, research has shown that children who grasp the concept of gender stability at an earlier age are more likely to engage in gender segregation between the ages of 3 and 5 (Halim et al., 2013; Kohlberg, 1966). For example, Smetana and Letourneau (1984) found that preschool-aged girls who understood gender stability were more likely to participate in more same-gender social interactions during free play than girls who had not grasped the concept yet.

However, while much of the existing literature focuses on cisnormative frameworks, a growing body of research has begun to highlight the experiences of gender-diverse individuals.

Therefore, the following discussion will examine key studies relevant to the gender development of transgender children, before narrowing the focus to nonbinary youth.

### ***Gender Development in Binary Transgender Children***

To a large extent, existing literature on gender development in *binary transgender (or trans-binary)* children—referring to transgender people who identify as either boys/men or girls/women—addresses topics such as early awareness and expression of gender identity, consistency in gender identity, social transitioning and mental health, and the influence of family and social support (Boskey et al., 2014). While these findings contribute to the growing body of gender-diverse research, this thesis specifically focuses on a subset of this population—nonbinary children. As such, the following discussion will center on a few key studies relevant to the gender development of transgender children.

One of the most comprehensive studies on transgender children was conducted by Gülgöz et al. (2019). Building on previous developmental research, the researchers compared the gender development of cisgender children to a cohort of 3- to 12-year-old binary transgender children. Based on this comparison, they posed four research questions: (1) What does transgender children's development look like? (2) How does the gender development of transgender children compare to their cisgender peers? (3) Do transgender and cisgender children show similar or different relations among aspects of gender development? (4) Is the extremity of a transgender child's gender (i.e., gender identity and expression) related to the amount of time in which the child has been treated as a member of that gender group? A key finding revealed that transgender children showed a clear pattern of gender development associated with their current gender, not their gender assigned at birth. In addition, the study found that the gender identity (i.e., the researchers describe this as the gender the children felt they were) of

transgender children was not significantly different from their cisgender siblings and cisgender controls. As Gülgöz et al. (2019) state, these findings suggest that early sex assignment and parental rearing based on sex assigned at birth does not always define how a child identifies or expresses gender later in life. Of course, while Gülgöz and colleagues conducted their study in 2019, it is important to remember that transgender people have existed for millennia; research is only now beginning to catch up to this longstanding reality.

Olson et al. (2022) address a common topic of research within the transgender communities—*re-transitioning* or *de-transitioning*, which refers to when an individual who previously identified as transgender affirms their cisgender identity. Using a longitudinal design, the researchers examined the rate of re-transitioning among youth who socially transitioned at an early age. The findings revealed that re-transitioning occurs less frequently than previously suggested. For example, Steensma et al. (2011) suggested that the ages of 10 to 13 might be a critical period for re-transitioning, with gender identity becoming more stable after these ages for youth who display gender nonconformity in their younger years. Specifically, Olson and colleagues found that, among the 317 trans-binary youth in their study, 7% had re-transitioned at least once, while 94% were living as transgender during the period of the study. Of the 94%, 1.3% had initially re-transitioned to cisgender or nonbinary before returning to their transgender identities.

In addition, Olson et al. (2022) discuss the link between re-transitioning and medical intervention, highlighting key findings by Kuper et al. (2020), who found that access to gender-affirming hormone therapy is associated with a reduction in body dissatisfaction in transgender youth. This underscores the significance of *gender-affirming care*, referring to medical, surgical,

mental health, and non-medical services that support the overall health and well-being of transitioning youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

While these studies are valuable to gender-diverse research, they continue to reinforce the prevailing cisnormativity in developmental research by applying theories designed for cisgender individuals by cisgender researchers. As will be discussed later, contemporary theories have emerged to address this gap. Specifically, gender-diverse researchers have developed frameworks informed by the experiences of trans and non-binary individuals, with a particular focus on the development of gender-diverse identities.

### ***Gender Development in Nonbinary Children***

Although much of the existing gender-diverse literature has focused on transgender youth, researchers have noted a significant gap in the understanding of nonbinary identities (e.g., Matsuno & Budge, 2017). This gap exists, despite nonbinary individuals representing a substantial portion of the transgender community. For instance, a recent census found that approximately 3.0% of American adults under the age of 30 identify as nonbinary (Pew Research Center, 2022). The Trevor Project (2021) reported that among LGBTQ youth aged 13 to 24, one in four participants (26%) in their sample of nearly 35,000 identified as non-binary, with approximately 72% using other labels within the nonbinary umbrella, such as gender non-conforming, genderfluid, and genderqueer. Moreover, Wilson and Kastanis (2017) suggest that this figure may be higher in California, where an estimated 27% of youth between the ages of 12 and 17—roughly 796,000 individuals—identified as gender-nonconforming at the time of the survey. Although the gap in research on nonbinary children's gender development persists, recent studies are beginning to address the unique challenges faced by nonbinary youth.

For instance, Ward and Lucas (2024) explore how nonbinary youth construct and express their gender identities in relation to societal expectations and norms. The authors highlight the challenges nonbinary youth face in a world that often privileges binary genders. For example, many participants in their study expressed frustrations with the societal pressures to conform to traditional gender roles, as well as with the limitations of descriptive labels such as gender non-conforming, genderfluid, or agender. To specify, several nonbinary participants expressed that these labels were either useful or restrictive in fully capturing their identities.

In addition, Ward and Lucas (2024) emphasize the fluidity and complexity of gender identity development among nonbinary youth, which contrasts the more binary trajectory of cisgender identity development. Their research particularly examines this development at the intersection of age, focusing on adolescence and early adulthood. Their analysis shows that their participants made sense of their gender development as a constant and evolving process. It also highlights how participants understood themselves, stressing the significance of being seen in the present moment and allowing for a more flexible understanding of gender identity. These findings underscore the importance of creating spaces where nonbinary youth can express themselves outside of the rigid gender binary and challenge traditional notions of gender. Consequently, the authors argue for a more inclusive and flexible understanding of gender identity, one that allows for diverse expressions of gender that do not fit neatly into predefined categories.

Similarly, Salinas-Quiroz and Sweder (2023) challenge traditional binary conceptions of gender by advocating for an inclusive framework that more accurately reflects the authentic gender development of nonbinary children. The authors critique existing gender theories rooted in outdated and conservative interpretations, emphasizing the need for models that do not force

nonbinary identity development into frameworks designed for cisgender children. They also draw on research that further questions the gender binary, such as Joel et al. (2015), who found that human brains exhibit a mosaic of features common to both males and females, despite documented sex and gender differences in biology. Additionally, the authors stress the importance of dismantling adult-centric views that position children as passive recipients of development. As they highlight, research by Amar (2016) reinforces the idea that children are active participants in their own development and should not be seen as “mere products of their nature and nurture” (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023, p. 4).

Insights and findings from studies like those outlined above underscore the urgent need for frameworks that prioritize the lived experiences of gender-diverse individuals, rather than relying on outdated, binary models. The following section describes key contemporary frameworks that address this gap and provide inclusive approaches to understanding gender development.

### **Contemporary Frameworks of Gender Development**

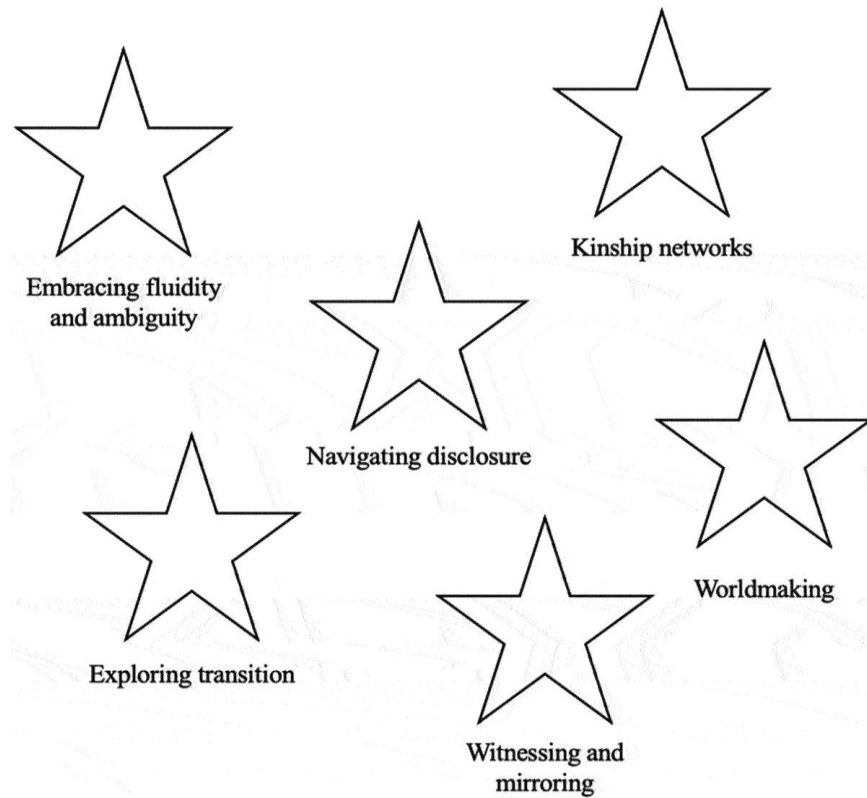
The Gender Affirmative Model (GAM) is a theoretical framework that affirms gender-diverse identities by focusing on resilience, coping, and wellness in transgender and nonbinary (TNB) children and families (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2021). This model is based on the following principles: (1) no gender identity or expression is pathological; (2) gender identity is defined by an integration of biology, development, socialization, culture, and context; (3) gender presentations are culturally diverse and require cultural sensitivity; (4) pathological presentations are likely to be a result of reactions to gender diversity (e.g., transphobia, homophobia, sexism); and (5) gender can be fluid and/or nonbinary depending on a particular time point or changes within an individual over time. Crucially, it emphasizes the concept of *gender health*, defined as

“a child’s opportunity to live in the gender that feels most real or comfortable to that child and to express that gender with freedom from restriction, aspersion, or rejection” (APA, 2021, p. 14; Hidalgo et al., 2013).

