

PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND TRANSGENDER YOUTH SUPPORTING ALL STUDENTS

Dylan Ahmed

INTRODUCTION

I am a 17-year-old transgender male of Asian background. Throughout my school journey I have questioned how socially just education is, especially for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, plus (LGBTQI+) community. LGBTQI+ students often do not find physical education to be a safe and welcoming space (Ayvazo and Sutherland, 2009), but why is this? In this article, I will explore whether physical education provides a platform where trans students are able to develop in a comfortable and accommodating setting.

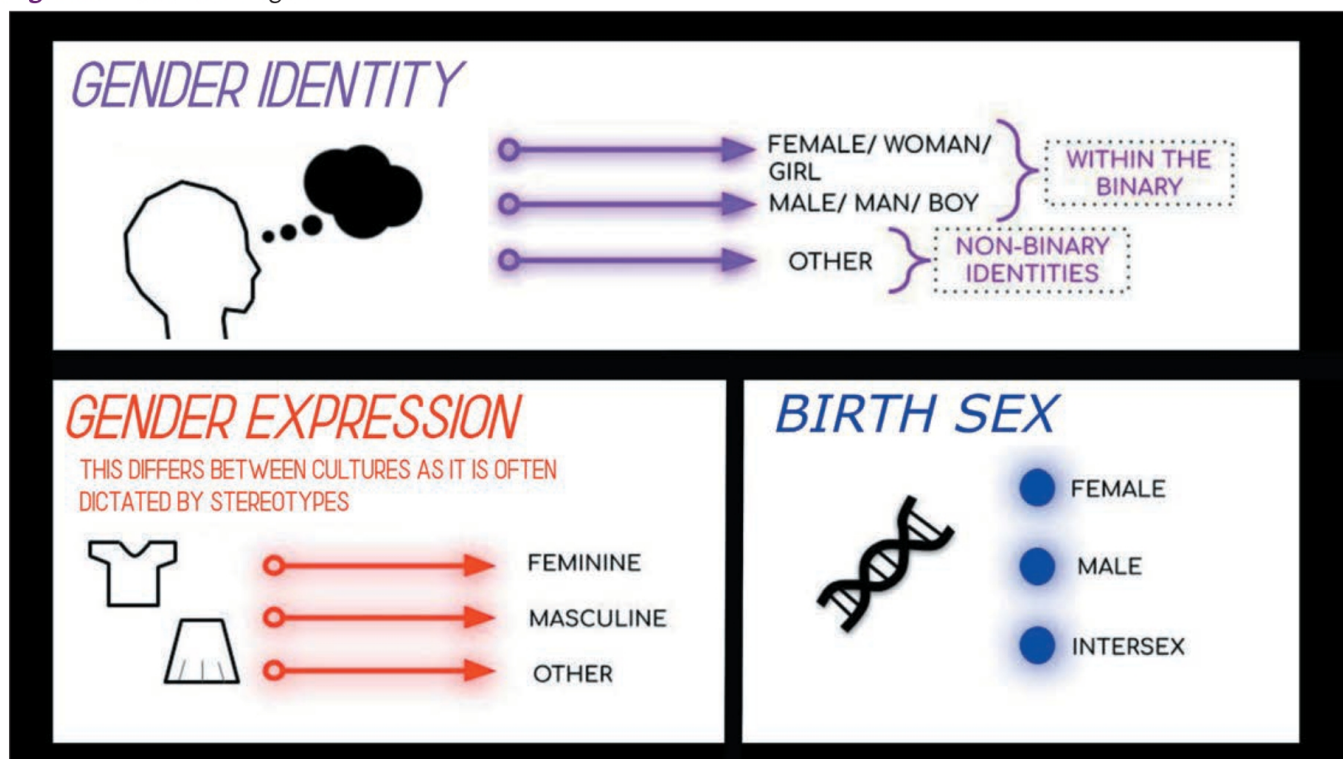
WHAT IS TRANS?

Trans (transgender) is an umbrella term used to describe individuals who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth (birth sex). Within the trans community, people may identify within the binary (male and female) or as non-binary (does not limit gender identity to male or female); a person's gender identity and gender expression may differ. For example, a trans woman who uses she/her pronouns may still wear what society classes as stereotypical masculine clothes;

however, this does not change her gender identity (refer to figure 1 for more clarity).

