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Batya Reich 

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# Gender Euphoria, Affirmation, and Joy: Positive Approaches to Transgender Youth in Educational Settings

Batya Reich

University of Cambridge

## ABSTRACT

This literature review critiques mainstream deficit-based approaches to studies of transgender people and LGBT+ communities. Studies that primarily focus on deficits in the trans community may contribute to an overemphasis on pain and suffering as inherent in the trans experience. This review then defines an alternative positive approach based in gender euphoria and gender pleasure, or positive experiences and affirmation of gender. The review examines both community and academic understandings of these topics. Finally, it explores the value of a focus on gender euphoria in educational contexts. This review concludes that a focus on euphoria and pleasure may be instrumental in allowing all youth to thrive in education and recommends further study on gender euphoria and pleasure.

## KEYWORDS

Gender euphoria, transgender youth, positive approaches, education, pleasure

## Introduction

In both the United States and the United Kingdom, the popular narrative of transgender identity is entrenched in pain: both mental (i.e., gender dysphoria, body dysmorphia, depression) and physical (i.e., invasive surgeries, being a victim of violence) (Austin et al., 2022; Beischel et al., 2022; Davis, 2022; de Melo, 2023). People often attempt to map transgender identity to the strict binary of cisnormativity, believing that medical transition from one gender to the other is the defining element of the transgender experience. They believe that one moves from the suffering of dysphoria to the arrival point of their ‘new’ gender. In this literature review, I examine the alternative, “gender euphoria,” a term that originated in transgender communities and has recently emerged in academic discourse (Beischel et al., 2022, p. 274). First, I critique the mainstream focus on gender dysphoria and how a deficit-based approach to transgender research impacts our understanding of transgender individuals. Then, through community and academic traditions, I attempt to construct a definition of gender euphoria which focuses on joy and active affirmation of one’s gender. Finally, I argue the utility of gender euphoria and positive approaches to transgender youth in educational settings.

## Positionality

My working definition of transgender is an umbrella term which covers any individual whose gender identity is different from the sex that they were assigned at birth. This definition includes binary transgender, nonbinary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, genderqueer, agender, and two-spirit identities among others (Baig et al., 2021; Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Goetz, 2022; Reed, 2023). I will use transgender, trans, and LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other non-heteronormative and non-cisnormative identities) to refer to these subjects. My working definition of cisgender refers to anyone whose gender identity is congruent with the sex they were assigned at birth and the gender with which they were socialised (Phipps &

Blackall, 2023). For example, I consider myself to be cisgender because when I was born, they put ‘female’ on my birth certificate, I was socialised as a girl, and I currently move through the world as a woman.

As a cis woman, researching and discussing aspects of trans identities, it is very important that I remain in community with many trans and/or nonbinary people. It is important for me to diversify my reference list and citations, including perspectives from people who have different life experiences that speak to my work. This helps me to maintain a cultural sensitivity and relevancy and use my work to empower those who have historically been disempowered by academic research (Reed, 2023). Additionally, it is important for me to question assumptions I might make, regarding the experience of gender, which stem from a cisgender worldview. My current emphasis on gender euphoria in my research is in conversation with trans voices, such as de Melo (2023) which have previously called for academic research to focus on euphoria and trans joy. Without this engagement with trans perspectives, my research would be limited to my cisgender positionality and likely overlook the diversity of trans experiences.

My interest in the intersection of educational theatre and gender is inspired by my personal experiences in theatre growing up. In school, I was cast as flirtatious maids, mothers, and old ladies. All of the shows that my school selected had normative gender roles and stereotypes. Many shows featured active male heroes, passive female love interests, and a gaggle of boy-crazy girls. The school musicals were heavily gendered spaces; however, in the community-based acting programs I joined, I saw less rigid alternatives for gender performance in theatre. I played a sloth, an assistant to Mother Nature, a male page, and a villainous time god disguised as a lunch lady. There were more roles than the repressed housewife or the comedic crone. For many characters, it often felt like gender was an afterthought. It was normal for people to play animals, fantastical creatures, or inanimate objects and barely worth remarking upon if a girl played a male character.