Building on this inclusive perspective, Dolan and Garvey (2024) propose an emergent model for nonbinary gender identity development. Instead of linear progression, as seen in theories like Kohlberg’s stage theory, their model conceptualizes gender identity as a starry sky (or identity model constellation), where individual experiences of nonbinary identity are represented by stars with varying brightness, visibility, and orientation. As shown in Figure 1, each star in this model represents one of six identity development experiences: (1) embracing fluidity and ambiguity, which reflects the diverse and unique definitions of nonbinary identities; (2) kinship networks, which represents the act of building communities and networks of nonbinary people; (3) navigating disclosure, which highlights the complex and non-monolithic nature of identity disclosure; (4) exploring transition, which encompasses the various ways nonbinary individuals transition socially or physically/medically; (5) worldmaking, which describes the process of naming and rejecting the violence nonbinary people face, and demanding and envisioning liberation; (6) witnessing and mirroring, which captures feelings of being seen and affirmed by loved ones, and the act of interacting with other nonbinary people to share cultural and identity experiences. As the authors explain, “stars may exist in the sky, yet they appear in different orientations, with varying brightness, or may not even be visible based on someone’s perspective,” (p. 173). This explanation illustrates how certain identity experiences may be more prominent for some individuals than for others. In summary, this model elevates the way nonbinary people see, think, and build knowledge in a world that promotes cissexist and binary ways of thinking and feeling.

**Figure 1.**

*Dolan and Harvey's (2024) Nonbinary Identity Development Model*



*Note.* Retrieved from “Dismantling gender binaries: An emergent model for nonbinary identity development,” by C. V. Dolan and J. C. Garvey, 2024, *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, 1–19, p. 174. Copyright 2024 by Carlos V. Dolan.

Although these frameworks contribute significantly to gender-diverse developmental research, they do not fully address the extent to which a nonbinary identity is significant to a child, which was the primary focus of the current study. Rather than adopting these frameworks in their entirety, this study will incorporate select aspects of them to interpret the narratives of nonbinary children. For example, the concept of gender fluidity, as mentioned in both models, will be used to describe identities that fall outside the traditional gender binary or to characterize gender expression. Furthermore, the current study adopted the strengths-based approach of the

Gender Affirmative Model by largely emphasizing the positive aspects of nonbinary children's experiences and exploring how gender nonbinary identity is related to one's sense of self.

### **Defining Sense of Self**

William James (1890) first introduced the concept of a sense of self (SOS) in "The Principles of Psychology." He proposed that "the self" consists of two distinct components: the objective "Me" (or *empirical ego*) and the subjective "I" (or *pure ego*). The empirical ego refers to a person's thoughts, feelings, social roles, and recognition from others, whereas the pure ego acts as the thinker and experiencer. Expanding on this distinction, Harter (2003) identified four key aspects of the I-Self: (1) self-awareness—an appreciation for one's internal states, needs, thoughts, and emotions; (2) self-agency—the sense of authorship over one's thoughts and actions; (3) self-continuity—the sense that one remains the same person over time; and (4) coherence—a stable sense of the self as a single, coherent, bounded entity.

Additionally, the definition provided by Basten and Touyz (2020) was adopted in this thesis to offer a broader understanding of a sense of self. They describe a SOS as a "personal, subjective awareness of one's self, which includes a sense of agency for one's own actions, a sense of continuity over time, and a sense of personal unity and wholeness, with a special affective energy or vitality" (p. 160). In simpler terms, a sense of self is how we see and understand who we are—a feeling of being the same person over time, with a unique and independent identity that stays with us no matter where we are or what we are doing.

### **The Current Study**

Using the perspectives of nine children, this study drew on contemporary frameworks of gender development to explore the significance of a nonbinary identity in shaping a child's sense

of self. Specifically, this secondary analysis focused on the following research question (RQ):  
How essential is being nonbinary to a child's identity?

Based on my own experiences and the societal emphasis on gender, I anticipated that the children in this study would place significant value on their gender identity over all their other identities.

### **Contextualizing Research Amidst the Current Political Climate**

However, in light of the current political climate in the United States, it is important to clarify that the findings of this research should never be used to support anti-trans rhetoric. Recent executive orders signed by President Trump have focused on restricting gender recognition and access to gender-affirming care.

Signed on January 20, 2025, the Executive Order on “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” mandates that federal agencies recognize only two genders—male and female—based solely on biological sex assigned at birth (The White House, 2025). This order also limits the recognition of nonbinary gender markers, such as the "X" marker, on federal documents like passports.

Additionally, signed on January 28, 2025, the Executive Order on “Protecting Children from Chemical and Surgical Mutilation” seeks to restrict youth access to gender-affirming care, including puberty blockers and hormone therapy, and prohibit federal funding for medical procedures related to transitioning a child's sex (The White House, 2025). This legislative action has already had tangible effects. For example, in April 2025, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) terminated approximately \$8.9 million in funding for key LGBTQ+ studies, including HIV projects, claiming that this research does not align with its mission to enhance health, lengthen life, or reduce illness (Shepherd, 2025). Critics argue that such funding reductions

jeopardize efforts to address health inequities among marginalized populations and endanger individuals within gender-diverse communities.

As the author of this thesis, I strongly oppose these executive orders, viewing them as harmful and detrimental to the progress made by TNB activists and the broader LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, I share the sentiment of critics who claim these policy changes reflect a broader trend of politicizing research agendas and justify the disregard of established medical standards for gender-diverse individuals (Shepherd, 2025). I want to emphasize that the ultimate aim of this study was to better understand the lived experiences and perspectives of nonbinary children. Therefore, the study centered on their viewpoints, recognizing that children are active participants in their own development. However, I also acknowledge that the findings from this research may not be fully generalizable given today's socio-political landscape. Nevertheless, the study could contribute to the growing body of research on gender development in nonbinary youth and provide further evidence for the importance of self-reported gender identity in gender-diverse research.

## **Method**

### **Data Source**

The data for this study originated from a larger research project focused on nonbinary children and their parents (Sweder, Garcia, & Salinas-Quiroz, 2024). The parent study aimed to address the gap in research regarding parental perspectives on raising nonbinary children by exploring parents' initial reactions to their child's gender identity disclosure, the way they support their child's nonbinary identity, and their emotional experiences. Additionally, the study examined societal responses, support behaviors, and the challenges and rewards of parenting a nonbinary child.

The children's study aimed to address the gap in research that directly asks children about the significance of their nonbinary identity (Salinas-Quiroz et al., 2024). Specifically, the researchers explored the gendered experiences of children who identify outside the traditional gender binary. The findings from this study highlight the complexity of being nonbinary, demonstrating that pronouns play a crucial role in helping children understand both their own and others' gender identities. The study also emphasizes that gender is fluid, illustrating that knowing one's gender involves a process of feeling, learning, choosing, and expressing. Furthermore, the research reveals that nonbinary individuals face serious challenges from the world, particularly due to societal perceptions, built environments, systemic barriers, and the operationalization of cissexism, as demonstrated by several studies (e.g., Murchison et al., 2023; Rosati et al., 2025).

Building on the children's study, the current study focused on the significance of being nonbinary to a child's overall identity. Additionally, it drew on the perspectives of nonbinary children to examine the various factors, beyond gender, that shape and define a child's sense of self.

### **Participants**

The recruitment process for this study took place over several months, spanning from late 2022 to early 2023. Initially, the researchers created and contacted a database of organizations that provide support to LGBTQIA+ individuals and families. In October 2022, the National Institutes of Health's Clinical and Translational Science Awards (NIH CTSA) Program launched a one-month Facebook advertisement and posted an additional Craigslist advertisement, which remained active through March 2023. Parents of nonbinary children completed a Qualtrics

survey and scheduled an in-person interview with the researchers. Participating families received a \$50 gift card as compensation.

To be eligible for participation, children had to self-identify as a gender outside the traditional binary (e.g., genderqueer, genderfluid, demigender, nonbinary, etc.). Additionally, they had to be between the ages of 3 and 8, reside in the Northeastern United States (including Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont), and be accompanied by an adult during the study.

Nine children met the study's criteria for inclusion. As seen in Table 1, participants' ages ranged from 5.2 to 8.11 years (reported as age in years and months), and their pronouns included options such as they/them, he/she/they, and she/he/they. All participants were White, except for one who identified as biracial (Asian/White), and all resided in the Greater Boston Area. Their families were predominantly upper middle class, with annual household incomes ranging from \$50,000 to \$74,999.

