"You're free from just a girl or a boy": Nonbinary children's understanding of their gender

Fernando Salinas-Quiroz, Tuğçe Aral, Jessie Hillekens, Sophie Hölscher & Jocelyn Demos

Published online: 13 May 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 2892

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles ↗

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

"You're free from just a girl or a boy": Nonbinary children's understanding of their gender

Fernando Salinas-Quiroz[a] , Tuğçe Aral[b#], Jessie Hillekens[c#], Sophie Hölscher[d#] and Jocelyn Demos[a]

[a]Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development (EPCSHD), School of Arts and Sciences, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA; [b]Department of Inclusive Education, University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany; [c]Department of Developmental Psychology, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands; [d]Educational Psychology – Socialisation and Culture, Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg, Halle (Saale), Germany

ABSTRACT

Background: In recent years, research on gender diversity in early childhood has increased significantly. However, much of the published literature still focuses on children whose experiences align with binary gender norms, inadvertently excluding nonbinary experiences from analysis.

Aims: We seek to explore how nonbinary children, aged five to eight, perceive and understand their gender modality and experiences.

Methods: Nine American nonbinary children were interviewed using a semi-structured approach, which included two book readings, a drawing activity, and approximately 23 pre-determined questions. Inductive reflexive thematic analysis was utilized for developing, analyzing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset. All authors engaged in various aspects of reflexivity throughout the process, including personal, functional, and disciplinary reflexivity.

Analysis: We constructed five themes, which were evident across the accounts of participating children. The first one, *Being nonbinary has different meanings for different people*, illustrates the diverse interpretations of nonbinary identities. *Gender is hard to describe but my pronouns help me make sense of it*, highlights the challenges of explaining gender, yet pronouns help participants lucidly put their and others' gender into words. *People can change their gender for good or just for a little while*, reflect participants' view of gender as dynamic and fluid. *"I have the agency to decide who I am with a little help of others": feeling, learning, choosing and telling*, explores participants' journey in adopting the label "nonbinary". Lastly, *Being nonbinary is both easy and hard: easy because I am myself, hard because of other people*, depicts the multifaceted experiences of being nonbinary, from the affirmation to bullying.

Discussion: In an era marked by a contentious political climate and ongoing debates about trans/nonbinary individuals, these young children defy conventional norms and establish themselves as active architects of their identity narratives, driven by their agency and self-determination.

Introduction

The concept of cisnormativity assumes that being cisgender is the default, universal gender modality (McGuire et al., 2016). This perspective reinforces a narrow and exclusive understanding of gender diversity, systematically oppressing and overlooking the lived experiences of individuals whose gender identities do not match the gender that they were assigned at birth. Additionally, it reinforces the idea that trans and nonbinary identities are abnormal or deviant. This contributes to discrimination and prejudice against those who do not conform to cisnormative expectations. However, in the contemporary era, a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender has emerged, acknowledging the diverse spectrum of gender identities beyond the confines of the binary (Ashley, 2022). This more nuanced understanding of gender is already prevalent in gender nonconforming children aged 3–10, who

CONTACT Fernando Salinas-Quiroz ✉ fernando.salinas@tufts.edu 🖃 Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development (EPCSHD), School of Arts and Sciences, Tufts University, 105 College Avenue, Medford, MA 02155, USA.

[#]These authors contributed equally to this article.

demonstrate a reduced inclination to perceive their own gender as stable or consistent over time (Fast & Olson, 2018; Zucker et al., 1999).

For the purposes of this article, we are using nonbinary as an umbrella term for someone who self-identifies as a gender outside the gender binary, and/or does not identify as always and completely being just a man or a woman, recognizing gender as existing along a spectrum. Some examples of nonbinary identities include being both a woman and a man, genderqueer or genderfluid identities that fluctuate, demigender identities that relate more to one gender than another without completely aligning with that gender, having two or three gender identities, two-spirit gender identities that are rooted in the spiritual and cultural beliefs of Indigenous communities in North America going beyond the traditional Western understanding of gender or another third gender according to a cultural heritage, xenogender identities incorporating concepts seemingly unrelated to gender, and/or the "lack of" a gender (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023). While trans and nonbinary are still Western terms, they are intended to encompass an ever-growing and ever-changing umbrella of gender modalities. Although many nonbinary individuals also consider themselves trans, it is worth saying that not all identify as such.

Despite the increasing visibility and acceptance of nonbinary identities, nonbinary individuals continue to face systemic persecution and discrimination in various aspects of their lives, as evidenced by the extraordinary number of anti-trans laws, bills, and executive orders that were proposed and passed since 2020 in the US. This ongoing discrimination highlights the urgent need for research to center the experiences of nonbinary individuals. Moreover, there remains a significant gap in research focusing on the voices of nonbinary children themselves. Therefore, our study aims to explore how nonbinary children, age five to eight, understand their gender and gendered experiences. It is imperative to listen to children to inform policy-making, shifting away from an adult-centric and condescending approach, and instead promoting trans joy and supporting the well-being of nonbinary individuals.

Systematic persecution of nonbinary individuals

The pervasive cisnormative conceptualization of gender in Western societies has been constructed along with other categories such as race through colonial institutions and processes. Colonial powers imposed binary gender norms as part of their social control and hegemony, erasing or delegitimizing indigenous and non-Western understandings of gender and sexuality (Morgensen, 2012). In stark contrast to these cisnormative systems that believe that sex and gender are immutable binaries that are determined solely by the assessment of a person's genitalia at birth by legal and medical authorities (Bauer et al., 2009; Miyagi et al., 2021; Salinas-Quiroz & Daniels, 2023), Ashley (2021, p. 43) articulates a view of gender as 'messy, plural, dynamic, and in constant evolution.' This understanding of gender criticizes the traditional binary classifications of 'male' and 'female', which dictate which genders do or do not exist and how these genders should or should not identify and act (Morgenroth et al., 2021). Instead, gender is recognized as encompassing a wide spectrum of identities, and as existing on a spectrum rather than being limited to male and female categories (Ashley, 2022).

On nearly every continent, and for all recorded history, thriving cultures have recognized, revered, and integrated more than two genders (Public Broadcasting Service, 2015), such as Muxes in Mexico, Sekratas in Madagascar, Metis in Nepal, and Fa'afafine in Samoa. Nevertheless, nonbinary individuals have been systematically persecuted in different parts of the world across time. For years, the legal, medical, and academic establishments have been instrumental in constructing gender and racial hierarchies in colonial societies, which have fueled systemic discrimination and violence against trans and nonbinary individuals (Keenan, 2022; Pauly, 2023). Rooted in eugenics and the rhetoric of "civilization", these structures have perpetuated white supremacy and patriarchy, with gender norms serving as a foundational element of racism (Bederman, 1995). Consequently, trans and nonbinary individuals—especially children— have become the targets of political campaigns, media scrutiny, and social discourse that question their very right to exist (ACLU, 2022; Movement

Advancement Project, 2023; Salinas-Quiroz & Daniels, 2023; Trans Formations Project, n.d.).

This system of political and extrajudicial violence both stems from and contributes to cisnormativity. The current surge in awareness of anti-trans violence globally is shedding light on longstanding issues that have historically been pervasive but less visible. Anti-trans policy attempts to exclude trans and nonbinary children from accessing healthcare, updating legal documents to reflect their gender, entering appropriate bathroom facilities, and participating in school activities such as sports and clubs (Meyer et al., 2022). Even though there is extensive evidence of trans children living as themselves and socially transitioning in childhood prior to the 1930s in the US. (Gill-Peterson, 2018, 2021), policies are often justified by an endeavor to frame trans and nonbinary children as a new phenomenon caused by "social contagion" and false claims that gender-affirming treatments are "experimental." This pervasive cisnormativity and systemic persecution faced by nonbinary individuals underscore the urgent need for societal recognition, acceptance, and protection of gender diversity, especially among children.