In my last eight years working with children in community-based arts organisations, I have seen a significant increase in children identifying as transgender or non-binary. I have seen an increase in awareness of both traditional pronouns (he, she, and they) and neopronouns (such as xe/xem/xyr, ze/hir/hirs, and ey/em/eir). These anecdotal experiences are representative of recent increased public awareness, specifically among young people, of gender as something more complex than the designation of ‘male’ or ‘female’ we are assigned at birth.

## Background

One outcome, and possible cause, of such awareness is the increased spotlight on transgender people in media. The BBC has many recent articles discussing transgender issues. However, an examination of some articles from one of the UK’s most popular news sources reveals troubling narratives about transgender people. For example, two of the first articles pulled when searching the BBC’s website in October of 2023 for the term ‘transgender’ are about violent transgender women prisoners (Savva & O’Shea, 2023; Campbell, 2023). The articles proclaim to be about a transgender rapist and violent transgender prisoners, playing into dangerous tropes of trans women being ‘men in dresses who enter women’s spaces with the intent to harm’ (Stryker & Whittle, 2013). Examining the attitudes around how media discusses transgender people helps to reveal the precarious position of the transgender community. If trans people are not presented as dangerous or monstrous, they are represented as different and apart. There is still a comprehension of ‘trans-ness as other’, or cisnormativity, which centres cisgender as the normal, default gender identity (Horton, 2023).

Increased public awareness about transgender people also seems to have coincided with increasing political attacks against LGBT+ communities. Politicians call drag performers ‘groomers’ and institute ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bills that criminalise any discussion of non-heteronormative or non-cisnormative topics in schools (Associated Press, 2022; Center on Extremism, 2022; Diaz, 2022). Officials prevent student and professional transgender athletes from competing in sports (Falkingham, 2023). Lawmakers attempt to limit gender-affirming healthcare options for transgender adults and youth (Ghorayshi, 2022; McMillan et al., 2023). Additionally, there is evidence of increasing physical attacks and hate crimes targeting transgender people. Across all of England and Wales, hate crimes against transgender people rose 11% in 2022-2023;

this rise could be linked to the previously mentioned political attacks against transgender people (Moss et al., 2023).

At the same time, there has been an increase in academic studies of transgender and wider LGBT+ issues in a variety of fields, including psychology and sociology, with many studies focusing on children and adolescents (Barras & Frith, 2023; Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Formby, 2015; Horton & Carlile, 2022). This academic discourse around LGBT+ issues is an important element in countering the demonstrated popular, often negative, discussions surrounding the transgender community. However, in considering mainstream academic discourse around transgender issues, it is important to recognize that many such conversations stem from cisnormative worldviews and utilise deficit-based approaches.

### **Deficit Approaches to Studies of Transgender Individuals**

The primary criteria required for diagnosis and subsequent gender-affirming care in the American Psychiatric Association's primary diagnostic tool, the DSM-5, is gender dysphoria, meaning distress related to gender incongruence, or a conflict between one's assigned gender and gender identity (2013). Gender dysphoria is a diagnostic tool and a focus for both the transgender community and an increasing number of researchers. One academic definition describes gender dysphoria as "a complex and nuanced experience of suffering that emerges in response to internal and external stimuli which highlight a disconnection between one's internal understanding of self and one's external presentation of self" (Austin et al., 2022, p. 1407). Such incongruence may have significant, varied impacts on one's physical health and mental well-being. These negative outcomes have been the focus of significant academic study concerning the trans community, specifically focusing on depression and suicidality (Budge et al., 2013; James et al., 2016; Lefevor et al., 2019). For example, in one study of trans men and women, nearly half of the participants experienced symptoms of depression (Budge et al., 2013).