**Table 1.**

*Demographics of Participants and Self-Ascribed Gender Label*

<b>Child (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Age (years.months)</b>	<b>Child's pronoun(s)</b>	<b>Child's self-ascribed gender label</b>
Janelle	6.1	They/them	Nonbinary
Sam	6	They/them	They/them or Sam
Féi/Luna	6.11	He/she/they	Féi/Luna
Elliot	6.6	They/them	Nonbinary
Demi	7.5	They/them	They
Jonathan	6.11	They/them	Jonathan or they/them
Jesús Ociel	8.11	They/them	Nonbinary or they/them
Tilda	5.2	She/he/they	Changes everyday
Sasha	8.2	They/them	Nonbinary

*Note.* Retrieved from “You’re free from just a girl or a boy”: Nonbinary children’s understanding of their gender,” by F. Salinas-Quiroz, T. Aral, J. Hillekens, S. Hölscher, and J. Demos, 2024, *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 1–18, p. 6. Copyright 2024 by Fernando Salinas-Quiroz

### **Measures and Procedure**

In most cases, two interviewers/researchers, a parent, and their child would enter the space where the interview would be taking place. One of the interviewers would explain the procedure to the parent and child, while the other interviewer would explain to the child that their parent would be in a room two doors away, participating in the parent portion of the study. Once the parent and second interviewer left the room, the first interviewer would instruct the child to take a seat in view of the camera, which would record the interview.

Before the interview, written consent was obtained from the child after the interviewer explained the purpose and implications of the study. Below is an excerpt of how the interviewer explained the study to one of the children:

“This [the camera] is part of our research study, and we're going to talk today so we can learn about how kids who are not boys or girls live and think. And we're going to talk to you and other kids who are not just either boys or girls. And then we're going to tell other grown-ups what we learn so we can help all different kinds of kids and just know about them. Does that sound cool?”

The study’s procedure was developed in collaboration with two early childhood education specialists to ensure that the activities were both engaging and age-appropriate. It consisted of a 60-minute semi-structured process, in which the interviewer and/or child read two books about gender identity, completed a drawing activity, and addressed 23 pre-determined questions about the child’s gendered experiences (see Appendix A). Throughout the session, children were encouraged to take breaks and check in with their parents as needed. The questions were posed in a specific order at various stages of the interview, focusing on key aspects of the

child's gender identity. For example, some questions explored how the child perceived their nonbinary identity, while others examined how others perceived the child's nonbinary identity.

The two children's books—*Who Are You? The Kid's Guide to Gender Identity* and *Avocado Asks: What Am I?*—were used to create a baseline understanding of gender to support the interview process. *Who Are You? The Kid's Guide to Gender Identity* (2019) by Brook Pessin-Whedbee is designed for children aged between 3 and 5 and uses simple language to describe and celebrate gender diversity, explaining how gender is experienced through our bodies, expressions, and identities. *Avocado Asks* (2020) by Momoko Abe tells the story of Avocado, a character exploring whether they are a fruit or a vegetable, providing a relatable narrative about self-discovery.

Between the readings, participants were asked to complete a drawing activity in which they were asked to illustrate a time when they had fun with their friends.

### **Data Analysis**

The children's transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), a qualitative research approach developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke in the early 2000s (Byrne, 2022). This approach is an adaptation of thematic analysis (TA)—a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into themes across a data set (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Although both approaches offer flexible and accessible ways to interpret complex data, RTA encourages the researcher to critically examine their own bias, perspectives, and experiences during the analytical process.

This form of analysis is a six-phase approach designed to identify recurring patterns or themes across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analytic method consists of: (1) familiarization with the data, which involves the repeated reading of a dataset to develop a

deeper understanding; (2) generating initial codes, where descriptive labels are assigned to sections of data that could be relevant to the research question; (3) generating themes, where various codes are grouped together based on their shared underlying meaning; (4) reviewing potential themes, deciding whether overarching themes meaningfully interpret the data and address the research question; (5) defining and naming themes, refining their scope and significance; and (6) producing a report that describes the findings.

In applying this RTA process to my study, I began by familiarizing myself with the nine interview transcripts through repeated reading over several weeks during the summer of 2024, with the help of a member from my research lab. I, then, generated initial codes related to my research question and logged these codes in a Google Sheet, organizing them into separate tabs for each participant. Early this year, my thesis advisor and I generated overarching themes based on patterns we identified within the codes. After independently reanalyzing these patterns, I collapsed or expanded the potential themes and ranked them based on their relevance to my research question. Specifically, I maintained the themes that directly addressed my research question and retained the less prominent themes for a more holistic understanding of the children's nonbinary experiences.

Once the themes were finalized, I descriptively named them to ensure they fully captured the complexity of the data. As demonstrated in Appendix B, I reorganized the codes within the Google Sheet according to these themes and highlighted those that best represented each category (see Table B1). Finally, I compiled a table that integrated these themes with transcript excerpts to illustrate my findings (see Table B2). In the analysis section, I present and analyze children's reflections that align with each theme, providing examples and highlighting the codes that best represent each theme.

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021), I made a conscious attempt to avoid using quantification language (e.g., all, every, most, many, etc.) in the following section. However, I felt that it was important to highlight themes or comments that were prevalent across the dataset. Therefore, terms such as “many” or “majority” referred to 7 or more children, “several” or “a number” referred to 4 to 6 children, and “a few” referred to 3 or fewer children.

### **Analysis**

Based on the analysis of the children's transcripts, I identified five key themes: (1) *nonbinary identity as an intrinsic yet evolving aspect of self*, (2) *the role of language in identity formation*, (3) *social validation and the search for community*, (4) *navigating and resisting gender norms*, and (5) *various dimensions of identity beyond gender*. Table B2 in Appendix B presents the themes, corresponding codes, and examples of excerpts from children that were most relevant to each theme. Moreover, the following section will discuss these themes in order of their perceived relevance to the research question.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there was an overlap between some of these themes, reflecting an intersectional concept that is also common in the gender development of cisgender youth. For example, as will be discussed next, the *nonbinary identity as an intrinsic yet evolving aspect of self* and the *social validation and the search for community* themes intersected as a number of children realized that they were nonbinary through interactions with their friends, family, or books. Likewise, the *nonbinary identity as an intrinsic yet evolving aspect of self* and the *the role of language in identity formation* themes overlapped, as some children discovered that they were nonbinary when they learned about the significance of pronouns such as they/them, he/they, and he/she/they. As will become evident, these intersections highlight the complex nature of nonbinary identity development.

***Theme 1: Nonbinary Identity as an Intrinsic Yet Evolving Aspect of Self***

This theme reflects the children's evolving journey of self-discovery. Many children expressed an innate awareness of not fitting within binary gender categories, even before they had the language to describe it. For others, their understanding of gender identity was shaped and refined through experiences such as social interactions, media exposure, and various social contexts. Over time, some children came to realize that their gender identity was not fixed but continuously negotiated and refined through lived experiences and personal reflection.

For example, several children could not relate to the character of Avocado from *Avocado Asks: What Am I?* by Momoko Abe. Child 9<sup>1</sup>, for instance, stated that they had never felt confused about their identity, unlike Avocado who was uncertain about whether they belonged with the fruits or vegetables from the story. Similarly, when asked whether they had ever felt like Avocado, Child 2 responded that they had never doubted their identity, as seen in the excerpt below.

Interviewer: Avocado's insides felt like they were turning to guacamole. I don't belong with the vegetables or the fruit. There must be somewhere I can feel at home. How do you think avocado feels right now?

Child 2: Not knowing what to do.

Interviewer: Hmm. Have you ever felt like that?

Child 2 nods their head no.

However, majority of the children described their nonbinary identity development as complex and continuously evolving. For example, some children described being nonbinary as

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<sup>1</sup>Although the children in this study were assigned pseudonyms, I did not have access to any identifying information while analyzing the transcripts and writing this thesis. As a result, I refer to the children by their assigned numbers throughout the document.

being both a boy and a girl, whereas others described it as being neither a boy nor a girl.

Particularly, Child 4 described being nonbinary as both and neither.

Interviewer: Um. What is it like the difference or the similar parts between being a boy girl and non-binary?

Child 4: Um, non-binary is like in the middle.

Interviewer: In the middle.

Child 4: (Unintelligible) or both of them.

Interviewer: Oh, so it could be neither or both or combined?

Child 4 nods yes.

Additionally, a number of children described their gender as fluid, changing on a daily basis. For instance, Child 3 explained that "...some days, that's a little he, the pronoun, the main pronoun, pretty much they take turns, they, she, and he, take turns and they and she take a long time with their turns. But he only had one day." Similarly, Child 1 explained that they were a girl in the morning, a boy in the afternoon, and both a boy and girl during this "switch" at lunchtime. To specify, they said:

Interviewer: So, you said that you used to be a girl in the morning and a boy in the afternoon.

Child 1: Yep!

Interviewer: Would you always change from being a girl to being a boy across the day?

Child 1: Yeah. And one time I was a boy, and before, I was a girl.

Snack in hand, child stands.

Child 1: And during lunch, I was changing into a boy. So, I was both of them, when lunch was happening.

Interviewer: Oh. You were sort of both when it was happening?

Child 1: Yeah.

Expanding on this complexity, Child 5, who identified as both a boy and a "they" at the time, expressed uncertainty about whether they would always use they/them pronouns and identify as a boy, as they were unsure how their feelings might change in the future.