Nonbinary identity development

The research on nonbinary individuals has also been characterized by cisnormativity and oppression, perpetuating existing inequalities and marginalization within academic discourse. Research about trans and nonbinary individuals has a history of cis researchers justifying the exploitation of these communities through a bigoted argument suggesting that trans and nonbinary individuals lack the objectivity required to make meaningful contributions to scientific literature (Barszczewski, 2020). Cis-supremacist systems, like other systems of privilege, are inherently invisible to those who benefit from them (Veiszadeh, 2017). Consequently, studies focused on trans and nonbinary children frequently suffer from inadequate design due to the predominant involvement of cis psychologists and are further informed by dated-gender theories (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023), which view children as far more malleable than adults, developmentally unfinished

and still open to behavioral imprinting (Gill-Peterson, 2023).

Psychology, as a discipline, often presents challenges for those who perceive realities as socially constructed, tending to privatize, individualize, and depoliticize the phenomena it studies (Kitzinger, 1995). As such, the reflective and analytic capacities of children are often underestimated (Lone & Burroughs, 2016), with cis-adults undermining and dismissing trans and nonbinary children's ability to self-determine their gender.

Inexorably, however, children possess an understanding of their identities. In recent years, there has been a surge in research focusing on gender diversity. Nonetheless, a significant portion of published literature continues to center on children whose experiences align with binary gender norms (Durwood et al., 2017; Gülgöz et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2015; McGuire et al., 2016; Westwater et al., 2019). This academic emphasis has largely adhered to a dichotomous understanding of gender, predominantly focusing on transnormative experiences, which align more readily with many researchers' underlying assumptions of cisnormativity (Bradford et al., 2019). As a result, the rigid dual structure of bigenderism has often been maintained, inadvertently excluding nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, and other gender experiences from analysis (Galman, 2020; Katz-Wise et al., 2023). For instance, Fast and Olson's (2018) study employs developmental concepts such as "gender-typical development" and "gender stability", which are inherently meaningful only within the context of cisgender experiences. Similarly, while researchers such as Gülgöz et al. (2019) and Olson et al. (2022) have broadened contemporary gender development research, their frameworks were originally conceived for cisgender individuals and may not be directly applicable to the lived experiences of nonbinary people (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023).

However, there has been a growing recognition within this research area of the importance of understanding identity development as complex and dynamic (Katz-Wise et al., 2023; Schudson & van Anders, 2019). Concurrently, the conceptualization of gender as extending beyond the

binary has gained traction (Fox & Wu, 2023; Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023). Previous research has highlighted age five to eight as a crucial time for gender development, in which gender is highly salient and a powerful motivator of children's preferences and behaviors (Fast & Olson, 2018). Within this age, nonbinary individuals often learn about nonbinary identities and recognize discomfort with their gender assigned at birth, prompting questioning on their gender identity (Blakemore et al., 2009; Bussey & Bandura, 1984; Koonce, 2019; Kuper et al., 2018; Waagen, 2022). Children in this age range may encounter discussions about gender as a spectrum, either from parents, teachers, or other caregivers (Waagen, 2022). They observe and imitate gender traits from various models, though the presence of nonbinary role models is limited (Koonce, 2019). Furthermore, children's exploration of gender traits is influenced by environmental factors, with liberal gender norms fostering exploration (Dowers et al., 2020; Fiani & Han, 2019). Peer groups play a crucial role, with mixed-gender groups providing more support for nonbinary children to express their gender identity compared to single-gender groups, where conformity to gender norms is often enforced (Fabes et al., 2003; Hanish & Fabes, 2014; Priess & Hyde, 2011; Waagen, 2022).

Salinas-Quiroz and Sweder (2023) postulated two minimum criteria for nonbinary gender identification in young children: (1) that a child learns about the existence of nonbinary identities and (2) that they do not identify with the definitions of a boy or a girl they have been taught. It is noteworthy to underscore that while these assertions marked a commendable endeavor and initial exploration, this relies on a developmentalist paradigm that the current study aims to transcend. Consequently, we find ourselves relinquishing the comfort of employing terms such as "authentic" and "development" given that they imply progressive and linear processes toward a final goal (Goodey, 2021). Overall, nonbinary gender changes involve a complex interplay of biological contributors, learning, imitation, and environmental influences, with opportunities for expression influenced by societal norms and peer dynamics.

The current study

While there is growing research on gender diversity, it has predominantly focused on trans gender identities within a binary gender framework, neglecting the lived experiences of nonbinary individuals in psychological literature (Waagen, 2022). Moreover, qualitative research in this area has been primarily limited to adults (e.g. Keller, 2019), leaving a gap in understanding nonbinary children's perspectives (Horton, 2022). While nonbinary children are often mentioned in discussions, they are seldom directly engaged in conversations about their own experiences. Much discourse and previous research tends to discount and invalidate the experiences of nonbinary children, portraying them as incompetent due to their age and thus, as immature (Wallace Skelton, 2022). To our knowledge, there has been no direct inquiry into how nonbinary children, aged five to eight, understand their gender modality and gendered experiences. We aim to address this gap and center the agency of nonbinary children.

Additionally, a recurring issue in the discourse around nonbinary individuals is the tendency to focus solely on the challenges and harms that they face, rather than recognizing and amplifying their actual lived experiences. Despite encountering discrimination and prejudice, it is crucial to develop methodologies that respect and validate the desires and knowledge of nonbinary individuals (Wallace Skelton, 2022).

Consequently, our study aims to fill this gap by exploring these aspects. In light of these considerations, we seek to explore how nonbinary children, aged five to eight, perceive and understand their gender modality and experiences. We specifically aim to address the following research questions:

1. How do nonbinary children understand and define their own gender modality?
2. What are the gendered experiences of nonbinary children in their daily lives?

Methodology

The name method risks "…a practically orientated *descriptive summary*, rather than a more

theoretically-orientated and reflexive *discussion* of *what, why* and *how* one did the research" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, loc. 5232). Our project "How Do Children Identifying Beyond the Gender Binary and Their Parents Understand Gender?" (IRB ID: CR-01-STUDY00002649) was originally conceptualized by Fer and further developed with Jocelyn Demos as a summer scholar; a program that funds rising juniors and seniors to pursue ten-week research projects with a faculty mentor. Fer *positions* (Boveda & Annamma, 2023) themselves as a Brown trans genderqueer/nonbinary Mexican immigrant, and a doctoral-degree-researcher (in the largest university in Latin America, a top public institution) as well as an Assistant Professor (tenure track position at an American private "little ivy" university). Jocelyn is an nonbinary trans feminine Latina and an undergraduate student at the same institution.

As positionality statements become more prevalent in research, they are often crafted as brief confessionals or clear disclosures of some researcher's identity labels and credentials. However, a significant issue arises when positionality is perceived as static, as it leads to a lack of theoretically informed reflection on our connections with the field, the literature, and participants. "We argue that the power and purpose of positioning should be to remove the researcher from the center of the work and centralize multiply marginalized communities. Consequently, positioning requires reflection throughout the research process, not just in researcher statements" (Boveda & Annamma, 2023, p. 5). Most scientific journals enforce strict word limits and tend to adhere to guidelines rooted in a post-positivist tradition, making it challenging to present qualitative research. Although we recognize our recent "sin" of falling into the very trap we critique, there's a genuine constraint at play, and we strive to navigate dual worlds/formats without undermining our research. We not only take a stance but also infuse reflexivity into every step of this process, encouraging reflection on our positions and adding depth and introspection to our work (see the following sections).