Understanding negative outcomes for disempowered communities, such as the trans community, is an important aspect of research. It can be harmful to ignore challenges experienced by marginalised communities, which often stem from systemic oppression (Jones, 2023). However, issues arise when deficits and negativity are the majority of the mainstream discussion around said communities. One critique of the focus on gender dysphoria in discussions about the transgender community is that it presents a "one-sided narrative that transgender individuals' lives are focused exclusively on experiences of gender dysphoria and bodily distress" (Austin et al., 2022, p. 1407). The emphasis on dysphoria highlights the negative aspects of the trans experience and relegates the trans body to a site of pain and confusion. These conceptions of the transgender body and experience can also create popular, false equivalences that equate transgender identity with mental illness (Davis, 2022). Another critique of the focus on gender dysphoria is that it contributes to pathologising "over-medicalized aspects" of trans experiences (Beischel et al., 2022, p. 274). Gender dysphoria is often required as a diagnosis before an individual can undergo medical transition. However, not all trans people medically transition, and often social transition and affirmative approaches (which emphasise supporting the identities of transgender individuals) are just as, if not even more, central to the everyday lives of trans individuals (Horton, 2023). Studies that attempt to define quantifiable scales of gender dysphoria can also create issues by over-relying on ideas of gender as a binary and conflict with queer theory by creating static metrics of identity (Beischel et al., 2022). Such studies represent a "cisgender gaze" that is often utilised in dominant stories of marginalised subjects, such as transgender individuals (de Melo, 2023, p. 181). Transgender people can be viewed as passive objects, rather than as fully autonomous people.

In a wider context, hyper-focus on negative aspects or experiences for LGBT+ youth can create a sense of inevitability or a feeling that one is guaranteed to face these difficulties. For example, a focus on homophobic and transphobic bullying can create environments where youth assume they will naturally and inescapably be bullied. One study participant responded to Formby (2015):

As soon as I went back to school [after transitioning] I was expecting ... being shoved into lockers

and things, I don't know why, I just expected it . . . and it didn't happen to me . . . I feel almost bad that it hasn't happened now 'coz I feel like I braced myself for it and I'm still waiting for it to happen, and it's not happening. (p. 633)

A focus on bullying conflicts can also overemphasise the actions of individuals, rather than attempting to break down wider social influences (Formby, 2015). From a trans-emancipatory theoretical framework, a focus solely on individuals' actions would be inappropriate without recognizing the role of cisnormativity in the status quo of structural injustice (Horton, 2023). Without understanding systemic cisnormativity, we cannot fully understand the deficits that previous research has revealed. The fear of rejection or implicit belief in 'cisgender as the correct default' underpins much of this research. Additionally, there are genuine safety concerns for LGBT+ youth as they can be a vulnerable population at an increased risk of becoming unhoused due to heteronormative and cisnormative rejection (Durso & Gates, 2012; Edidin et al., 2012).

Current mainstream academic research about LGBT+ youth, specifically about transgender children and adolescents, hyper-focuses on deficits and negatives, such as dysphoria, mental illness, bullying, and pain. These deficit-based approaches apply cisnormative perspectives to the transgender community and uphold dominant, binary understandings of gender. When a majority of trans narratives feature bullying, dysphoria, and mental illness, there is a created expectation that such suffering is inevitable for transgender individuals. Additionally, the focus on negative outcomes experienced by trans individuals may not consider that depression and suicidality experienced by trans youth could stem from structural cisnormativity. These stories also uphold the heteronormative and cisnormative status quo and speak to individual, incremental changes, rather than a widespread cultural shift in our understanding of gender and identity.