Interviewer: ...Um, so will you always be they/them and a boy?

Child 5: Um, I might change later, I don't know.

Interviewer: Okay. What might make you change it?

Child 5: Um... I don't know.

Interviewer: Hmm. Well how do you feel about – yeah?

Child 5: Because... I don't know what I'm gonna feel like later.

In contrast, several children described their experience of understanding their nonbinary identity as intuitive and effortless. When asked whether figuring out that they were nonbinary came naturally to them or whether they had to think about it, Child 2 responded, "You think about it a little, but you don't really need to think about it that much." Similarly, when asked about their experience of self-discovery, Child 4 explained that they identified as nonbinary simply because that was how they felt and described the process as quick. However, Child 5 provided an insightful articulation of their nonbinary identity–

Interviewer: Sometimes, they don't know that. I am – girl – boy – both – neither – just me – many people are different things. What do you think you'd write?

Child 5: Um. That one.

Child 5 points to book.

Interviewer: Just me?

Interviewer points to the same spot in the book.

Child 5: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewer: Why 'just me'?

Child 5: Because... I am me!

Interviewer: Mmm. Mmhmm.

Child 5: I am myself.

Notably, other children expressed that they have always known that they were nonbinary but lacked the language to describe it until their friend started to identify as nonbinary, or they were introduced to the concept of gender-diverse identities through the media or their parents. For example, when asked when they started feeling like they were both a boy and a girl, Child 6 explained, “Well... So, I went by he/him/his, until my friend – I, I felt like both. But I just like, um, I didn’t know about they/them, so I just... stayed boy until my friend knew how to do it.” Meanwhile, Child 7 explained that their parents taught them about the range of gender identities, and other children were already familiar with *Who Are You? The Kid’s Guide to Gender Identity* (2019) by Brook Pessin-Whedbee before the study.

Additionally, a number of children were uncertain about whether they would continue to identify as nonbinary in the future. For instance, when asked whether they will always use they/them pronouns, Child 6 responded, “I don’t know.” When further asked if they could have a different identity in the future, Child 6 acknowledged that it was possible.

Interviewer: Okay. Thank you for telling me about that. And will you always be both? And use they/them from now on, as you grow up?

Child 6: I don’t know.

Interviewer: You don't know?

Child 6: No.

Interviewer: Would you... Do you think it's possible you could have a different identity?

Child 6: Yeah.

Interviewer: How does that feel?

A beep is heard from somewhere in the room.

Child 6: Um... I think good.

Child 6 leans forward towards the interviewer.

Interviewer: You think good? Why does it feel good?

Child 6: Because... (unintelligible).

Interviewer: Hmmm.

The room goes dark.

Interviewer: So - yeah, I know right, it's a little jump scare!"

Interviewer returns to their seat as soon as the light turns on.

Interviewer: So when you say it's good, I want to know what makes you think it's good? What are some good things that can be about maybe changing your identity?"

Child 6: Cause I think I might feel different when I'm older.

### ***Theme 2: The Role of Language in Identity Formation***

This theme explores the impact of language, including labels and pronouns, on shaping the children's sense of self. It highlights the emotional responses expressed by the children when misgendered or when incorrect labels were used, as well as the diverse understandings of what it means to be nonbinary. The theme also emphasizes the central role that language plays for nonbinary children, regardless of gender identity, underscoring its significance in shaping gender as an identity.

The children in this study described their nonbinary identities in various ways. As discussed in the first section, some children described being nonbinary as being both a boy and a girl (e.g., Child 5), whereas others described it as being neither a boy nor a girl (e.g., Child 7 and 9). A few children, however, described their nonbinary identity as being both and neither simultaneously, with Child 4 characterizing this experience as freeing. Additionally, a number of

children explained that their gender changes rapidly (e.g., Child 1 and Child 3). Child 3 elaborated by saying:

Interviewer: Okay! So now we're in the present. That's very cool. So, when, will you always be they/she mix? From now on?

Child 3: Um, I could ... ah, okay. Well, I might turn into just one of the two. Like, I just turn into a they for a while, then a she, then just a they/them mix, or pretty much I go between the two, then middle, pretty much, ugh... pretty much, it's going from one to one to one to one, faster than you can really see. So I'll say, instead of they, a they/she mix.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Child stands up and approaches something off-screen.

Child 3: Just one second. Like, they! She! They! She! They – they! She! They! She!

Child returns to chair.

Child 3: You see how fast that was? See how fast that was?

Interviewer: Yeah! Back and forth! That makes sense!

Child 3: So fast... I don't say it's both of them, because each one can get one whole minute between them.

There was also variation in the pronouns they used. While most children expressed that they prefer using they/them pronouns, a number expressed that they identify with a combination of he/they, she/they, or he/she/they. For example, Child 3 explained that they have a “double gender” because they prefer they/them and she/her pronouns. Additionally, Child 5 said that they are a “they” and a boy, explaining:

Interviewer: “Oh, will you tell me about what it's like being both they and a boy?”

Child 5: “So, it's sorta like being more a boy, because there's like two boys. And one girl.”

Interviewer: “Oh, I see.”

Child 5: "Because, they/them means, like, to me, she and – I mean they – I mean boy and girl.

And, um, so I'm they and he, so there's more boys than girl."

However, a common experience among most of the children in this study is the significant importance they placed on nonbinary labels and pronouns. For example, Child 5 explained that they were unaware of their nonbinary identity because they did not know that "it was a thing" at the time. Moreover, Child 5 expressed that they were careful of what label they used to describe themselves—referring to when the interviewer asked if they identify as trans—because "it might mean something else."

Moreover, most of the children expressed strong reactions when their labels or pronouns were used incorrectly, or when they were misgendered by family members or peers. For example, Child 7 shared that they were bullied after telling their class that they were nonbinary, and they felt angry because their teachers did not intervene until their parents emailed them about the incident. Child 7 also expressed that they get angry when people use the wrong pronouns, and they wished that people would learn to use their pronouns faster because correcting them was tiring.

Child 7: Well... This may... I guess it's kind of just hard because I just wish that people would learn how to just use my correct pronouns faster. It gets very tiring to...

Interviewer: Yeah, do still feel that feeling in your stomach?

Child 7: Oh, yes. It's when... most of the actually, it's a lot of the time. People don't listen all the time. I wish people would listen better. Cause it just gets tiring.

Notably, several children expressed that they preferred being called by their names rather than specific pronouns. For instance, when asked how they would like others to refer to them, Child 5 and Child 6 said that they wanted to be called by their name.

### *Theme 3: Social Validation and the Search for Community*

This theme explores the influence of social factors on the emotional and mental development of nonbinary identities. It captures the children's experiences of coming out to their friends and family as nonbinary, and how these experiences have shaped their sense of self. Additionally, it emphasizes the significance of community for this marginalized group, highlighting the children's deep need to feel a sense of belonging.

Several children reported experiencing bullying or isolation because of their nonbinary identity. For instance, Child 7 suggested that the Avocado character might be feeling sad, lonely, and confused because they experienced similar emotions when they felt like they did not belong at school. Similarly, Child 9 described feeling "disincluded" or left out during a game of soccer, while Child 2 shared:

Child 2: Um, kids boy me.

Interviewer: Oh, they boy you.

Child 2: Cause they – they like, they'll boy me, because they're like, what kind of, like, tell them! Like, pronouns. But they're just like, no. They kept following me around. I don't know how they, like, how they... why they were mean to me.

Child 2 rests chin in both fists.

These feelings were particularly troubling to some, as a few children expressed that they sought comfort from their friends and family. For example, while discussing the Avocado story, Child 5 suggested that having many friends is valuable because Avocado can tell them about their identity, and they can make them feel better. Likewise, Child 7 mentioned that their friend, Ronya, and their parents cheer them up whenever they feel like they do not belong.

Interviewer: I see. Well, have you ever had someone cheer you up? Maybe in a more immediate way. But in general, like tomato cheered up Avocado?

Child 7: Yeah.

Interviewer: Who was—

Child 7: My parents and my friend Ronya.

In contrast, some children expressed that they have always felt a sense of belonging. For example, Child 4 suggested that they have never felt sad, like Avocado, because they have always felt like they belonged. Similarly, while discussing the Avocado story, Child 5 said:

Interviewer: I guess there is, but they're also thick. Avocado's insides felt like they were turning into guacamole. I don't belong with the vegetables, or the fruit. There must be somewhere I can feel at home. How do you think avocado is feeling now?"

Child 5: Sad.

Interviewer: Mmm. For the same reasons?

Child 5: Yeah.

Interviewer: Hmm. And have you felt like that?

Child 5: Um, no.

Several children expressed feeling relief when they told their parents that they were nonbinary. Child 5 shared that they felt good when their mother talked to them about being nonbinary, saying, "When she told me about, I said, she told me about it [nonbinary], and I said, can I be that [nonbinary]? And she said, okay!" However, some children faced difficulties when their family was not immediately accepting of their nonbinary identity. For example, Child 1 described their experience of telling their grandma that they were nonbinary—

Child 1: Well, I said, my grandma said, that being, that talking, that, that, they/them wasn't in English.

Child 1 looks at the floor.

Interviewer: What did your grandma say?

Child 1: She said that non-binary is talking – talking about non-binary isn't English!

Interviewer: Oh.

