

Background Information

“The kid that’s most marginalized in the classroom, if my classroom or my school can be a safe space for them, then everybody else is gonna be fine. If we make the school safe and affirming and a great space to learn for the most marginalized, everybody else will be okay, too. So that’s what I aspire to do.”

—Tim’m West (he/they), Executive Director at the LGBTQ Institute at the National Center for Civil and Human Rights

WHEN DID you first hear the word *transgender*? Who was the first out transgender person you met? When did you first encounter a student or other young person who was trans?

Many of us, particularly those who were born before the era of Google and Facebook, first learned about trans people on daytime talk shows—if we learned about trans people at all. We almost certainly didn’t have teachers who spoke about trans people in grade school. Trans people might have merited attention in higher education, but almost certainly as a minor mention in a single chapter or two, and not as a nuanced and complex community. Likewise, many of us were well into adulthood before we met our first out trans person.

A Brief History of Trans Identity

According to one 2021 survey, less than half of the people living in the United States know someone who is transgender or who uses gender-neutral pronouns.¹ And while that's significantly more people than noted in previous surveys, it still means there are still huge parts of the population that simply don't know trans people. Meanwhile, a 2022 survey found that two-thirds of Americans "say they've had a paranormal encounter," which may mean that more people in the United States think they've met a ghost than know a trans person, demonstrating a wide gap in basic awareness of trans identity.² (These surveys also leave important questions unanswered, including, "But what if the ghost was trans?")

These facts—a lack of education about trans identity and a lack of interaction with *out* trans people—can lead many to assume that transgender identity is new, that the experiences of trans people are taking society into uncharted territory, and that there is little history or experience to guide us as we consider how to best support transgender students. Fortunately, this is not the case.

It is true that words like *transgender* and *genderqueer*—as well as terms like *gender binary* and *LGBTQ* (or the even longer *LGBTQIA+*)—came into existence in the 19th and 20th centuries, with many of these terms less than 100 years old.³ That makes it difficult (if not impossible) to apply modern terms to people who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago. It also may not make sense to use English terms like *transgender* to refer to people who today live in other societies and cultures. At the same time, there have always been people who exist outside of the static boxes "male" and "female." At every point in history, and in every society that exists today, we can find people living gender-expansive lives as vibrant and thriving members of their community (see Figure 1.1).

This section is not intended to be a complete history of gender, or of trans identity. Julian Gill-Peterson's *Histories of the Transgender Child* has extensive information on the formation of modern ideas about trans youth. Also, Appendix 1: Additional



FIGURE 1.1 Ginny Suss, photograph from Trans Prom featuring youth activist Danielle Trujillo holding a sign that reads “trans kids have always existed,” 2023.⁴

Resources includes lots of materials for learning about trans identity and trans history more broadly. Rather, this section is intended as an antidote to the false claim that being trans is new or was somehow created by the Western world. In fact, trans people have always been a part of humanity, even if the words used to talk about gender identity have changed (and are changing, and will continue changing) over time.

One of the earliest examples of a *trans-ish* identity or experience (i.e., identities and experiences that seem related to the modern experience of being trans, even if the term *trans* isn't being used) comes from millennia ago: the Galli of ancient Rome, eunuch priests of the mother-goddess Cybele. Modern historians describe the Galli as “wearing bright clothes, heavy jewelry, make-up and sporting bleached and crimped hair,” while the Roman writer Julius Firmicus Maternus, living in the 4th century CE, said, “[Galli] say they are not men, and indeed they aren't; they want to pass as women.”⁵

In India and South Asia, the hijra community stretches back at least 1,000 years, although hijra have not always been accepted

or supported, particularly by Western outsiders. Franciscan travelers in the 1650s harshly described “men and boys who dress like women” as a sign of depravity, and British colonizers attempted to extinguish hijra identity in the 1800s.⁶ Nevertheless, strong hijra communities continue to exist throughout the region; Pakistan officially recognized hijra as a third sex in 2009; Bangladesh, in 2013; and India, in 2014. Today, it is estimated that more than 10 million hijra people live in the region.⁷

Meanwhile, in North America, many Indigenous communities use the umbrella term *two-spirit* to describe third-gender or otherwise gender-variant roles and identities that exist in many native cultures. The term *two-spirit* is often attributed to Elder Myra Laramee, who proposed its use in 1990 during the Third Annual Intertribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian American Conference. There is not one single definition of *two-spirit*, and Indigenous populations may also have terms in their own languages for their two-spirit members. *Two-spirit* replaced the term *berdache*, which had been negatively used by colonizers and white anthropologists to describe Indigenous people since at least the 1600s.⁸

There has been a growth of two-spirit community gatherings and activism in recent decades, with Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits (BAAITS) holding a large annual powwow since 2011 and aiming to “restore and recover the role of Two-Spirit people within the American Indian/First Nations community by creating a forum for the spiritual, cultural and artistic expression of Two-Spirit people.” Likewise, two-spirit activists were heavily involved in resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline and elsewhere; as two-spirit activist Jen Deerinwater wrote in 2018, “Reviving our stories, traditions, and roles as multi-gendered Indigenous people is how we resist our oppressors. It’s how we will overcome settler colonialism and complete the sacred circle.”⁹

Finally, there is a long history of women dressing as men to work in all-male professions, fight in all-male armies, or perhaps simply to live as their authentic selves. Charley Parkhurst, once described as “best whip in California,” was born as Charlotte Parkhurst in 1812, but lived and worked as a man for decades, not being discovered until Parkhurst’s death in 1879. Similarly,

Albert D. J. Cashier was born as Jennie Irene Hodgers in 1843, but adopted a male persona to enlist in the Union Army in 1862 and lived the rest of his life—more than 50 years—as a man.¹⁰ Were these two people trans? Unfortunately we can't go back and ask them, but that they both continued to live as men for much of their lives suggests a more nuanced and complex answer than that they were simply women who wanted to work in male professions. (As a side note, it is recommended to not use a trans person's given name—sometimes referred to as a “deadname”—when referring to them. Because we don't know how Parkhurst or Cashier identified, we used both their given and chosen names.)