### Constructing a Comprehensive Definition of 'Gender Euphoria'

An alternative to deficit-based approaches regarding trans individuals is gender euphoria, a concept which originated in transgender communities and has recently entered academic discourse (Beischel et al., 2022; de Melo, 2023; Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). The trans playwright, Tabby Lamb, has written multiple shows exploring transgender identity and gender as a concept on stage. One example of an expression of gender euphoria from her work, *Happy Meal*, is "I was born in exactly the right body . . . These journeys we've taken were the journeys we were meant to take to find ourselves," (Lamb, 2022, p. 64) The assertion that one was born into the right body is a strong counter-argument to the centring of dysphoria and pain in cisgender understandings of transgender identity. This declaration also subverts the popular explanation of transgender individuals as 'being born into the wrong body' (Stryker & Whittle, 2013). In *Happy Meal*, we follow the online lives of two trans youth and their developing relationship with each other, as well as their own bodies; Lamb argues that transgender people were not simply born into the wrong body. While there are obstacles and negative experiences for the characters, Alex and Bette, they were always meant to take this journey of exploration and self-discovery (Lamb, 2022). Gender euphoria arises from the joy of self-discovery and feeling comfortable in one's own body (de Melo, 2023). Lamb's experience and writing of gender euphoria mirrors some of the experiences of other queer and trans performers. For example, interviews with drag performers from 2017-2018 featured in Bukkakis (2020) reveal further examples of non-academic definitions of gender euphoria:

**Dollar Baby:** The feeling of joy when one's gender is recognized correctly. It's a feeling that can be caused by being able to play with gender however one wants, a feeling of taking it lightly because it's lost its threat.

**Bree Zilla:** It is like existing in a space that is powerful and joyful, where all the complexities of my gender just float without me having to explain them or think about them.

**Psoriasis:** A celebration of individuality. It shouldn't be forced, it comes from within. It shouldn't be expected, it's part of a process that an oppressed individual might go through.



**Victoria Sin:** A utopian ideal, a point we can work towards and try to model with drag . . .

**Umlilo the Kwaai Diva:** Being completely happy with the gender you are comfortable with on the spectrum . . . now I've reached a '0 fucks given' approach to the way I see myself in relation to the world and that gives me a bit of gender euphoria from time to time . . .

**Kaye P. Rinha:** The strong feeling that gender is something fluid and cheerful. It invites us to be free and creative with it instead of limiting us to borders.

**ShayShay:** It can be achieved in spaces where my gender doesn't matter at all. Where my clothes are not seen as representations of my gender . . . If I am in a state where I feel free from thinking about how others are interpreting my gender, that is my 'Gender Euphoria'. (pp. 133-134)

Within these community definitions from Lamb (2022) and the performers interviewed by Bukkakis (2020), some understand gender euphoria as aspirational, while others understand it as an achievable state of joy and freedom. Some understand gender euphoria as stemming from outside forces, but other definitions stress feelings and internal experiences. Within the LGBT+ community, there is no one consensus on what gender euphoria is exactly; however, there are recurring themes of affirmation, supportive environments, experiences of joy, and understanding transition as a journey of self-discovery.

While gender euphoria is a phrase colloquially understood within the transgender community, academic definitions are still evolving. Beischel et al. (2022) recognize that there are varied academic understandings of gender euphoria and that without a common understanding, researchers may only focus on one particular aspect, or might not realise that various conceptualisations of gender euphoria exist at all. Additionally, by defining gender euphoria in contrast to gender dysphoria, one establishes an unbreakable link between the two, implying individuals cannot experience euphoria without dysphoria (Beischel et al., 2022). A binary understanding of gender euphoria and dysphoria upholds normative, binary conceptions of gender and experience.

Generally, gender euphoria is understood as a feeling of joy in the rightness of an individual's gender. It can elicit many positive emotions, including happiness, confidence, and affirmation (Beischel et al., 2022; Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). Beischel et al. (2022) identified several themes in participants' responses to an online survey about gender euphoria. For example, experiences of gender euphoria were both "bodily and social", including physical interactions, internal processes, and interactions with others (p. 287). Additionally, while there is an existing conception of gender dysphoria and gender euphoria as being opposite, this understanding is not universal. As the survey's participants constructed understandings of euphoria and dysphoria from their own experiences, it is difficult to generalise the connection between the two without disregarding some individual comprehensions (Beischel et al., 2022). Finally, the joy of gender euphoria is typically described by transgender individuals and originates from conceptions within the transgender community. Therefore, the term 'gender pleasure' is useful to describe positive gendered experiences for individuals of any identity, and includes feelings of gender euphoria (Beischel et al., 2022).