Child 1: Because she didn't know exactly, too much about genders.

The children in these interviews also expressed a desire to meet other children like them. Referring to the *So, Who Are You? The Kid's Guide to Gender Identity* book, Child 1 shared that they like the book because "it's got two nonbinary people in it." On the other hand, Child 7 expressed feeling happy and surprised when they discovered that there were other children like them, stating, "Um, it was. Well, it was like. I don't know. It just. I just felt... Better, I guess." Furthermore, when asked whether they would support another nonbinary child in getting in touch with other children like them, Child 7 said that, although they were not sure how they would do it, they would be their friend because they are also nonbinary. Moreover, Child 7 offered advice to other children who were still on their own journeys of self-discovery, saying:

Interviewer: Yeah. That's great. That's great. And so if you had someone else who is trying to figure out their own gender identity, let's say, maybe wondering if they're a boy, girl, non-binary or whatever they are, how do you think you'd support them?

Child 7: Well, I'd tell them, go. You can choose different ones. Once you find the one that you feel most best suited with, you can then match your gender I guess.

#### ***Theme 4: Navigating and Resisting Gender Norms***

This theme reflects the children's strategies for challenging gendered expectations, particularly regarding clothing and self-expression. Many rejected the binary categorization of items and activities as "for boys" or "for girls," embracing a wide variety of toys, hobbies, and accessories regardless of their gender identity. Additionally, a number of children elaborated on the premise that gender is fundamentally separate from physical bodies, emphasizing that gender relates more to a sense of self or an internal feeling.

Under this theme, several children discussed various ways in which they are resistant to traditional gender norms, especially when it involved clothing. Child 8 explained that, since they do not believe that how you dress affects how someone sees themselves, they wear dresses and skirts because they “like to mix it up.” Similarly, Child 7 expressed that anyone should be free to dress however they choose because they believe that clothing is not related to a person’s identity. Elaborating on this, Child 7 added, “I don't really dress in one way or another way. If that's what it's talking about. But I don't like dresses that much.” Additionally, Child 5 shared their perspective on what it means to be nonbinary in this context:

Interviewer: Okay. So, what makes you they/them, then?

Child 5: Um...

Interviewer: Instead of a boy, or a girl?

Child 5: I think... boy things and girl things. But there are no, like, boy things and girl things. There's everybody things. I like everybody things.

Most children shared other ways that they expressed their gender in “unconventional” ways. Child 1 explained that, even though they identify as nonbinary, they like to paint their fingernails. Similarly, Child 3 mentioned that they want to have long hair because they believe that anyone can have long hair. Child 5 added that anyone can like dinosaurs, despite some people considering dinosaurs to be “boy things.”

Moreover, a few children commented on the idea that gender is not related to one’s body. For example, while discussing the book by Brook Pessin-Whedbee, Child 6 said that gender is more about pronouns than your body, and Child 4 shared the following:

Interviewer: And sometimes people get this confused with gender. But gender is much more than the body you were born with. What do you think gender is?

Child 4: What you feel like.

Interviewer: What you feel like. Can you tell me more about that?

Child 4: Like –

Child adjusts the sleeves and shoulders of their sweatshirt.

Child 4: Well...

Child changes the position of their feet, and slings one arm over the back of the chair.

Child 4: What gender you think more fits you.

Furthermore, Child 2 expressed that anyone can identify as whatever gender they choose, further challenging the binary framework of traditional gender norms by stating:

Child 2: Like you said, everybody can, they can change over, they can change who they are whenever they need to.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Child 2: For good or just a little while.

### ***Theme 5: Various Dimensions of Identity Beyond Gender***

This theme explores children's descriptions of other aspects of their identities that they consider central to their sense of self. It highlights the qualities, beyond gender, that these children view as significant and valuable to who they are.

For example, when asked to choose the items they liked from the book by Brook Pessin-Whedbee, most children chose a variety of items that were not necessarily tied to their gender. Child 5, for example, mentioned that they like toy cars, Marvel shoes, costumes, and dressing up. Similarly, Child 2 shared that they liked nature, playing dress-up with fairy wings, and playing pretend with powers. As discussed under the theme of navigating and resisting gender norms, most nonbinary children in this study displayed a preference for what Child 5 referred to as "everybody things." As explained by Child 3, this could be because:

Child 3: That's one part called the gender identity, but there's more than your gender identity, into your real identity!

Interviewer: Yeah! Like what else do you think is more than your gender identity?

Child 3: Well... what you like.

Furthermore, when asked about how they express themselves, a number of children chose to describe their talents, hobbies, or personal interests. For example, Child 7 stated, "I like book writing. I guess I don't really know what like, that stuff means. I don't really dress in one way or another way. If that's what it's talking about. I like. I don't like dresses that much." Similarly, Child 8 expressed themselves through drawing and reading, whereas Child 4 said that they like space, Mars, and "catstronauts" (or cat astronauts).

Other children chose to describe their best personal qualities. For instance, Child 6 mentioned that they like to help "doing little things," whereas Child 9 described themselves as someone who likes to "be crazy." Notably, Child 2 shared—

Interviewer: Okay. Babies can't talk, so grown-ups make a guess by looking at their bodies. This is the sex assigned at birth. Male or female. Sometimes people get this confused with gender. The gender is much more than the body you're born in. And I like what you're saying, that they don't know until they grow up. As babies grow into kids, they start to know what they like and don't like. This is your personal expression, what you like and how you dress and how you act. And there are so many ways to express yourself. What you like, continue to do, or even from day to day. What are some ways that you like to express yourself?

Child 2: Hmm. Happy.

Interviewer: Happy? You'd like to express yourself as happy?

Child 2: Mmhmm.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which a nonbinary identity shapes a child's sense of self. To date, there is limited research that has explored this topic, particularly among children within this 5 to 8-year-old age range. Therefore, the findings from this study could contribute to advancing research on nonbinary identity development in young children and enhance understanding of how gender influences overall identity formation. Furthermore, these findings underscore the importance of including the perspectives of marginalized groups in research. They also provide valuable insights for supporting gender-diverse children in their process of self-discovery—a critical area of focus considering President Trump's recent executive orders.

For most children in this study, discovering their nonbinary identity was a natural and effortless process. Some children expressed that they had been nonbinary since birth, while others needed the language to accurately describe their internal sense of self. Moreover, external factors played a significant role in shaping their understanding of their nonbinary identity. Several children reported feeling emotionally affected when mislabeled or misgendered by others and sought to connect with other children like them, seeking to build a community where they are unequivocally accepted. A few children already had this community in place, primarily composed of friends and family, which likely could have affected how they expressed their nonbinary identity.

Notably, most children actively resisted gender norms by engaging in hobbies or activities that defied gender stereotypes, such as wearing dresses and skirts when they felt like it. Interestingly, however, when asked how they express themselves, several children chose to

highlight personal qualities that appeared unrelated to their nonbinary identity. For instance, Child 2 mentioned that they like to express themselves as happy.

## **Theoretical Frameworks and Research Findings**

### ***Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory***

According to Piaget's (1971) theory of cognitive development, the nonbinary children were either in the preoperational stage (approximately ages 2 to 7) or the concrete operational stage (approximately ages 7 to 11). These stages are characterized, respectively, by a child's growing ability to represent objects and events through language, drawings, and symbolic play, and by their emerging ability to think logically about concrete events and objects. These cognitive characteristics were reflected in several responses, particularly when the children were asked how they express themselves. For example, Child 2 (aged 6) and Child 5 (aged 7.5) demonstrated symbolic play in responses by describing activities such as dressing up with fairy wings, pretending to have powers, and playing with toy cars, Marvel shoes, and costumes. Additionally, Child 3 (aged 6.11) exhibited early logical thinking by stating, "That's one part called the gender identity, but there's more than your gender identity, into your real identity!"—a response that reflects a developing understanding of identity as a multifaceted construct. Collectively, these responses illustrate the children's cognitive developmental stages at the time of the interview and how these stages affect their expressions, both related and unrelated to their nonbinary identities.

### ***The Gender Affirmative Model***

The findings from this research align closely with the theoretical frameworks described in the literature review. For instance, the Gender Affirmative Model by Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2021) proposed that gender identity emerges from the integration of biology, development,

socialization, culture, and context. This principle is reflected in two key findings of the study. First, the influence of parents and peers played a crucial role in the development of nonbinary identities in some children in this study. This is evident in Child 7's experience, as they shared that their parents and friends cheered them up whenever they felt like they did not belong. However, more research is needed—particularly from youth who grew up in non-affirming environments—to further explore the role of parents and peers in nonbinary identity development.

The second key finding highlights the context-dependent nature of gender identity, as illustrated by Child 5's careful choice of gender labels, as they expressed concern about being misinterpreted. This finding is consistent with the above principle from Gender Affirmative Model (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2021). Furthermore, the model highlights the concept of gender health, which refers to a child's ability to live in the gender that feels most authentic and comfortable to them. This concept is reflected in some children's descriptions of being nonbinary as a freeing and special experience. Another key principle of the Gender Affirmative Model is that gender is fluid and/or nonbinary, shifting based on a particular point in time or change within an individual over time (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2021). This principle is demonstrated by several children in this study, who described their nonbinary identity as evolving—changing on a daily basis or depending on the context.