Recruitment

To participate, children needed to self-identify beyond the gender binary (see page 1), be between 3 and 8 years old, be accompanied by their parent, and live in the Northeastern US, i.e. Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont, to restrict the financial burden of transportation. We offered prepaid train rides to and from campus, prepaid parking fees for the university's parking, and/or payment of bus fees.

Between July and August 2022, we spend weeks creating a database and reaching out to organizations dedicated to advocating for 2SPLGBTQIA + individuals/families. Afterwards, in October 2022, specialists from NIH CTSI created a 1-month Facebook targeted advertisement/campaign (UL1TR002544) and a Craigslist advertisement from October 2022 until March 2023. Eleven parents answered a Qualtrics's questionnaire and only nine met the inclusion criteria, so they proceeded to schedule an in-person visit to our facilities. We compensated families with a 50 USD gift card. Despite our recruitment efforts in order to have a diverse sample, all children in the study are white except one who is Asian and white, and the entirety lives in the Greater Boston Area (Massachusetts) and have upper middle-class parents with yearly household income ranging between 50,000 and 74,999 USD, and 150,000 USD and greater. As specified by the US Census Bureau, in 2021 the median household income was 81,744 USD in Boston and 70,784 USD across the US (in 2021). Moreover, although we assume that children can already recognize their nonbinary identity by age 3–5, we only managed to recruit 5–8-year-olds.

How?

We wanted to make sure that activities were attractive and joyful, so we co-constructed them with two early childhood education specialists. The semi-structured interview involved two book readings, one drawing activity, and around 23 pre-determined questions both during and following the reading and drawing tasks. Before starting, we demonstrated to children that their

parent was on the other side of the mirror both to reduce potential separation anxiety, and to show them that they were also going to be interviewed by one of us. We documented assent with 7–8 y/o children and willingness to participate for younger individuals. The entire interview process took around 60 min with a range between 50 min and 1 h and 25 min. Please note that only two interviews took longer than 1 h and 15 min. Children could take breaks and check-in with their parent as many times as needed. Only one child asked for two short breaks during the interview. We structured questions to be asked in a specific order and particular points during the tasks. Some questions addressed their gender modality and how they explain it (e.g. "How would you describe your gender?", "Were you always [child's description of gender modality] since you were a baby?"), and other questions addressed their gendered experiences (e.g. "Do your friends know that you are [child's description]?"). We read two books[1] to or with the child (depending on their reading level and age) during the interview. These books allowed a baseline understanding of gender to facilitate more broad interview questions. In between the first and the second book, we asked the nine participant children (see Table 1) to" draw a picture of a time that you and your friends did something fun." All children participated in all tasks and no children declined any parts of the study. Only one child refused to answer some questions. Most children did not display signs of fatigue, except three children who showed verbal or non-verbal signs of tiredness. When children displayed these signs, the interviewer moved on to the drawing part or

shortened the last parts of the interviews. All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Reflexivity

At the time that interviews were being transcribed, Fer was invited to give a 5-day workshop on reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in Greece. There, they met three colleagues that shared views, interest, identities, and social positions, but most importantly, that *seek to act in allyship*. "Allyship is not an identity. It is a life-long process of building relationships based upon trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized (folk)…an arduous practice of unlearning and evaluating." (Gao, 2015, p. 8). Tuğçe Aral is a queer/pansexual Turkish immigrant and a doctoral researcher and lecturer (German public university), Jessie Hillekens is a queer Dutch cis woman and an Assistant Professor (tenure track position at a Dutch public university), and Sophie Hölscher is a bisexual cis woman, third culture child, and a doctoral researcher and lecturer (German public university).

Although this passage comes across as a 'brief confessional' (see first paragraph of the Method-ology section), on the inaugural day of the workshop, each author dedicated themselves to crafting their own reflexivity statement. This engaging exercise lasted for a total of 4 h, with the initial hour and a half to two hours dedicated to the writing process. The remaining time was allocated for sharing these statements with the group. The resulting documents proved to be a valuable resource throughout the analytic process.

Under the guidance of Fer, who not only facilitated the workshop but also actively participated by crafting a new statement (a regular practice they undertake every semester), the rest of the authors, with Fer among them, were prompted to delve into various aspects of reflexivity, including *personal*, *functional*, and *disciplinary* perspectives, all within the context of the *specific research topic* (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Table 1. Participants.

Child (pseudonym)	Age (years. months)	Child's pronoun(s)	Child's self-ascribed gender label
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: Despite we assume that children can recognize their nonbinary identity by age 3–5, we only managed to recruit 5–8-year-olds.

Fer prompted the middle three authors to reflect on their intersecting identities, particularly those where they occupy positions of social privilege and marginality. They ask them to consider how these social positions shape how they see the world and others, as well as how they may be perceived by peers or society. Additionally, the middle three authors were encouraged to reflect on how their personal backgrounds, life experiences, and ideological beliefs shape their worldview.

Following this, the middle three authors were prompted to examine their relationship with knowledge, scholarship, and research practice. This involved reflecting on their research training and experiences, understanding what constitutes 'good quality' research, and recognizing institutional pressures such as 'publish or perish'. They were also encouraged to explore their preferences for research methods and how these choices impact the research process and resulting knowledge.

Finally, Fer directed the middle three authors to return to reflexivity regarding their identities and life experiences, particularly in relation to the project and the topic of nonbinary children. They were asked to consider how their positions intersect with this subject and to examine any assumptions they may hold about individuals outside of the gender binary.

As the reader may discern, these are not merely lengthy documents, but rather profoundly intense personal statements that, when shared with the group, fostered a sense of closeness and safety among us. While ideally these reflexivity statements should be delineated in this section, as its outset, we deliberated on the neoliberal logic prevalent in academia and the contemporary world's emphasis on haste and the production of brief articles. For those interested in accessing them, please contact the corresponding author.

In a nutshell, the four of us share the following assumptions: (a) reality and truth are contingent, local, and multiple; (b) gender is self-determined; (c) nonbinary individuals feel a profound sense of clarity, presence, and lucidity (Marchese, 2023); and (d) we most seek for *curiosity* and *compassion beyond comprehension* (Vaid-Menon, 2022).

RTA

Thematic Analysis is a method for developing, analyzing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset. The differentiating factor across its different versions is that RTA values "…a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, a reflexive researcher…" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, loc. 1246). We followed the RTA six-phase process—starting with *familiarization* with the interviews, moving into a rigorous collaborative *coding* process, before starting to explore, *develop, review,* and *refine themes,* and finally producing this *written analytic report.*

Coding

Where becoming familiarized with the data is ongoing but not yet structured, coding becomes structured and systematic. During coding, we meticulously read each interview at least two times so we could then identify and label segments of text relevant to the research question (i.e. how nonbinary children understand their gender and gendered *experiences*?). It is important to note that not all data segments were tagged if they didn't relate to the research question, since codes are "…ultimately guided by your research question and purpose." (Braun & Clarke, 2022, loc. 2953).

We used collaborative coding to enhance understanding, interpretation, and reflexivity, rather than to reach a consensus about codes. The first four authors worked together to code data and develop codes through discussing and reflecting on their ideas and assumptions. Our purpose was to "…collaboratively gain richer or more nuanced insights, *not* to reach agreement about every code." (Braun & Clarke, 2022, loc. 3028). This process ensured a structured exploration of meaning and patterns throughout the nine interviews, guaranteeing thorough and detailed analysis for theme development. This systematic approach also safeguards against accusations of *cherry-picking.*

We followed an inductive approach where the majority of the codes were semantic. Pure induction is impossible, since "…we bring with us all sorts of perspectives, theoretical and otherwise, to

our meaning-making, so our engagement with data is never purely inductive…This is why reflexivity matters…" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, loc. 3027). Semantic codes directly capture expressed meanings, often mirroring participants' language. According to Braun and Clarke (2022) semantic codes are particularly beneficial for those interested in exploring *experiences*: this is why in our RTA analytical journey we prioritized data meanings, starting from and departing from these meanings as our foundation.