Some limitations to keep in mind concerning current academic studies of gender euphoria include the race, socioeconomic status, age, and location of the participants. Most of the data in Beischel et al. (2022) came from young, white survey respondents. As gender experience varies across different social identities, Beischel et al. posit that gender euphoria may not currently be equally accessible or may take alternative forms when considering race, class, and cultural background (2022). The performer Umlilo the Kwaai Diva questions whether gender euphoria is achievable in South Africa and other places where non-cisnormative bodies are "still a site of violence inflicted by society" (Bukkakis, 2020, p. 133). Further research is needed to understand diverse community perspectives on gender euphoria.

From a gender minority stress model, affirmations of gender euphoria may act as resilience factors which mediate stressors related to transphobia and cisnormativity (Jacobsen & Devor, 2022). Studies have shown that gender-affirming practices, such as medical or social transition, can mitigate negative outcomes, such as issues around mental health for trans people. For example, adolescents aged 15–24 whose affirmed names and pronouns were used at home, school, work, and with friends had 71% fewer symptoms of

depression and a 65% reduction in suicide attempts (Austin et al., 2022).

While there may not be complete consensus, gender euphoria is understood in trans communities and academia as joyful experiences and affirmation of one's gender. This euphoria can be a result of external, physical, or social experiences and internal, psychological experiences. Gender euphoria is not always inherently understood in contrast to gender dysphoria. While gender euphoria is a concept by and for the trans community, gender pleasure is a term that encompasses gender euphoria as well as affirmations of gender identity for cisgender individuals. Introducing positive approaches to gender identity into educational settings, including concepts of gender euphoria and gender pleasure, is likely to have significant implications for educational outcomes, by helping children in marginalised communities to thrive.

### Understanding 'Gender Euphoria' in Education

One goal of positive approaches to gender and structural understandings of cisnormativity is that rather than merely survive, we should strive to create environments where trans individuals thrive. In *surviving & thriving: a song for the child who needs it*, Kama La Mackerel writes:

there is surviving & there is thriving  
these are different things . . .  
surviving is when you & you are no longer in the same room, under the same skin, but somehow you  
keep breathing  
surviving will not make you whole-  
surviving might afford you quick relief . . .  
thriving is different . . .  
thriving is that feeling when your heart expands  
& your spirit soars  
& you know  
in the safety of your bones  
you can walk in your light  
you can stand in your truth  
you can live  
you can love (Baig et al., 2021, p. 78)

To thrive is to do more than survive; once your survival needs are met, you can live and experience more fully. If schools can act as protective spaces and support experiences of gender euphoria which foster trans students' well-being, LGBT+ students would likely have more positive outcomes.

Studies suggest that a current issue in schools is the alienation of trans and LGBT+ youth; cisnormativity is still ever present, specifically in UK schools (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Horton & Carlile, 2022; Phipps & Blackall, 2023). Institutional support of affirmation and euphoria could help mitigate negative experiences and exclusion for trans students. In looking to promote positive experiences, research indicates three broad categories for sources of gender euphoria in schools: social supports, school practices (for example, LGBT+ inclusive teaching), and internal experiences (Mann et al., 2023). Students, staff, and parents seem more likely to recognise social supports, such as school climate or supportive events, as sources of euphoria. "For students, supportive social climates referred to social events where friends, peers, teachers, school staff, and general school climates supported gender identities or sexual orientations" (Mann et al., 2023, p. 7). Students also highlighted both social groups that celebrated their identity and social groups that normalised their identity, treating it as a "non-issue" (p. 7). While positive celebrations were valued in helping LGBT+ students thrive, there was also an emphasis on the value of identity being treated as a non-issue or 'not a big deal'. Mann et al. (2023) suggest that perceived "equal treatment and non-discriminatory practices" are the most valued school supports for fostering euphoria (p. 8). One critique of this study could be that it

considers LGBT+ inclusion an end goal. Some would argue that active disidentification from the majority, where possible, can result in more liberating forms of identity performativity (Muñoz, 1999).