### ***The Nonbinary Gender Identity Development Model***

The concept of gender fluidity is further supported by Dolan and Garvey's (2024) emergent model for nonbinary gender identity development, who illustrate “embracing fluidity and ambiguity” as a star in an identity model constellation. According to their model, fluidity is better understood as a spectrum between man and woman or as identities entirely separate from

binary concepts of gender. This definition of fluidity is reflected by the varying descriptions of the nonbinary identity by children in this study—some described it as neither a boy nor a girl, others as both a boy and a girl, and some as both and neither at the same time. Similarly, the concept of ambiguity is evident in how each child uniquely defined their gender identity. For instance, Child 5 defined their nonbinary identity as two boys and one girl, whereas Child 2 described themselves as a they/she mix because they “just turn into a they for a while, then a she, then just a they/them mix, or pretty much I go between the two, then middle, pretty much, ugh... pretty much, it’s going from one to one to one to one, faster than you can really see.” This reflects the ambiguity of gender identity, highlighting that it can mean different things to different people and may change depending on how they feel or how they want to express themselves.

Furthermore, Dolan and Garvey (2024) emphasize the role of kinship networks in their model of nonbinary identity development. In this study, the children highlighted various ways in which they were supported by their family or friends during their journey of self-discovery, and how they sought to foster bonds with other nonbinary children to build a community of their own. This idea aligns with Dolan and Garvey’s concept of mirroring and witnessing, which recognizes the importance of being seen as nonbinary and knowing other nonbinary children to relate to. Additionally, there were instances where the children discussed how people should approach transition, with Child 4 commenting that anyone can change their gender whenever they need to, “for good or just a little while.” Child 7, in particular, navigated disclosure by correcting those who misgendered them and educating others about the complexities of nonbinary identities, experiencing frustration when people fail to learn their pronouns more

quickly. Therefore, these examples correspond with two other stars—exploring transition and navigating disclosure—in Dolan and Garvey’s constellation analogy.

Furthermore, this “starry sky” model emphasizes the uniqueness of each nonbinary experience, with Child 2 eloquently expressing that their nonbinary identity makes them special. As Dolan and Garvey (2024) articulate, “stars may exist in the sky, yet they appear in different orientations, with varying brightness, or may not even be visible based on someone’s perspective” (p. 173). As reflected in the themes, the children in this study placed varying levels of importance on different aspects of their identity—all viewing their gender as significant, though to differing extents.

However, Dolan and Garvey’s (2024) constellation model was developed from the experiences of nonbinary students in higher education institutions. Designed to inform policymakers, educators, and researchers, this model aimed to highlight multifaceted processes of gender identity development and support more gender-affirming practices and policies for nonbinary people within higher education contexts. As such, their model may not fully translate to or resonate with younger age groups—such as the 5- to 8-year-olds in this study—whose developmental contexts and lived experiences differ significantly. This is evident in the ways the findings from the current study challenge and contribute to the model. For example, Dolan and Garvey’s “nonbinary worldmaking” star describes the process of naming and rejecting the violence nonbinary people face, and demanding and envisioning liberation. This star did not apply to the children in this study, as they did not describe ways in which they created alternative spaces of refuge for each other amidst a violent campus climate, as illustrated in Dolan and Garvey’s original example. Additionally, the “Various Dimensions of Identity Beyond Gender” theme from the current study—which describes other aspects of the nonbinary children’s

identities that they considered to be central to their sense of self—was not posited as a star in Dolan and Garvey's (2024) emergent model for nonbinary identity development.

### **Nonbinary Identity and Sense of Self**

This study provides an initial step to understanding the extent to which a nonbinary identity is related to a child's sense of self. Based on Harter's (2003) expansion of James' (1890) definition of a sense of self, I believe that the nonbinary children in this study met three of the four key aspects of the I-Self. They displayed self-awareness—an appreciation for one's internal states, needs, thoughts, and emotions—by expressing confidence in their identity, asserting that they have never been confused about who they are, and recognizing their uniqueness as nonbinary. They also demonstrated self-agency—the sense of authorship over one's thoughts and actions—by navigating their identity disclosure with their social networks and actively seeking to build communities of their own. Additionally, most exhibited coherence—a stable sense of the self as a single, coherent, bounded entity—by commenting that they were nonbinary because it felt right to them.

However, a few children did not fully demonstrate a sense of self-continuity—a stable sense of the self as a single, coherent, bounded entity—by expressing that they did not know if they would always continue to identify as nonbinary. For example, Child 6 mentioned that they might feel differently about their identity as they get older, and Child 5 expressed that they did not know how they were going to feel about their identity later. Thus, while some aspects of self-continuity were less certain, the overall findings suggest that the children's view of themselves in this study align more closely with Basten and Touyz's (2020) definition of the sense of self—"personal, subjective awareness of one's self, which includes a sense of agency for one's own

actions, a sense of continuity over time, and a sense of personal unity and wholeness, with a special affective energy or vitality” (p. 160).

Based on these findings, I would conclude that identifying as nonbinary is closely linked to a child’s sense of self. This conclusion aligns with my expectations based on personal experience, as mentioned in my personal statement. However, it is crucial to highlight the last theme that describes the various dimensions of identity beyond gender. When asked how they express themselves, most children chose to emphasize their best traits, such as being a happy person, or their hobbies, like reading and drawing. Although these nine children do not represent the entire nonbinary community, these findings suggest that being nonbinary is just one part of a larger, multifaceted identity. Further research is needed to draw more definitive conclusions.

## **Limitations**

### ***The Sample and Sampling Method***

This research is not without its limitations. One notable limitation of this study is the lack of diversity within the sample. All participants were White, with only one identifying as biracial (Asian/White), and all participants came from middle-class families residing in the Greater Boston Area. Various factors may have affected sampling and other procedures, including financial constraints, travel limitations, and the small size of this identity group. To address these limitations, there are several potential solutions. For instance, conducting interviews over a virtual platform, like Zoom, could expand the geographical scope and address travel constraints. In addition, replicating this study with a larger sample of children, within the target age range of 3 to 8, could provide a more accurate representation of the identity experiences of children in the early stages of their nonbinary journeys. Thus, providing a more comprehensive understanding of gender development in gender-diverse youth. Furthermore, utilizing online platforms such as

Reddit or Discord, which can host parents from diverse backgrounds, could help recruit a wider group of nonbinary children, enhance the diversity of the sample, and improve the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, the sampling method may have limited the diversity of perspectives within the broader nonbinary community, particularly among nonbinary youth. Participants in this study were recruited through their parents, who responded to advertisements on Facebook or Craigslist. It would be reasonable to assume that these parents were already supportive of their child's nonbinary identity, meaning that these children likely grew up in affirming environments—an experience not shared by all nonbinary youth. Consequently, the current study not only omits the voices of youth from non-affirming households, but also largely emphasizes the influence of supportive adults, a factor that is not universally present in nonbinary experiences.

This sampling bias may have also influenced the comments shared by participants in this study, many of which centered on the importance of parental support in nonbinary identity development. For instance, some parents introduced their children to the concept of a nonbinary identity through open conversations or affirming books. To help balance this perspective, future research could aim to include participants with a wider range of experiences, including those from less affirming environments. This might involve engaging parents who were not initially supportive of their child's identity, offering a more complete picture of the different ways nonbinary youth come to understand themselves.

### ***Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Secondary Sources***

Another limitation of this research lies in the analytic process. Braun and Clark (2021) highlight the value of using collaborative coding during the reflexive thematic analysis process, as it enhances understanding, interpretation, and reflexivity. As described by McCready et al.

(2024), collaborative coding could involve having two or more researchers meet regularly to discuss their candidate themes and refine them until a consensus is reached between the coders. This approach could have been particularly useful during the fourth step of the analysis, which was reviewing potential themes. Involving a second researcher at this stage would have provided an opportunity to challenge my assumptions, further clarifying my interpretations and ensuring they were more transparent to the readers. Therefore, future research could benefit from following Braun and Clark's suggestion of incorporating collaboration throughout the data analysis process to enhance the depth and rigor of the findings.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of working with secondary data. For example, I initially interpreted some comments made by the children about whether they would continue to identify as nonbinary in the future as reflecting uncertainty or doubt. However, this could equally be understood as openness to possibility or an expression of the fluid nature often associated with nonbinary identities. In this light, the coherence factor in Harter's (2003) definition of sense of self could be interpreted not as adherence to a fixed identity, but as a belief in gender fluidity and self-discovery (j. w. skelton, personal communication, April 14, 2025). However, without the opportunity to ask follow-up or clarifying questions—something that is not possible when working with secondary data—such nuances can be difficult to fully discern.

### ***Researcher Positionality and Intellectual Accountability***

Moreover, my initial interpretation of uncertainty regarding the nonbinary children's comments about the future may have been influenced by my positionality as a cisgender person. Although I strived to conduct ethical, transparent, and inclusive research, I acknowledge that my understanding of gender-diverse experiences is inherently limited by my own lived experience,

in which I was conditioned to view that gender is fixed and binary. To address this limitation, future research could include a co-researcher who is nonbinary or identifies as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, helping ensure that a broader range of perspectives and lived experiences inform both the research process and its interpretations.