Thematization (development, revision, and refinement)

Developing initial themes from our codes involved a series of processes. We engaged with the data codes to explore areas where there were similarities of meaning. Next, we clustered together potentially connected codes into candidate themes and explored these initial patterns of meaning. This exploration considered each cluster independently; in relation to the research question; and as part of the wider analysis. It was key to remember at this stage that we were exploring clustered patterning across our dataset. Considering that data 'do not speak for itself', we, as researchers, speak for our themes (and our data) and will tell a story that we have crafted about our dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Phase four extended and provided a crucial check on the initial theme development from phase three. This was achieved through a process of re-engagement with: (1) all the coded data extracts; and (2) the entire dataset. The purpose was to review the viability of the initial clusterings and explore opportunities for enhancing pattern development. This phase was notably iterative. We moved back and forth between the data and the evolving analysis to ensure that our analysis either: (a) effectively addressed our research question with a compelling narrative or (b) remained grounded in the data without straying too far.

We ensured that each theme captured a distinct core point and offered rich diversity and nuance about the dataset. Additionally, we verified that themes were coherent, distinct, and comprehensive enough.

Analysis[2]

It's your job as analyst to determine the most relevant and important patterned meaning that 'speaks' both about the data, and into the existing field of scholarship and the wider context (Braun & Clarke, 2022, loc. 4573).

We constructed five themes, which were evident across the accounts of participating children. The first theme, *Being nonbinary has different meanings for different people,*[3] shows how participants made meaning of being nonbinary in complex ways. The second theme, *Gender is hard to describe but my pronouns help me make sense of it*, captures that gender is a difficult concept to explain, yet pronouns help participants lucidly put their and others' gender into words. The third theme, *People can change their gender for good or just for a little while*, reports on how participants describe gender as something dynamic and fluid. *"I have the agency to decide who I am with a little help of others": Feeling, learning, choosing and telling*, addresses participants' journey of adopting the label "nonbinary", and the fifth and final theme, *Being nonbinary is both easy and hard: easy because I am myself, hard because of other people*, reports on the multifaceted experiences of being nonbinary, from the gender-affirming ones to experiences of bullying. These five themes are discussed in detail below.

Theme 1: Being nonbinary has different meanings for different people

There're many different ways […] I don't really know what it feels like for other people to feel a different gender, but for me, it's just different. (Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.)

The first theme revolved around the many ways in which participants made meaning of being nonbinary. It was apparent across interviews that all participating children self-identified as nonbinary (*"See, I'm nonbinary"*, Janelle, 6 y.o.; *"[My gender is] they/them. It's nonbinary."*, Sam, 6 y.o.), that their gender identity did not match binary notions of gender (*Interviewer(I): "How is it different or similar [from boy or girl]?", Child(C): "Different."*, Elliot, 6 y.o.), and that nonbinary was

a gender modality rather than the lack of gender (*"I do have a gender. I feel like I do"*, Demi, 7 y.o.). Therefore, all participants do not identify completely or exclusively as a boy or girl and claimed a nonbinary gender identity, in line with the minimum criteria for nonbinary gender identification in young children proposed by Salinas-Quiroz and Sweder (2023).

Yet, they had different ways in which they constructed what being nonbinary meant to them. Some participating children explained being nonbinary in relation to being a boy or a girl. They expressed that being nonbinary is '*in the middle [between being a boy and a girl]*' (Elliot, 6 y.o.), being "*a boy and a girl at the same time*" (Demi, 7 y.o.; also expressed by Janelle, 6 y.o., Elliot, 6 y.o., and Jonathan, 6 y.o.), being "*not a girl or boy*" (Sasha, 8 y.o.; also expressed by Janelle, 6 y.o., Jonathan, 6 y.o., and Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.), being "*both of them*" (Elliot, 6 y.o.), or being "*both, neither and both*" (Féi/Luna, 6 y.o.). Notions of genderfluidity, demi and bi/tri-genderism were evident. Some participants would (also) use multiple pronouns, names, and genders to explain their nonbinary identity:

> Since the school year began, I had two genders, Féi and Luna. [...] Girl and they/them. And two, and two names, Féi and Luna. (Féi/Luna, 6 y.o.)

> Because now I'm a boy and I'm a they. (Demi, 7 y.o.)

It was also frequent that participants would use other labels to describe their gender identity. They would describe their gender as "*feminine*" (Féi/Luna, 6 y.o.), "*a funny kid*" (Demi, 7 y.o.), "*just me*" (Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.; also expressed by Sam, 6 y.o. and Demi, 7 y.o.) or "*a double gender*" (Féi/Luna, 6 y.o.). Yet other participants did not like any of the prompted gender labels in the *Who are You?...* book (Tilda, 5 y.o.) or explained that being nonbinary meant that "*you're free from just a girl or a boy*" (Elliot, 6 y.o.). While some thus explained being nonbinary in relation to being a boy or a girl, other participants explained being nonbinary in ways that were seemingly unrelated to the binary notion of gender. These participating children therefore knowingly seem to broaden the concept of gender and to challenge the status quo by creating their own meaning of what their gender means to them.

In addition, participants expressed positive feelings regarding their nonbinary identity. They describe being nonbinary as a "*miracle*" (Sam, 6 y.o.), a "*big other world*" (Elliot, 6 y.o.), "*sort of like everybody*", "*awesome*", and "*fun*" (Demi, 7 y.o.), or "*nice*" and "*happy*" (Jonathan, 6 y.o.). Participants stress the importance of being able to live their gender modality: "*It's good being yourself*" (Jonathan, 6 y.o.) and "*Now I feel better about myself*" (Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.). Moreover, one participant describes how nonbinary gender identities uplift humanity: "*If everyone was the same, then it would be boring*" (Sasha, 8 y.o.).

Overall, participants portrayed a wide variety of meanings they attached to being nonbinary. Thus, their responses were aligned with the nonbinary concept as a theorized umbrella term that includes a wide variety of gender identities beyond the binary (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023). Our participants reflect this pluralism and demonstrate the creative nature of gender. In line with prior work showing that gender is socially constructed in childhood (Spark et al., 2019), participants demonstrated agency in constructing their own meaning and gender identity through claiming a nonbinary identity and self-labeling as such (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023). As these identity constructions are deeply personal, participants also acknowledged them as such, stressing that they "*know everything about me, [but] I don't know that much about anyone else.*" (Sam, 6 y.o.; also expressed by Féi/Luna, 6 y.o., and Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.). Moreover, they associated nonbinary identity with positive feelings. In sum, all participating children shared a clear and positive nonbinary identity yet constructed its meaning in different ways.

Theme 2: Gender is hard to describe but my pronouns help me make sense of it

> Hmm. If I were talking to an adult, I say they and them. (Janelle, 6 y.o.)

The second theme captures that while gender is a hard concept for participating children to

describe, pronouns help them to put their gender into words. While participants expressed a nonbinary identity (see also Theme 1), they often struggled to explain what gender entails when asked to describe it:

> It's the thingy that… it's like what… um… well if you… it's like you….Okay I don't know how to explain it. (Sasha, 8 y.o.)

They often said they did not know what gender was and that it was really hard, or they struggled to put their answers into words. Gender is a way to socially categorize people and to impose gendered expectations on them. Children come to understand social categories and their individual group membership already at age 1 (Rhodes & Baron, 2019), which, together with their understanding of group norms, increase with age (Cooley & Killen, 2015). As such, it is not surprising that our participants already have a clear nonbinary identity. Yet, at the same time, gender is an abstract concept and is harder to explain than their own gendered experiences.