Gender expression and identity widely vary between cultures. Many trans individuals will deal with gender dysphoria: the distress someone feels when not being able to present as their true gender identity. This distress can be caused by anything, ranging from a situation they are in to clothes they must wear. An example in school may be wearing gendered uniforms.

Figure 1: The Gender Diagram



MY EXPERIENCE AS A TRANS STUDENT IN PE

'Coming out' as transgender at an all-girls school was quite a battle in itself, but when it came down to specific subjects, despite my undying passion for physical education, I felt a great deal of mental turmoil when it came to physical education after disclosing my identity. This was in no way whatsoever the intentional fault of the teachers; in fact, they played a vital part in creating many positive experiences for me in physical education.

Positive experiences were hugely due to the teachers doing their best to make me feel comfortable and confident. Their support quickly allowed me to stop doubting myself and regain some part of my self-esteem. This led me to do many great things, such as being sports captain, helping to organise This Girl Can campaigns, helping to lead extra-curricular clubs for younger year groups and, most importantly, realising where my passions really lie and what I want to do with my future. Countless physical education lessons and competitions brought me pure happiness from being able to participate in an accepting environment.

However, the societal pressure of trying to appear as more stereotypically masculine while playing typically female sports (such as netball) is what really caused mental turmoil. The fear of being judged for not being 'trans enough' definitely deterred me from joining the netball team or from wanting to participate in any school sports competitions in which I would be

representing a female team. Regardless of how masculine I presented, the logo of an all-girls school on my kit would always indicate to other schools' teachers and students that I was female. Every now and then, students from other schools would make derogatory comments due to assumptions they made about my queer identity based on my appearance. Often, I wouldn't flag these as I didn't want to cause any conflict. Looking back now, I wish I had challenged all of these comments. I always found myself trying to figure out how to be the first person in and out of the changing room, since I was uncomfortable changing with girls but did not want to segregate myself from my classmates and be seen as different from everyone else. I felt as if my identity threw me into a lot of lose-lose situations. Naturally, these will have consequences for the rest of my life. Thankfully, I am strong enough to share them with you to support other trans students.

CREATING AN ALL-INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

The most prominent problem in many schools in accommodating trans students is the issue of changing rooms. This is a space in which a student may feel their most vulnerable and may be one of the most traumatic spaces within the school environment for queer and trans students (Sykes, 2011). Forcing a trans student to change in the changing room of their assigned gender can cause extreme discomfort, feelings of invalidation and fear of harassment or bullying. Although it is

not as simple as just allowing students to choose where they change, I believe there should always be some form of gender-neutral cubicle option. This eliminates the safeguarding issues which may arise from gender-neutral changing rooms while also allowing students to feel comfortable (there are many schools which already do this). For most schools, there will be difficulty in finding the funds to make these changes; this is just one of the many areas in which the government structurally fails to provide an equal school experience by cutting funds.

You may wonder why this is so important in the grander scheme of things. How would discomfort in the changing room really affect a student's education? Well, putting a student in a position where they are immediately in a negative headspace, before even beginning the physical education lesson, is bound to have an adverse effect on their overall learning outcomes and attitude towards the subject. To instil respect for the subject, we must show a willingness to adapt to the students and care about their mental, social and affective wellbeing.

A specific issue for trans males and some non-binary youth is personal safety. Chest binding is a widely used method of alleviating dysphoria; many trans youth who feel dysphoric because of their chest will attempt to make it appear as flat as possible. All methods of doing this pose a level of risk, but there are some that are more dangerous than others. The safest method is to wear a chest binder from



companies which specialise in making them. These are compression garments which help to flatten an individual's chest; although this is the safest option, it still limits the wearer's breathing. In fact, it is advised that they are not worn at all during exercise; however, many youths cannot handle the mental distress of not binding in public. Those who cannot afford a binder (usually costing £35-£50) may resort to using bandages to wrap around themselves. This option is dangerous and can leave bruises, cause friction burns and even break ribs. For many students this is a highly sensitive issue to discuss as it can be a difficult concept to explain to a teacher. This leaves the student vulnerable during physical activity as they may not feel comfortable enough to raise concerns about their own safety if they have difficulty breathing due to binding. There were multiple times throughout the years where this was the case for me and I was honestly afraid for myself; it wasn't until Year 11 (after four years of binding) when I began to let my teachers know when I felt as though I was struggling. For some, this can result in extreme anxiety and cause a lifelong apprehension of movement. Teachers should be aware of the risks of binding. Then, if a student does decide to tell them they are anxious about participating due to personal safety, some adaptations can be made, rather than the student's worries being disregarded due to lack of education on the subject. These adaptations may be small, such as allowing students to take small breaks from movement every ten minutes or reducing the intensity of a lesson so a student is not forced to experience extreme discomfort.