In relation to my evolving understanding of gender identity and expression, I felt that it was also essential to consider the resources that inform our understanding of gender. One such resource is *Who Are You? The Kid's Guide to Gender Identity* by Brook Pessin-Whedbee, which was foundational to the original study. However, it has not been without its critiques. For instance, Maya Gonzalez has raised concerns that Brook Pessin-Whedbee's book appropriates key concepts from Gonzalez' earlier works, including *The Gender Now Coloring Book* (2010) and its *School Edition* (2011). Gonzalez specifically claims that Pessin-Whedbee's book reproduces elements of her trademarked framework, *The Gender Wheel*, which presents a queer-centric, holistic model of gender inclusion designed for young audiences. Additionally, Gonzalez identifies significant overlaps in structural elements, such as the use of three concentric circles to represent gender concepts and the framing of the *Body and Identity or Gender*/"*Inside*" circle (Gonzalez, n.d.; Gonzalez, 2021).

To address these claims, future research could benefit from engaging directly with original works such as *The Gender Wheel* (2017) and *The Gender Now Coloring Book* (2010) by Maya Gonzalez. According to the author's website, *The Gender Wheel* offers a nature-based, inclusive, and body-positive conceptualization of gender, whereas *The Gender Now Coloring Book* provides an in-depth, interactive exploration of bodies, nature, and historical perspectives on gender diversity (Gonzalez, n.d.). Furthermore, Gonzalez's identity as a queer Mexican American artist, illustrator, educator, and publisher underscores the importance of integrating

diverse voices into discussions on gender. Engaging with her work aligns with the broader objective of this research—to ensure that perspectives from historically marginalized communities are included in scholarly discourse.

## **Future Directions**

### ***Age and Nonbinary Identity Development***

Building on the research by Ward and Lucas (2024), a valuable area of focus for future research could be examining age as a factor in the development of gender-diverse identities. Despite the relatively narrow age range of about 4 years, I observed that, at the time of the interview, the younger children seemed to exhibit more fluidity in their gender expression compared to their older counterparts. For instance, Child 8—who had just turned 5—shared that they identified as a mix of he/she/they pronouns and preferred to be called by the pronouns they resonated with on any given day. Similarly, Child 1—who had just turned 6—described their gender as something that changes throughout the day. In contrast, Child 7—who was about to turn 9—expressed that they did not know if they would always identify as nonbinary, as they felt unsure about the future and found this uncertainty upsetting. As a result, they did not fully display a sense of self-continuity like the younger children.

Additionally, the older children in this study seemed more likely to acknowledge the complexity of nonbinary identities. For example, Child 7—who was about to turn 9—explained that while they used they/them pronouns, being nonbinary is more complex than just pronouns to them. Similarly, Child 5—who was about 7 and a half—explained that being a “they/them” does not change how a person behaves, emphasizing that being nonbinary is more complicated than that. On the other hand, Child 2—who had just turned 6—simply identified as nonbinary and

expressed a clear preference for being referred to by they/them pronouns, without wanting to be called a boy or a girl.

Given these observations, future research could explore how age may influence the development of nonbinary identities, specifically examining how fluidity and certainty of one's gender identity might evolve over time. Follow-up interviews conducted after five or so years could offer valuable insights as to how, or whether, the perspectives of the children in this study have evolved over time and through new experiences. Alternatively, a longitudinal study, in contrast to the cross-sectional design used here, could offer a more comprehensive understanding of how perspectives on gender develop throughout childhood, enabling researchers to identify when certain variables—such as expressions of fluidity—emerge, change, or stabilize. This approach could help establish a developmental sequence similar to Kohlberg's stage theory, but it would be tailored specifically to nonbinary and gender-diverse individuals. Applying these methods with this specific group of children could reveal how any change in perspective might affect their sense of self, particularly their sense of self-continuity, as they age.

### ***Race and Nonbinary Identity Development***

As outlined in the positionality statement, this thesis does not engage in an in-depth discussion of race for various reasons. To reiterate, I am a Black woman, who was raised in a predominantly Black country, where race did not play the same central role in my personal experience as it might for Black individuals or minorities in Western societies. Nevertheless, I recognize the significance of race in shaping trans identity throughout U.S. history (Snorton, 2017). For that reason, future research could explore how race may be related to gender identity in nonbinary children, particularly since the participants in this study were predominantly White.

Additionally, adopting an intersectional approach could provide deeper insight into how other social identities—such as ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status—are related to the sense of self of nonbinary children. Such research would be a valuable addition to existing literature, which largely focuses on mental health and experiences of discrimination among gender-diverse individuals across various settings (e.g., Fogarty & Zheng, 2018; Zhou, Huang, & Howard, 2023; Zongrone, Truong, & Clark, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

The themes from this study suggest that the journeys of identity development for nonbinary children are innate and continuously evolving. These children greatly value their social networks, particularly their parents and peers, for their ability to comfort them during difficult times, such as when they feel a sense of not belonging. Language plays a crucial role for them, as instances of misgendering and mislabeling often provoke feelings of frustration or anger. The children also demonstrated varied understandings of what it means to be nonbinary, defining their identity based on their individual experiences and perceptions, further emphasizing the complex nature of identity development in gender-diverse youth. However, the children also highlighted other parts of their identity, such as their hobbies or personality, that they deemed important to them. Therefore, these findings suggest that while a child's nonbinary identity is closely linked to their sense of self, it is not necessarily the most salient part of their identity.

Parents and teachers, especially, can use these key takeaways to better support children on their journeys of self-discovery. They need to understand that this journey is a deeply personal process that requires unwavering support and validation. Furthermore, when needed, they should protect children from external challenges, such as bullying, and provide a safe, nurturing environment where these children can develop and affirm their sense of self. This

support is especially crucial today, as gender—particularly the experiences of gender-diverse individuals—has become highly politicized, with debates and policies that significantly impact how individuals experience their gender identity, how society recognizes it, and the legal frameworks that govern it.

## Appendix A

### Examples of Interview Questions<sup>2</sup>

- Do you know whether the baby will be a boy or girl or what the baby will be?
- Would you like to tell me about some of the ways you like to express yourself?
- How would you describe your gender?
- Does anything change your gender for you or, like, make it the way that it is?
- Do your friends know that you are [child's description]?

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<sup>2</sup>Due to limited access to the interview materials, the questions provided are those that I was able to identify within the child transcripts.

## Appendix B

Table B1

*Google Sheets Organization of Codes by Theme*

<b>RQ: How essential is being NB to a child's identity?</b>				
<b>Nonbinary Identity as an Intrinsic Yet Evolving Aspect of Self</b>	<b>Navigating and Resisting Gender Norms</b>	<b>The Role of Language in Identity Formation</b>	<b>Social Validation and the Search for Community</b>	<b>Various Dimensions of Identity Beyond Gender</b>
I don't hate any part of my gender.	Anyone can be who they want to be.	I think people can be a they/them if they want to be both a boy and girl.	I don't get sad when I'm with my family and friends.	I like toy cars.
I might change my gender later because I don't know what I will feel later.	Avocado can be a lot of things.	Avocado could be a they/them because avocado could be a fruit and vegetable.	I have never felt sad for not belonging.	I like sushi, guacamole, salad, and tacos.
I am two boys and one girl. I am more boys than girls.	It should be okay for anyone to be who they want to be.	I am more of a girl than a boy, so I would prefer they/them or he/him over she/her.	It felt good when my mum was okay with me being a they/them.	I like to express myself by climbing trees, being funny and going on adventures.
Gender is fun for everybody.	I think Avocado could be a fruit and vegetable	Being called she/her is okay, but not awesome.	I only know one other person who is a they/them like me.	I like reading.
I am just me. I am myself.	I like to wear skirts because I like how they feel but not how they look.	I am a he and a they.	It's good to have a lot of friends because you can tell them things and they can make you feel better.	I like Marvel shoes.

*Note.* This table provides an example of how I reorganized the codes within the Google Sheet according to the themes and highlighted those that best represented each category.

**Table B2***Analyzed Themes, Codes, and Examples of Corresponding Excerpts*

<b>Theme 1: Nonbinary Identity as an Intrinsic Yet Evolving Aspect of Self</b>	
<b>Code</b>	<b>Example Excerpt</b>
I've never felt like I didn't know what to do about my identity.	Interviewer: Avocado's insides felt like they were turning to guacamole. I don't belong with the vegetables or the fruit. There must be somewhere I can feel at home. How do you think avocado feels right now? Child 2: Not knowing what to do. Interviewer: Hmm. Have you ever felt like that? Child 2 nods their head no.
Being non-binary is being in between a boy and a girl.	Interviewer: Um. What is it like the difference or the similar parts between being a boy girl and non-binary? Child 4: Um, non-binary is like in the middle. Interviewer: In the middle. Child 4: (Unintelligible) or both of them. Interviewer: Oh, so it could be neither or both or combined? Child 4 nods yes.
My gender changes throughout the day.	Interviewer: So, you said that you used to be a girl in the morning and a boy in the afternoon. Child 1: Yep! Interviewer: Would you always change from being a girl to being a boy across the day? Child 1: Yeah. And one time I was a boy, and before, I was a girl. Snack in hand, child stands. Child 1: And during lunch, I was changing into a boy. So, I was both of them, when lunch was happening. Interviewer: Oh. You were sort of both when it was happening? Child 1: Yeah.
Being non-binary is more complicated than pronouns.	Interviewer: So this is meant for, you know, any kind of kid to come and have fun. But do you mind if I ask you another question that I just thought of? So do you. For you, what do you think non-binary means? Like, what does it mean? What does it mean to be non-binary? Does it mean something to you? Child 7: Uh... using they/them pronouns... not feel like, not feeling like a boy or a girl. Interviewer: Okay. Child 7: That's for me. I'm not quite sure about other people, but I don't really know, actually. Child 7 rests chin in both palms. Interviewer: Yeah. It's a question that seems to make you think, right. Child 7: Mhmm. Child 7: I'm done thinking now. Interviewer: Okay, so your pronouns and – Child 7: I guess – Interviewer: The feeling. Child 7: I don't really know what I – when what I have, I have to answer your question but I don't, don't know the answer, I guess it's kind of harder because