Participants explicitly expressed having no doubts about who they are by stating that they *"heard about it and then completely decided I was nonbinary"* (Janelle, 6 y.o.), *"knew who I wanted to be"* (Sam, 6 y.o.), and *"I never, ever, ever [felt confused]. Especially not about myself."* (Féi/Luna, 6 y.o.). Thus, while participants have difficulty describing gender as a concept, they are not confused about who they are: they feel a profound sense of clarity, presence, and lucidity (Marchese, 2023).

Pronouns appeared to be a way to put their gender into words:

> C: I'm feeling like a boy today.
>
> I: Do you always feel like a boy?
>
> C: No.
>
> I: When you don't feel like a boy, what are some things you feel like?
>
> C: They and she. (Tilda, 5 y.o.)

When asked about their gender, participants often referred to they/them pronouns to indicate their nonbinary identity. Additionally, some participants used she/her and he/him pronouns. The usage of they/them pronouns is common among nonbinary individuals to signal that they identify outside the gender binary (Norris & Welch, 2020). Gender-neutral pronouns are a linguistic way to challenge gender perceptions and establish more gender equality and inclusivity (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015). Using pronouns that match individuals' gender is affirming and empowering (Sevelius et al., 2020), making pronouns a critical way for participants to signal and claim gender modalities, and to make sense of them.

Theme 3: People can change their gender for good or just for a little while

> Everybody can, they can change who they are whenever they need to. For good or just a little while. (Sam, 6 y.o.)

The third theme describes how participants explain gender as something dynamic and fluid. They talked about gender as something that can change over time (Janelle, 6 y.o., Sam, 6 y.o., and Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.); in other words, that it is in constant transformation (Salinas-Quiroz & Daniels, 2023). They saw change and fluidity as something *"normal"* and *"fun"* (Demi, 7 y.o.) and something that *"feels good"* (Jonathan, 6 y.o.) and that *"just happens"* (Sam, 6 y.o.). All participating children mentioned that their gender had already changed. When asked about their gender as a newborn, many indicated that they did not (yet) know about gender as a baby (Sam, 6 y.o., Elliot, 6 y.o., Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o., Tilda, 5 y.o., and Sasha, 8 y.o.) or that they used to be a boy or girl (Janelle, 6 y.o., Féi/Luna, 6 y.o., Demi, 7 y.o., and Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.). Some participants shared explicitly that their gender had transformed in the past:

> I guess I didn't really think that much of it when I, before I was older. I mean, when I was about seven or six then I maybe felt a little bit different about it. (Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.)

Interestingly, several participants also expressed gender fluidity (Janelle, 6 y.o., Féi/Luna, 6 y.o., Demi, 7 y.o., and Tilda, 5 y.o.), whereby their gender changes over shorter periods of time (Katz-Wise, 2020) such as within days, hours, or even minutes and seconds:

> 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.… Just one second. Like, they! She! They! She! They – they! She! They! She! (Féi/Luna, 6 y.o.)

Along the same lines, all participants also kept the possibility for future transformation open, because *"I don't really know. Because guess what? Change is…change is… unknowable."* (Janelle, 6 y.o.) and *"I can't answer that because I don't have a time machine."* (Sasha, 8 y.o.). They argued that they didn't know what their gender would look like in the future, yet they kept different opportunities open because they might start to like or feel something else:

> I: Do you think it's possible you could have a different identity?
>
> C: Yeah. […] 'Cause I think I might feel different when I'm older. (Jonathan, 6 y.o.)

While all participants expressed that their gender might change, several also explicitly mentioned that they did not want that to happen (Sam, 6 y.o., Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o., and Sasha, 8 y.o.) or that they did not think that their gender would transform (Janelle, 6 y.o., Sam, 6 y.o., and Elliot, 6 y.o.):

> [I think I will always be nonbinary from now on as I grow up] 'cause it… 'Cause it feels like that. It's the one that makes me feel right. (Elliot, 6 y.o.)

This reflects that while participants feel comfortable and happy with their gender modality, they have flexible notions of gender as a creative construct that might—but not necessarily will—change over time. Although many societies generally conceptualize gender as static and rigid, children did not perceive it as such. They challenged societal norms and conceived gender as messy (Salinas-Quiroz & Daniels, 2023). Without an exception, they felt that gender can be reconsidered and reinvented to what feels best in the moment—which may or may not last "forever."

Theme 4: "I have the agency to decide who I am with a little help of others": feeling, learning, choosing, and telling

> I never wanted to be one of them [girl/boy] … just like a year ago was the time that I actually found out they/them was a thing. (Sasha, 8 y.o.)

The fourth theme captured participants' journey to identifying as nonbinary. What was clear across participants' accounts is that while the process of figuring out their gender identity differs between them, it was an agentic process involving feeling (emotion), learning (cognition), choosing (volition) and telling (behavior). Many participants described feeling nonbinary or not feeling like their gender assigned at birth before knowing what to call it. In line with previous literature (Waagen, 2022), some participants spoke about feeling pressured to change themselves or cited feelings of discomfort before identifying as nonbinary:

> I guess just feel like, it in my stomach whenever someone says she thinks, she blah, blah, blah. Her blah. blah, that stuff… [It feels] uncomfortable. Yeah. It kind of made me… sweaty. (Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.)

The accounts were further indicative of the two minimum criteria for nonbinary gender identification in young children: a) a child learns about the existence of nonbinary identities and b) they do not identify with the definitions they have been taught of a boy or a girl (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023). Only after learning about nonbinary gender identities are participants able to give a name to their feelings:

> 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 a boy until my friend knew how to do it. (Jonathan, 6 y.o.)

Unsurprisingly, as parents are the most important socializing agents of gender during childhood (Spivey et al., 2018), participants most commonly learn about nonbinary gender identities from them. The fact that some participants found out about different gender modalities through books or a nonbinary friend underlines how different socializing agents help children expand their gendered experiences as well as identify their gender, rather than "causes" or "determinants" of nonbinary gender identification (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023). In turn, one participant describes that living their gender modality in school helped other classmates realize they were also nonbinary. These instances highlight the importance of nonbinary representation for gender development, as nonbinary individuals grow up in cis-supremacist

systems in which gender expectations are imposed on them, which can lead to feelings of incongruence between their gender modality and prevailing norms (Craig et al., 2015; Mills-Koonce et al., 2018).

Participants' choice of words in talking about their gender identity highlights that children are not passive recipients of societal norms or parental expectations but active agents in shaping their gender (Spark et al., 2019). After children in the study learn about being nonbinary, they "*want*" (Sam, 6 y.o., Demi, 7 y.o., Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o., and Sasha, 8 y.o.), "*choose*" (Jonathan, 6 y.o.), "*know*" (Sam, 6 y.o., and Demi, 7 y.o.) and "*decide*" (Janelle, 6 y.o.) to be nonbinary. Other participants' narratives include first "*thinking*" *about* (Janelle, 6 y.o.) and "*figuring out*" (Janelle, 6 y.o., and Sasha, 8 y.o.) their gender, by "*trying out*" (Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.) different gender options until they find one that "*feels*" (Elliot, 6 y.o., and Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.) right. Their choice of words highlights the importance of emotion, cognition, and volition for gender identity identification, with the former two informing the latter: the quintessential self-determination component. Finally, participants stress the importance of "*telling*" people about their gender modality. Participants' responses reflected that only by communicating their gendered experiences and identity with others, and not by looking at genitals, gender assigned at birth, clothing, or hobbies, can you know what a person's gender modality is:

> No one knows [someone's gender] until they tell you. (Sam, 6 y.o.)

In summary, participants' accounts challenged the idea of gender assigned at birth, and rather indicated gender as an active self-determination process in which one feels, learns, chooses, and tells.

Theme 5: Being nonbinary is both easy and hard: easy because I am myself, hard because of other people

> Well, what's easy is I just really, I'm myself. But what's hard about it is that sometimes kids in my class… mostly just one kid…forget[s that I am nonbinary]. (Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.)

