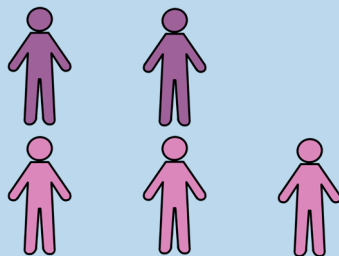


Gender identity acceptance facilitates self-expression

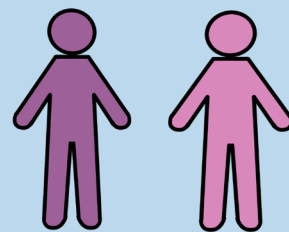
Exploring gender identity can create both opportunities for inner happiness and struggles with fitting in. Transgender and non-binary students speak to their experiences inside the school community and out.





2 in 5

LGBTQ+ students in the U.K. have never been taught about LGBTQ+ issues at school.



1 in 2

LGBTQ+ students in the U.K. hear transphobic language at school frequently or often.

Source: Stonewall.org

Eden Leavey /
Culture Editor: Print

Finding the label that fits one's gender identity – especially when lacking a connection to the one assigned at birth – can lead to a stronger sense of self. However, some say societal gender constructs often suppress transgender and non-binary individuals' gender expression.

Personal journey

To Finn Eichenberger ('23), "gender identity shouldn't be something that gets in the way of self-expression." Yet, he said due to gender norms, people have developed stereotypically gendered mindsets.

"Gender identity is something that a lot of people think is very binary," Eichenberger said. "If you identify as a guy, you have to act like a guy, or have to be more masculine, and vice versa for if you identify as female."

Before he transitioned, Eichenberger said he had not felt truly himself but unknowingly explored his gender identity growing up.

"When I was younger, I would dress up as a guy and like, wanting to cut my hair short, but my parents didn't really want me to," Eichenberger said. "It's been a lot of internal struggle, like self-hatred, not really being happy with who I was, and not really knowing

why."

Similarly, Elena Li-Williams ('25) said she experienced some confusion but also curiosity while testing out different pronouns and mannerisms of gender expression.

"It took me a while just to come to terms with," Li-Williams said. "It was a lot of thinking and experimenting with how I felt when I referred to myself in different ways, and also just seeing how when people referred to me, how that felt. It took a long time, but, eventually, I kind of found myself."

Meanwhile, Gracie Lambertson ('25) said ASL is a much more open-minded school than the prior one they attended, which has since allowed them to think about gender fluidity.

"I grew up going to an all-girls, quite Christian school, so there was never any representation of gender identity at all there," they said. "I've never really felt connected to femininity. Me identifying as gender-fluid is just something that means gender isn't really something that makes up that big of a part of me for other people."

In addition, Li-Williams said ASL is the most accepting of all the schools she has attended, and during her transition, numerous adults in the

community reached out to show their support.

After Eichenberger's transition, he said his self-confidence increased drastically. Eichenberger also said members of the community witnessed him fully coming into himself.

"I've been at ASL for a really long time, so people that I've known for a long time have said that after I transitioned socially, they noticed I'm a happier person," Eichenberger said.

To further express his gender identity, Eichenberger said he often presents himself cosmetically in ways that go against the grain of societal gender norms.

"People will say, 'Don't wear makeup because you identify as a guy,' but it's like, who says that it's for women only?" he said.

Lambertson said although the community is fairly responsive to using transgender and non-binary students' preferred pronouns, they have witnessed many discriminatory incidents around the school.

"When you first introduce yourself, teachers and most students usually go and help you out and they do use they/them pronouns," Lambertson said. "However, a lot of the

time, I do find that teachers ignore people making transphobic comments."

Because of prevalent transgender stereotypes, Eichenberger said he feels like he cannot fully express himself and still experiences a lot of gender dysphoria pertaining to his higher pitched voice and anatomy. According to the NHS, gender dysphoria is a medical term which describes the distress or unease that one may feel as a result of not feeling like the gender that fits their gender identity.

"I work out a lot – I box – and a huge part of that has been trying to make my hips smaller because that's a really big part of my body dysphoria," Eichenberger said. "I also have chest dysphoria and I am planning to get top surgery."

Discrimination

Furthermore, Li-Williams said she struggles with being mis-gendered by people in public because she fears if she corrects a stranger, she might be subject to transphobia.

"There's fear that if I express that's not who I am, I could find some sort of backlash," Li-Williams said. "Outside of school, I don't really live as myself. It's only at home and

at school that I live as Elena, as she/her. Outside I can't really do it. I'm scared because there are so many strict rules. I'm just scared of someone who might disagree."

Lambertson said they are also afraid to express themselves fully after facing discrimination for a haircut they got in June 2021.

"A few weeks after school ended, I cut my hair really short," Lambertson said. "I got a bunch of hurtful comments from random people. I actually got called slurs a couple of times – that really sucked. Now I just don't feel comfortable having short hair anymore, just because that was really difficult."

Within the school, Eichenberger said the transgender and non-binary community is often targeted with insensitive gender identity inquiries.

"People at ASL just haven't experienced or interacted with transgender or non-binary people before, so then when they hear of someone or see someone who is, they get weird about it, and they ask invasive personal questions," Eichenberger said.

Moreover, Lambertson said it is an exceedingly painful experience to be treated differently or "not like an equal

human."

"It hurts so much to hear, you know, because it takes so much courage to actually try to express your identity and try to go against things that are so ingrained in our society," Lambertson said.

Moving forward

In the future, Eichenberger said he hopes to see more integration of gender and sexuality into the well-being curriculum so students become more educated about topics surrounding gender identity.

"Not a whole unit, but having some classes being LGBTQ+ education in general-like intersex people, that's a huge thing that's brushed under the rug, even though it's super normal," Eichenberger said.

Concurrently, Eichenberger also said he would love to be able to study queer history in social studies classes and also read books by queer-identifying authors in his English classes.

Moving forward, Li-Williams said if people avoid using stereotypes to define things as either feminine or masculine, people will be able to deconstruct gender norms together.

"People expect me to act a certain way because they think I'm that gender," Li-Williams said. "Try to think about it more and try to focus on the individual person, rather than their sex or their gender and how they act."

Glossary:

Definitions from Stonewall.org

Cisgender

Someone whose gender identity is the same as their gender assigned at birth.

Transitioning

The steps a transgender person may take to live in the gender with which they identify.

Gender identity

A person's innate sense of their own gender, whether male, female or something else.

Gender dysphoria

Distress felt by those whose gender identity doesn't match with their birth-assigned gender.

Gender expression

How a person chooses to outwardly express their gender identity.

Intersex

term used to describe a person who has sexual anatomy that doesn't fit into just "female" or "male."

Gender

Largely culturally determined and is usually assumed from the sex assigned at birth