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	I just say what it's like when I think, but I don't really know. If what you're asking for like all people, I couldn't really...
I am just me. I am myself.	<p>Interviewer: Sometimes, they don't know that. I am – girl – boy – both – neither – just me – many people are different things. What do you think you'd write?</p> <p>Child 5: Um. That one.</p> <p>Child 5 points to book.</p> <p>Interviewer: Just me?</p> <p>Interviewer points to the same spot in the book.</p> <p>Child 5: Yeah.</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay.</p> <p>Interviewer: Why 'just me'?</p> <p>Child 5: Because... I am me!</p> <p>Interviewer: Mmm. Mmhmm.</p> <p>Child 5: I am myself.</p>
I will probably be non-binary for the rest of my life.	<p>Child 7: I'm probably - I'm expecting for like most of my life I'm gonna be non-binary.</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay, yeah.</p> <p>Child 7: I am probably going to be non-binary for the rest of my life...?</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay.</p> <p>Child 7: Well, maybe. I can't tell. No one can tell.</p>
My gender might change later because I don't know what I'm going to feel later.	<p>Interviewer: ...Um, so will you always be they/them and a boy?</p> <p>Child 5: Um, I might change later, I don't know.</p> <p>Interviewer: Okay. What might make you change it?</p> <p>Child 5: Um... I don't know.</p> <p>Interviewer: Hmm. Well how do you feel about – yeah?</p> <p>Child 5: Because... I don't know what I'm gonna feel like later.</p>
I don't know if I will always be nonbinary, but I think that feels good.	<p>Interviewer: Okay. Thank you for telling me about that. And will you always be both? And use they/them from now on, as you grow up?</p> <p>Child 6: I don't know.</p> <p>Interviewer: You don't know?</p> <p>Child 6: No.</p> <p>Interviewer: Would you... Do you think it's possible you could have a different identity?</p> <p>Child 6: Yeah.</p> <p>Interviewer: How does that feel?</p> <p>A beep is heard from somewhere in the room.</p> <p>Child 6: Um... I think good.</p> <p>Child 6 leans forward towards the interviewer.</p> <p>Interviewer: You think good? Why does it feel good?</p> <p>Child 6: Because... unintelligible.</p> <p>Interviewer: Hmmm.</p> <p>The room goes dark.</p> <p>Interviewer: So - yeah, I know right, it's a little jump scare!"</p> <p>Interviewer returns to their seat as soon as the light turns on.</p> <p>Interviewer: So when you say it's good, I want to know what makes you think it's good? What are some good things that can be about maybe changing your identity?"</p> <p>Child 6: Cause I think I might feel different when I'm older.</p>

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**Theme 2: The Role of Language in Identity Formation**


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I might not always be a they/she mix. Interviewer: Okay! So now we're in the present. That's very cool. So, when, will you always be they/she mix? From now on?  
 Child 3: Um, I could ... ah, okay. Well, I might turn into just one of the two. Like, I just turn into a they for a while, then a she, then just a they/them mix, or pretty much I go between the two, then middle, pretty much, ugh... pretty much, it's going from one to one to one to one, faster than you can really see. So I'll say, instead of they, a they/she mix.  
 Interviewer: Yeah.  
 Child stands up and approaches something off-screen.  
 Child 3: Just one second. Like, they! She! They! She! They – they! She! They! She!  
 Child returns to chair.  
 Child 3: You see how fast that was? See how fast that was?  
 Interviewer: Yeah! Back and forth! That makes sense!  
 Child 3: So fast... I don't say it's both of them, because each one can get one whole minute between them.

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I am two boys and one girl. I am more boys than girls. Interviewer: "Oh, will you tell me about what it's like being both they and a boy?"  
 Child 5: "So, it's sorta like being more a boy, because there's like two boys. And one girl."  
 Interviewer: "Oh, I see."  
 Child 5: "Because, they/them means, like, to me, she and – I mean they – I mean boy and girl. And, um, so I'm they and he, so there's more boys than girl."

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I wish people would learn to use my pronouns faster because it's tiring. Child 7: Well... This may... I guess it's kind of just hard because I just wish that people would learn how to just use my correct pronouns faster. It gets very tiring to...  
 Interviewer: Yeah, do still feel that feeling in your stomach?  
 Child 7: Oh, yes. It's when... most of the actually, it's a lot of the time. People don't listen all the time. I wish people would listen better. Cause it just gets tiring.

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I didn't know if I was a boy or girl or non-binary as a baby. Interviewer: So when you were a baby, you were neither, right?  
 Child 2: Yeah, I didn't know what I was.  
 Interviewer: Yeah. So, are other people neither when they're a baby?  
 Child 2: Maybe. I don't know, because I haven't found that, no one has told me that. It's private information. No one has told me.

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**Theme 3: Social Validation and the Search for Community**


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Some kids bully me by saying that I am a boy. Child 2: Um, kids boy me.  
 Interviewer: Oh, they boy you.  
 Child 2: Cause they – they like, they'll boy me, because they're like, what kind of, like, tell them! Like, pronouns. But they're just like, no. They kept following me around. I don't know how they, like, how they... why they were mean to me.  
 Child 2 rests chin in both fists.

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My parents and friend cheered me up when I felt like I didn't belong. Interviewer: I see. Well, have you ever had someone cheer you up? Maybe in a more immediate way. But in general, like tomato cheered up Avocado?  
 Child 7: Yeah.

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	Interviewer: Who was— Child 7: My parents and my friend Ronya
I have never felt sad for not belonging.	Interviewer: I guess there is, but they're also thick. Avocado's insides felt like they were turning into guacamole. I don't belong with the vegetables, or the fruit. There must be somewhere I can feel at home. How do you think avocado is feeling now?" Child 5: Sad. Interviewer: Mmm. For the same reasons? Child 5: Yeah. Interviewer: Hmm. And have you felt like that? Child 5: Um, no.
My grandma doesn't know a lot about nonbinary people.	Child 1: Well, I said, my grandma said, that being, that talking, that, that, they/them wasn't in English. Child 1 looks at the floor. Interviewer: What did your grandma say? Child 1: She said that non-binary is talking – talking about non-binary isn't English! Interviewer: Oh. Child 1: Because she didn't know exactly, too much about genders.
Explore other genders until you find what fits you best.	Interviewer: Yeah. That's great. That's great. And so if you had someone else who is trying to figure out their own gender identity, let's say, maybe wondering if they're a boy, girl, non-binary or whatever they are, how do you think you'd support them? Child 7: Well, I'd tell them, go. You can choose different ones. Once you find the one that you feel most best suited with, you can then match your gender I guess.
<b>Theme 4: Navigating and Resisting Gender Norms</b>	
I like everybody things and that makes me a they/them.	Interviewer: Okay. So, what makes you they/them, then? Child 5: Um... Interviewer: Instead of a boy, or a girl? Child 5: I think... boy things and girl things. But there are no, like, boy things and girl things. There's everybody things. I like everybody things.
Gender is what fits best for you.	Interviewer: And sometimes people get this confused with gender. But gender is much more than the body you were born with. What do you think gender is? Child 4: What you feel like. Interviewer: What you feel like. Can you tell me more about that? Child 4: Like – Child adjusts the sleeves and shoulders of their sweatshirt. Child 4: Well... Child changes the position of their feet, and slings one arm over the back of the chair. Child 4: What gender you think more fits you.
Anyone can change who they are when they need to.	Child 2: Like you said, everybody can, they can change over, they can change who they are whenever they need to. Interviewer: Yeah. Child 2: For good or just a little while.

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**Theme 5: Various Dimensions of Identity Beyond Gender**

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Gender identity is only one part. What you like is also part of your real identity.	<p>Child 3: That's one part called the gender identity, but there's more than your gender identity, into your real identity!</p> <p>Interviewer: Yeah! Like what else do you think is more than your gender identity?</p> <p>Child 3: Well... what you like.</p>
I like express myself as happy.	<p>Interviewer: Okay. Babies can't talk, so grown-ups make a guess by looking at their bodies. This is the sex assigned at birth. Male or female. Sometimes people get this confused with gender. The gender is much more than the body you're born in. And I like what you're saying, that they don't know until they grow up. As babies grow into kids, they start to know what they like and don't like. This is your personal expression, what you like and how you dress and how you act. And there are so many ways to express yourself. What you like, continue to do, or even from day to day. What are some ways that you like to express yourself?</p> <p>Child 2: Hmm. Happy.</p> <p>Interviewer: Happy? You'd like to express yourself as happy?</p> <p>Child 2: Mmhmm.</p>

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*Note.* This table outlines the themes, codes, and corresponding excerpts analyzed in this paper.

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