The last theme captures the positive experiences of identifying as nonbinary within often negative conditions, i.e. cis-supremacist systems that marginalize, invalidate, and discriminate against nonbinary individuals (Jones, 2023). The narratives depict mostly sensitive support from the people surrounding them. While some participants expressed worry or nervousness in sharing their nonbinary identity with others, participants had mostly positive experiences when doing this with family and friends. In participants' accounts, parents specifically emerge as pivotal pillars of teaching, understanding, affirmation and support. Certainly, in part due to the age of the participating children (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023; Spivey et al., 2018), parents are described as their main resource to turn to when having questions about gender or when confronted with nonbinary related ignorance or bullying. Parents in the study act as advocates for their children toward other family members, teachers, or strangers.

> [My family] will correct those people before I do [referring to the use of wrong pronouns by others]. (Sasha, 8 y.o.)

However, amidst the positive experiences, all participants recount negative encounters with others, ranging from family members, to peers, or teachers. A notable challenge is the prevalence of ignorance about nonbinary identities, as well as missing structures such as "all genders" changing rooms. Participants also describe multiple instances where their gender identity is invalidated or dismissed:

> Sometimes they don't know that [there are really many genders]. (Demi, 7 y.o.)

> [My grandma] said that […] talking about nonbinary isn't English! (Janelle, 6 y.o.)

Moreover, the narratives paint a poignant picture of the impact of misgendering on the well-being of nonbinary children. In line with other studies with nonbinary individuals, our participants are consistently educating other people on nonbinary identities, as well as reminding them of their pronouns (Fiani & Han, 2019; Paechter et al., 2021). This is demanding emotional labor (Fiani & Han, 2019) often imposed on individuals from marginalized groups, which can lead to burnout in the

long run (Gorski, 2018). Even within our very young participants, the negative impact of educating those who hold power and privilege on their well-being can be seen:

> 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…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. (Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.)

Furthermore, regarding peers, bullying emerges as a deeply troubling issue that participants encounter in and outside of school. The impact of bullying is heightened by the fact that official structures such as camps or schools are inadequately prepared in relation to nonbinary individuals or gender-based discrimination (Paechter et al., 2021), and often only act after parents get involved. Unfortunately, the situation is often resolved by participants removing themselves from the situation *("I'm not going there again"*, Jesús Ociel, 8 y.o.). This fits a long-standing history of nonbinary individuals being asked to reshape themselves to fit cisnormative spaces (van der Toorn et al., 2020).

In summary, participants' accounts reveal the profound impact of positive feelings and support in fostering a sense of self-acceptance and contentment. The vital role played by parents as unwavering supporters signifies the importance of family *curiosity and compassion beyond comprehension* (Vaid-Menon, 2022) in promoting a positive environment for nonbinary individuals. Conversely, the challenges encountered underscore the need for continued education and dismantling cis-supremacist systems in order to ensure that nonbinary individuals can live their gender modality without being marginalized, invalidated, and discriminated against.

General discussion

The aims of this study were to explore how nonbinary children understand and define their own gender modality (aim 1) and what their gendered experiences are in their daily lives (aim 2). By conducting interviews with nine nonbinary children themselves, we aspired to understand what being nonbinary means through a child-centered approach which prioritizes their experiences over adult–centric narratives on being trans/nonbinary. The five themes that were constructed within the analysis: (1) *Being nonbinary has different meanings for different people*; (2) *Gender is hard to describe but my pronouns help me make sense of it*; (3) *People can change their gender for good or just for a little while*; (4) *"I have the agency to decide who I am with a little help of others: Feeling, learning, choosing and telling*; and (5) *Being nonbinary is both easy and hard: easy because I am myself, hard because of other people,* provide valuable insights into the agency demonstrated by nonbinary children in navigating and constructing their identities within a cisnormative society. In an era marked by a contentious political climate and ongoing debates about trans/nonbinary individuals and children (ACLU, 2022; Movement Advancement Project, 2023; Salinas-Quiroz & Daniels, 2023; Trans Formations Project, n.d.), these young children defy conventional norms and establish themselves as active architects of their identity narratives (Spark et al., 2019).

The five distinct themes capture the nuanced ways nonbinary children understand and navigate their gendered experiences. First, the nonbinary children in our study defined being nonbinary in various ways (Theme 1). They displayed a diverse understanding of gender (Fast & Olson, 2018; Zucker et al., 1999), challenging traditional binary notions (Ashley, 2022). Our children's ability to articulate their identities, even when faced with challenges in explaining the abstract concept of gender, underscores their determination to communicate their truth through the powerful medium of pronouns (Theme 2). For them, pronouns seem a way to signal and claim their nonbinary gender identity (Norris & Welch, 2020) and an accessible way to challenge cisnormativity (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015). The third theme of fluidity speaks volumes about these children's refusal to be confined by rigid categories. In a world often preoccupied with static definitions, these young minds embrace the idea that gender can be a fluid, changing concept (Katz-Wise, 2020; Salinas-Quiroz & Daniels, 2023). This more dynamic understanding of gender is prevalent among gender nonconforming children whose experiences do not fit

into the dominant cisnormative narrative they are confronted with (Fast & Olson, 2018; Zucker et al., 1999). Contrary to dated theories that see children as open to behavioral imprinting and that take away children's agency (Gill-Peterson, 2023), children thus actively challenged binary understandings of gender that are omnipresent in society. This agency is also evident when our participants describe their process of identity formation—a journey shaped by feelings, learning, choices, and open conversations (Theme 4, Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023). In a society where gender norms are often imposed, their process of learning about nonbinary identities and subsequent self-discovery emphasizes the importance of affirmative education and accessible resources, as only after learning about nonbinary gender identities are children able to identify as such (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023).

However, amidst the empowerment lies the sobering recognition that the main challenge nonbinary children in our study faced is external opposition (Theme 5). Yet, they are rooted in societal systems and individuals' reluctance to accepting these identities. Unfortunately, anti-trans bills currently prevent trans and nonbinary youth from using appropriate bathroom facilities, participating in sports, accessing healthcare, and updating legal documents to reflect who they are (Meyer et al., 2022). In a world where public discourse often tries to deny children the agency to understand their own gender (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023), our study firmly establishes that nonbinary children possess the capacity for self-determination (Spark et al., 2019). Their narratives affirm that the main barriers they face are external, stressing the critical need for people and systems that support, acknowledge, and respect their self-determined identities (Jones, 2023).

The exploration of nonbinary children's self-determination and agency in shaping their gender identities holds significant implications. It's crucial to acknowledge that some of our participant's characteristics—predominantly affluent and white—reflect a specific demographic subset within the nonbinary community. Though our study purposefully prioritizes the voices of nonbinary/trans children, our participants mainly shared a homogenous life experience as being predominantly privileged, wealthy, and white. Additionally, children in our study had mainly supportive parents who helped them understand and affirm their gender modality and gender-related experiences and they grew up in progressive environments with ample community support. Although parents were also interviewed as part of the larger project (see "How Do Children Identifying Beyond the Gender Binary and Their Parents Understand Gender?" (IRB ID: CR-01-STUDY00002649) for the paper on parents' experiences), we wanted to foreground children's voices in the current article. The challenges faced by these nonbinary children may be compounded for those who exist at the intersections of race, class, and other marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Nonbinary children navigating identities in marginalized communities might encounter additional barriers stemming from structural inequalities and systemic racism. This study underscores the importance of future research examining nonbinary experiences through a more comprehensive and intersectional perspective, in order to enhance our understanding of how structural inequalities can intersect with gender modalities to create unique challenges for nonbinary children with multiple marginalized identities. Moreover, it highlights the need for continued education, especially in official structures such as schools, and the dismantling of cis-supremacist systems to ensure that all nonbinary individuals can live their gender modality without facing discrimination (Paechter et al., 2021; van der Toorn et al., 2020).