Furthermore, there is an undeniable effect of school sport on the vastly inequitable nature of physical education in England. School sports in England are often Eurocentric (Dowling, 2015) and split into male and female categories (Hills and Croston, 2012). For trans students, the gendered divide within school sports is enough by itself to divert them from participation, but when these ideas are taken into compulsory physical education lessons, it has a far greater effect. We often see that, despite efforts to separate the aims of physical education and school sport, there is a common trend between the two: the heavily gendered physical activity stereotypes. By this I mean the tendency for boys to be taught football and more 'masculine' activities while girls are taught netball, gymnastics and other 'feminine' activities. The issue affects every pupil; by reinforcing stereotypes, students may feel they will be judged if they participate in certain sports (e.g. boys who want to play netball).

There are further implications of this gendered curriculum on trans students. Firstly, physical education lessons are often split into male and female. This can be extremely difficult for trans students as they may be forced into a class with their biological sex. This presents a message of non-acceptance and creates strong feelings of invalidation. Although this may not always be the case (e.g. a trans male is allowed in the male class), there is still an issue in accommodating non-binary students. No matter what, they will have to be in a male or a female class, both of which force labels on them which disregard their identity and can hugely affect their mental health. Additionally, many trans students who also come from a Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) background (such as myself) are prevented from exploring their own and others' culture due to the Eurocentric curriculum; this further neglects the identities of the diverse student population. The questions we must ask ourselves are: How does segregated physical education benefit students? Why do we idealise and stick to the same sports and activities? Is there a benefit or are we just refusing to challenge outdated traditions?

TOP TIPS

I would be surprised if there is a physical education teacher out there who hasn't mentioned the mental health benefits of physical activity to their students. However, when physical education can cause so much mental stress in a group of students, it is unsurprising that so many trans individuals develop a negative view of physical education and activity. Trans youths often feel they lack a safe environment and the necessary resources to address their mental health concerns (Grossman and D'Augelli, 2006). To create an open and accepting atmosphere, here are some of my tips for teachers.

- When teaching a new class, ask everybody to introduce themselves and (if comfortable) share their pronouns.
- Use gender-neutral language when addressing a class or group, e.g. students, folks, everyone or the class name.
- When using athletes as examples, include trans athletes. Challenge any negative comments regardless of whether there is a known trans student in the class.
- Try to implement mixed-gender activities in your curriculum.
- Avoid basing activities on gender: the curriculum should not be based on gender but on the intent of your department.

- Be aware of the possibility of any student being trans and challenge your own cis-normative thoughts; whether they make it known or not, you should always act as if someone in the class may be trans and keep it in mind to create an always inclusive environment.

Finally, take some time to educate yourself in gender diversity and understand the different experiences people can have. In doing this, be careful about where you get your information. The best thing to do is speak to people who are transgender; a cisgender person will never really be able to portray the feelings and experiences of a trans person, no matter how great their knowledge; seek out inclusion resources made by trans people for trans people and share them widely. The BAME PE trans inclusion resource is an easy-to-follow resource which aims to help physical education teachers create an open and affirming atmosphere. It can be found at: <https://bamepe.wordpress.com/resources/>

You can also find resources at:

- Queer Newham: <https://queernewham.weebly.com/resources.html>
- Shape America: <https://www.shapeamerica.org/standards/guidelines/Transgender/?hkey=241d34b2-5445-4914-b863-cd4e68314e8b>
- Mermaids Trans inclusion kit for schools: <https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/AllsortsYouthProject-Trans-Inclusion-Schools-Toolkit-Sept-18.pdf>
- Article on the effects of binding: <https://hellocue.com/articles/cycle-a-z/chest-binding-tips-and-tricks-for-trans-men-nonbinary-and-genderfluid> ■

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Dylan Ahmed is an aspiring physical education teacher and college student. He has written this article on behalf of BAME PE. For more information on BAME PE, visit: <https://bamepe.wordpress.com/> or follow us on Twitter @BAMPE_PE