The previous research discussed is primarily concerned with the mind, focusing on individuals' emotions and internal experiences. However, gender can also be understood as an embodied experience, as the body and gender are created through the performance of actions and words (Allegranti, 2009; Bailey, 2001; Butler, 2002). Gender is often experienced first in the body, from the experience of pregnancy which is often associated with womanhood and femininity, to the embodied experience of how gender dysphoria can feel in trans bodies (Bailey, 2001; Kondelin, 2017). A recent study on physical education considers the embodied experiences of trans youth in education; Barras and Frith (2023) examine the joy and fun trans people can experience through physical activity, considering physical education as a possible realm for gender euphoria. The study found that through physical activity "seeing, feeling or experiencing the body in particular ways, communicates to the self-information made meaningful in relation to gender which is then experienced as affirming or gender euphoric" (p. 9). Embodied pleasure and joy can motivate participation in physical activity and, more broadly, a focus on embodied experiences of pleasure may help move the field away from individualised processes of inclusion and binary understandings of exclusion and inclusion. Such a transition could help us to develop a more dynamic "constellation" of practices to promote euphoria (Barras & Frith, 2023, p. 12).

When looking at euphoria, joy, and pleasure in educational contexts, community-based arts organisations are a vital sphere to examine. Education does not solely occur in schools; art education is often more "informal" (Ulbricht, 2005, p. 7). Additionally, schools can be often seen as structures which are oppressive towards marginalised individuals. Referred to as 'free spaces', community-based arts organisations are designed by and for the people and communities that utilise them; these spaces are ideal for understanding how they may enable individuals "to re-find our collective selves" (Fine et al., 2000, pp. 149). Community-based arts education can specifically be designed to promote socially progressive change and has been linked to students' development of resilience (Kim, 2015; Ulbricht, 2005). Therefore, further research focusing on trans youth in community-based organisations may be informative.

Gender euphoria may be useful in educational settings, by creating environments of pleasure where students of any gender identity can thrive. In schools, supportive social climates and positive physical, embodied experiences may foster gender euphoria. A more nuanced positionality of trans youth in schools, compared to a binary conception of inclusion and exclusion could also be an important shift for educational settings. Finally, community-based organisations may also be an important sphere for future research examining gender euphoria in education.

## Conclusion

Research into trans individuals and communities mainly utilising deficit-based approaches and conceptions of dysphoria, while useful in understanding the effects of structural cisnormativity, can overemphasise negative aspects of trans experience. A spotlight on dysphoria from a cisgender gaze will reinforce binary understandings of gender and inclusion. As a cisgender researcher, it is vital to question such binaries. Research exploring gender euphoria and centring pleasure can be useful in providing an alternative perspective; gender euphoria is an understanding of joy, pleasure, and affirmation in one's gender, which is centred within the trans community. In educational contexts, gender euphoria is a valuable element for further study.

One area for future research is understanding experiences of gender euphoria in theatrical performance. Gender, trans experiences, and gender euphoria have been significant themes of many theatrical pieces, such as in Lamb's (2022) *Happy Meal*. Gender can be understood as an embodied experience and theatre is an embodied art form. Theatre can "blur boundaries between body and non-body, whether that be mind, spirit, object . . . society . . . incorporality, flow" (Shepherd, 2005, p. 1). Similarly, to physical education explored by Barras and Frith (2023), devised theatrical performance is an embodied physical practice that can be utilised



in more complex understandings of pleasure and euphoria. “Love, fear, trauma, loneliness, awe, rage, joy, delight . . . these parts of the human experience live in the body, and so . . . they are best reflected back to us through the body” (Dorsey, 2018, p. 88). Theatre generates pleasure, which engages cultural and personal values (Shepherd, 2005). Theatre is vital for bridging the cultural divide between mind and body; therefore, it is a natural place to explore embodied experience and conceptions.

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