One of the strengths of our study is its trans perspective and its commitment to a genuine and nuanced representation of nonbinary experiences. We assert that our investigation stands as pioneering and iconoclastic in nature. By having trans and genderqueer/nonbinary team members we provide much needed new and dissident forms of knowledge, since we subverted the history of cis, heterosexual, and white researchers exploiting our communities and rejected the often seen but inherently bigoted argument that we cannot be sufficiently objective to make meaningful contributions to scientific literature (Barszczewski, 2020). This perspective enriches the study's depth, allowing for a more empathetic

and respectful exploration of nonbinary children's narratives. According to Katz-Wise et al. (2023), qualitative methods help us "…gain insight into trans gender and/or nonbinary youth's understanding and experience of gender identity changes" (p. 7). Although it is important to be cautious of potential power dynamics that are inherent in interviews between children and adults, focusing on the voices of nonbinary children themselves, rather than an adult-centric perspective, lends agency and credibility to the analysis. This participatory approach contributes to a more accurate representation of their experiences, ensuring that their voices remain at the forefront of the discussion, and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of gender identity and agency in a world that often seeks to silence nonbinary and trans voices (Salinas-Quiroz & Sweder, 2023; Vaid-Menon, 2022). Additionally, the RTA employed in this study enables us to reflect on our positions, resulting in a more nuanced and respectful interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

In summary, our study shines a spotlight on the remarkable self-determination and agency of nonbinary children in shaping their gender identities. It reinforces the need to challenge societal norms that undermine their agency and highlights the importance of dismantling cisnormative systems that harm them, while also creating environments that affirm and celebrate nonbinary peoples.

Notes

1. *Who are You? The Kid's guide to gender identity* by Brook Pessin-Whedbee—cis white—(2016) and *Avocado Asks: What am I?* by Momoko Abe—cis Asian—(2020). Unfortunately, we learned once the study closed that the first one was partially plagiarized from the queer Chicanx educator Maya Christina Gonzalez. "Many have a way with words. They label themselves seers, but they will not see. Many have the gift of tongue but nothing to say. Do not listen to them. Many who have words and tongue have no ear, they cannot listen, and they will not hear" (Anzaldúa, 1981).
2. And not "Results" since themes are already interpretative.
3. As per Braun and Clarke (2022) perspective, "…[using] brief data quotations in theme names can provide an immediate and vivid sense of what a theme is about, while staying close to the data language and concepts" (loc. 4891).

Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Fernando Salinas-Quiroz http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1257-6379

Data availability statement

The authors confirm the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. The parents of the participants in this study exclusively provide written consent for the use of "Quotes, child drawings and

vignettes taken from you or your child's responses to the interviews or the questionnaire may be shared for educational and research purposes." Due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available for sharing.

References

American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU]. (2022). *Legislation affecting LGBTQ rights across the country*. https://www.aclu.org/legislation-affecting-lgbtq-rights-across-country

Anzaldúa, G. E. (1981). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color* (p. 171). Persephone Press.

Ashley, F. (2021). 'X' why? Gender markers and non-binary transgender people. In I. C. Jaramillo & L. Carlson (Eds.), *Trans rights and wrongs* (pp. 33–48). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68494-5_2

Ashley, F. (2022). 'Trans' is my gender modality. In L. Erickson-Schroth (Ed.), *Trans bodies, trans selves* (2nd ed., p. 22) Oxford University Press. https://www.florenceashley.com/uploads/1/2/4/4/124439164/ashley_trans_is_my_gender_modality.pdf

Barszczewski, J. (2020). Shutting up: Cis accountability in trans writing studies research. *Peitho: Journal of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition*, 22(4), 1–10. https://cfshrc.org/article/shutting-up-cis-accountability-in-trans-writing-studies-research/

Bauer, G. R., Hammond, R., Travers, R., Kaay, M., Hohenadel, K. M., & Boyce, M. (2009). "I don't think this is theoretical; This is our lives": How erasure impacts health care for transgender people. *The Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care: JANAC*, 20(5), 348–361. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jana.2009.07.004

Bederman, G. (1995). *Manliness & civilization: A cultural history of gender and race in the United States, 1880–1917*. University of Chicago Press.

Blakemore, J. E. O., Berenbaum, S. A., & Liben, L. S. (2009). *Gender development*. Psychology Press.

Boveda, M., & Annamma, S. A. (2023). Beyond making a statement: An intersectional framing of the power and possibilities of positioning. *Educational Researcher*, 52(5), 306–314. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X231167149

Bradford, N. J., Rider, G. N., Catalpa, J. M., Morrow, Q. J., Berg, D., Spencer, K. L., & McGuire, J. K. (2019). Creating gender: A thematic analysis of genderqueer narratives. *The International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20(2–3), 155–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1474516

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide [eBook version]*. SAGE.

Bussey, K., & Bandura, A. (1984). Influence of gender constancy and social power on sex-linked modeling. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47(6), 1292–1302. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.47.6.1292

Cooley, S., & Killen, M. (2015). Children's evaluations of resource allocation in the context of group norms. *Developmental Psychology*, 51(4), 554–563. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038796

Craig, S. L., McInroy, L., McCready, L. T., & Alaggia, R. (2015). Media: A catalyst for resilience in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 12(3), 254–275. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–168.

Dowers, E., White, C., Cook, K., & Kingsley, J. (2020). Trans, gender diverse and non-binary adult experiences of social support: A systematic quantitative literature review. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 21(3), 242–257. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2020.1771805

Durwood, L., McLaughlin, K. A., & Olson, K. R. (2017). Mental health and self-worth in socially transitioned transgender youth. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 56(2), 116–123.e2. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2016.10.016

Fabes, R. A., Martin, C. L., & Hanish, L. D. (2003). Young children's play qualities in same-, other-, and mixed-sex peer groups. *Child Development*, 74(3), 921–932. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00576

Fast, A. A., & Olson, K. R. (2018). Gender development in transgender preschool children. *Child Development*, 89(2), 620–637. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12758

Fiani, C. N., & Han, H. J. (2019). Navigating identity: Experiences of binary and non-binary transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) adults. *The International Journal of Transgenderism*, 20(2–3), 181–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1426074

Fox, M. J., & Wu, H. (2023). Terminology and language used in Indigenous-specific gender and sexuality diversity studies: A systematic review. *Social Sciences*, 12(3), 145. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12030145

Galman, S. C. (2020). Far from tree. In *Parents and caregivers across cultures* (pp. 199–216). Springer Nature.

Gao, O. (2015). *How to be a (better) white ally*. https://www.oceangao.com/how-to-be-a-better-white-ally

Gill-Peterson, J. (2018). *The transgender child*. University of Minnesota Press.

Gill-Peterson, J. (2021, April 1). 'Trans kids are not new': A historian on the long record of youth transitioning in America. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/01/trans-children-history-jules-gill-peterson-interview

Gill-Peterson, J. (2023, May 3). Transgender compromise. The right of the architects of trans inclusion agree that trans girls can't play. Sad Brown Girl. https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/transgender-compromise

Goodey, C. (2021). *Development: The history of a psychological concept*. Cambridge University Press.

Gorski, P. C. (2018). Racial battle fatigue and activist burnout in racial justice activists of color at predominantly white colleges and universities. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 22(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2018.1497966

Gülgöz, S., Glazier, J. J., Enright, E. A., Alonso, D. J., Durwood, L., Fast, A. A., Lowe, R. S., Ji, C. G., Heer, J., Martin, C. L., & Olson, K. R. (2019). Similarity in transgender and cisgender children's gender development. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 116(49), 24480–24485. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1909367116

Gustafsson Sendén, M., Bäck, E. A., & Lindqvist, A. (2015). Introducing a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language: The influence of time on attitudes and behavior. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 893. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00893

Hanish, L. D., Fabes, R. A. (2014). Peer socialization of gender in young boys and girls. In *Encyclopedia on early childhood development*. https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pdf/expert/gender-early-socialization/according-experts/peer-socialization-gender-young-boys-and-girls

Horton, C. (2022). "Euphoria": Trans children and experiences of prepubertal social transition. *Family Relations*, 72(4), 1890–1907. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12764

Jones, T. (2023). Euphorias! Positive feelings within negative conditions. In *Euphorias in gender, sex and sexuality variations: Positive experiences* (pp. 1–14). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23756-0_1

Katz-Wise, S. L. (2020, December 3). Gender fluidity: What it means and why support matters. Child & Teen Health. https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/gender-fluidity-what-it-means-and-why-support-matters-2020120321544

Katz-Wise, S. L., Ranker, R. L., Kraus, A. D., Wang, Y., Xuan, Z., Greif Green, J., & Holt, M. (2023). Fluidity in gender identity and sexual orientation identity in transgender and nonbinary youth. *Journal of Sex Research*, 16, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2023.2244926

Keenan, H. B. (2022). Methodology as pedagogy: Trans lives, social science, and the possibilities of education research. *Educational Researcher*, 51(5), 307–314. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211065740

Keller, M. Z. (2019). *A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of genderqueer individuals*. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering*. ProQuest Information & Learning. https://scholarworks.unr.edu/handle/11714/4527

Kitzinger, C. (1995). Social constructionism: Implications for lesbian and gay psychology. In A. R. D'Augelli & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 136–161). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:Oso/9780195082319.003.0006

Koonce, K. (2019). The name remains the same. In M. Rajunov & S. Duane (Eds.), *Non-binary: Memoirs of gender and identity* (pp. 130–138). Columbia University Press.

Kuper, L. E., Wright, L., & Mustanski, B. (2018). Gender identity development among transgender and gender nonconforming emerging adults: An intersectional approach. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 19(4), 436–455. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1443869

Lone, J. M., & Burroughs, M. D. (2016). *Philosophy in education. Questioning and dialogue in schools*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Marchese, D. (2023, July 27). Alok Vaid-Menon is "fighting for trans ordinariness." *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/07/29/magazine/alok-vaid-menon-interview.html

McGuire, J. K., Kuvalanka, K. A., Catalpa, J. M., & Toomey, R. B. (2016). Transfamily theory: How the presence of trans* family members informs gender development in families. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 8(1), 60–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12125

Meyer, E. J., Leonardi, B., Keenan, H. B. (2022). *Transgender students and policy in K-12 public schools: Acknowledging historical harms and taking steps toward a promising future*. National Education Policy Center. https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/transgender

Mills-Koonce, W. R., Rehder, P. D., & McCurdy, A. L. (2018). The significance of parenting and parent–child relationships for sexual and gender minority adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence: The Official Journal of the Society for Research on Adolescence*, 28(3), 637–649. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12404

Miyagi, M., Guthman, E. M., & Dow-Kuang Sun, S. (2021). Transgender rights rely on inclusive language. *Science*, 374(6575), 1568–1569. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abn3759

Morgenroth, T., Sendén, M. G., Lindqvist, A., Renström, E. A., Ryan, M. K., & Morton, T. A. (2021). Defending the sex/gender binary: The role of gender identification and need for closure. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 12(5), 731–740. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620937188

Morgensen, S. L. (2012). Theorising gender, sexuality and settler colonialism: An introduction. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2(2), 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2012.10648839

Movement Advancement Project. (2023). *Equality maps: Snapshot: LGBTQ equality by state*. https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/

Norris, M., & Welch, A. (2020). Gender pronoun use in the university classroom: A post-humanist perspective. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 5, a79. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v5i0.79

Olson, K. R., Durwood, L., Horton, R., Gallagher, N. M., & Devor, A. (2022). Gender identity 5 years after social transition. *Pediatrics*, 150(2), e2021056082. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-056082

Olson, K. R., Key, A. C., & Eaton, N. R. (2015). Gender cognition in transgender children. *Psychological Science*, 26(4), 467–474. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614568156

Paechter, C., Toft, A., & Carlile, A. (2021). Non-binary young people and schools: Pedagogical insights from a small-scale interview study. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 29(5), 695–713. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1912160

Pauly, M. (2023, March 8). Inside the secret working group that helped push anti-trans laws across the country. Mother Jones. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2023/03/anti-trans-transgender-health-care-ban-legislation-bill-minors-children-lgbtq/

Priess, H. A., & Hyde, J. S. (2011). Gender roles. In B. B. Brown & M. J. Prinstein (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of adolescence* (pp. 99–108). Elsevier.

Public Broadcasting Service. (2015). *A map of gender-diverse cultures*. https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits_map-html/

Rhodes, M., & Baron, A. (2019). The development of social categorization. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, *1*(1), 359–386. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-devpsych-121318-084824

Salinas-Quiroz, F., & Daniels, A. (2023, May 23). *"Education as a practice of freedom:" Youth participatory action research towards transing educational spaces and research.* Proposal to the Spencer Foundation.

Salinas-Quiroz, F., & Sweder, N. (2023). Authentic gender development in nonbinary children. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *8*, 1177766. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1177766

Schudson, Z. C., & Van Anders, S. M. (2019). 'You have to coin new things': Sexual and gender identity discourses in asexual, queer, and/or trans young people's networked counterpublics. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *10*(4), 354–368. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2019.1653957

Sevelius, J. M., Chakravarty, D., Dilworth, S. E., Rebchook, G., & Neilands, T. B. (2020). Gender affirmation through correct pronoun use: Development and validation of the transgender women's importance of pronouns (TW-IP) scale. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*(24), 9525. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17249525

Spark, C., Porter, L., & De Kleyn, L. (2019). 'We're not very good at soccer': Gender, space and competence in a Victorian primary school. *Children's Geographies*, *17*(2), 190–203. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2018.1479513

Spivey, L. A., Huebner, D. M., & Diamond, L. M. (2018). Parent responses to childhood gender nonconformity: Effects of parent and child characteristics. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *5*(3), 360–370. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000279

Trans Formations Project. (n.d.). *Trans formations project: Protect trans kids*. https://www.transformationsproject.org/

Vaid-Menon, A. (2022, April 11). We are all playing dress up. ALOK. https://www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2023/1/22/we-are-all-playing-dress-up

Van der Toorn, J., Pliskin, R., & Morgenroth, T. (2020). Not quite over the rainbow: The unrelenting and insidious nature of heteronormative ideology. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, *34*, 160–165. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.001

Veiszadeh, M. (2017, August 1). Rethinking privilege [video]. TEDxSydney 2017. https://tedxsydney.com/talk/rethinking-privilege-mariam-veiszadeh/

Waagen, T. (2022). *Non-binary gender identity development: A qualitative study*. https://commons.und.edu/theses/4384

Wallace Skelton, J. (2022). Schools often fail to expect trans and nonbinary elementary children: What gender independent, nonbinary, and trans children desire. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, *124*(8), 244–274. https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681221126243

Westwater, J. J., Riley, E., & Peterson, G. M. (2019). What about the family in youth gender diversity? A literature review. *The International Journal of Transgenderism*, *20*(4), 351–370. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1652130

Zucker, K. J., Bradley, S. J., Kuksis, M., Pecore, K., Birkenfeld-Adams, A., Doering, R. W., Mitchell, J. N., & Wild, J. (1999). Gender constancy judgments in children with gender identity disorder: Evidence for a developmental lag. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *28*(6), 475–502. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018713115866