Looking specifically at language, the pioneering German sex and gender researcher Magnus Hirschfeld didn't create the term *transsexualismus* until 1923. The term was later Anglicized to *transsexualism* and *transsexual* by David Oliver Cauldwell in 1949 and 1950, while the word *transgender* didn't appear until 1965, when Dr. John Oliven argued that being trans was about more than just sexuality and that the term *transsexual* was too limiting.¹¹ Since then, there has been a rise in terms like *trans*, *genderqueer*, *gender fluid*, *non-binary*, and the many other ways to describe the complicated experiences of living in a gendered body.

Trans Joy

“Being part of the transgender community makes me feel not alone because I know there are other people like me.”

—Griffin (she/her), 12

Language has changed, is changing, and will continue to change. While this ever-changing landscape can make it difficult to apply modern ideas of gender and identity to historical figures, we must also avoid the trap of thinking that trans or LGBTQ people didn't exist in the past simply because the language we use today was not yet invented.

(Some of) The Many Ways to Be Trans

So what do these historical terms, identities, and experiences teach us about trans people in the United States today?

First and foremost, they remind us that there is no One Right Way to Be Trans. Indeed, there are as many ways to be trans as there are members of the trans community. Some transgender people know from a very young age, as early as three or four, that their gender is somehow different from what the world seems to expect of them. Some people realize they're trans in adolescence, or around puberty. And some people don't discover their trans identity until well into adulthood.

Likewise, some trans people undergo medical procedures—hormones or surgery—to alter their body. Other trans people don't. Some trans people only change their name with friends and family, others legally change their name in court, and some trans people don't change their name at all. It's impossible to tell if someone is trans just by looking at them or by how they act. After all, if there's no One Right Way to Be Trans, there's also no one right way to look or act trans, either.

Just like there is no One Right Way to Be Trans, there is also no Hierarchy of Transness. That is, no trans person is any more trans or less trans than someone else. Realizing you're trans at an early age isn't better or worse than realizing you're trans later in life, just different. Likewise, specific interests or types of expression don't mean someone is more or less trans, or more or less of a "real" man, woman, or anything else. Similar to any other community, the trans community has people who like sports and people who don't, people who like makeup and jewelry and people who don't, people who want to be out and loud and proud and people who prefer to be quiet and far from the center of attention.

The same is true, then, of the needs of trans students. While there are overarching themes and similarities among the needs of trans students, this book can only provide guidance on what trans students require in general to be supported in school and to thrive as their authentic selves. We can't tell you what your

specific students want and need. With that in mind, we encourage you to work with your students to determine their priorities, ask families what help they need, and evaluate your education community to find the approaches that will work best for your unique community.

Trans Joy

“I’d say my favorite part of my trans identity is that it’s mine! It’s a part of me and I wear it openly and proudly.”

—Kameron (he/him), 17¹²

How Many Trans Students Are There?

“When I first started my research career, I couldn’t focus on trans youth. It wasn’t even a possibility to only focus on trans youth. All of the scholarship at that time focused on LGBT youth; we didn’t have nuances. As a young trans scholar coming into the field, I annoyed everybody by being like, ‘Well, wait, no, this is different for trans kids [than for cis kids].’”

—Russ Toomey (he/they), Professor of Human Development and Family Science at the University of Arizona

Researching LGBTQ+ populations can be difficult for a number of reasons, including a lack of questions about sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) on many existing large-scale population surveys (e.g., regular surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Commerce or Department of Labor) and a lack of SOGI data in many existing administrative systems (e.g., a school district’s student record database).¹³

Surveying young people is also tricky: conducting research on minors generally requires parental consent, young people

are more difficult than adults to reach via landline phones, reaching cellphones is often harder and more expensive than calling landlines, and online surveys of youth often require a parent or guardian to start the survey and then hand it off to the young person. Some youth may also simply lie when surveyed, either because they are not comfortable sharing personal information with adults or simply because youth sometimes lie when taking surveys.¹⁴ (One of the authors of this book definitely remembers lying on surveys she was given as a high school student!)

This lack of data is slowly changing, however. Massachusetts, for example, conducts a biannual Youth Risk Behavior Survey. In 2021, the most recent year for which data is available, that survey found that 5% of Massachusetts youth identified as transgender or said they were questioning their gender identity.¹⁵ Likewise, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been asking young people about sexual orientation in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey since 2015, but will be adding a question about gender identity beginning in 2023. CDC researcher Dr. Kathleen Ethier, whose work is discussed in the Introduction, is excited to “finally have national data on trans youth [via the Youth Risk Behavior Survey], which will be fabulous.”

But even with the limited data we have, it's clear that the existence of transgender youth is not a new phenomenon. As is discussed in the Introduction, transgender people have always existed, even if the word *transgender* did not yet exist. Still, the number of young people identifying as trans is on the rise, as are the number of young people identifying as part of the broader LGBTQ community.¹⁶ This has resulted in anti-trans voices claiming that children are being fooled or tricked or peer pressured into being trans. To show why this fear is unfounded, we need to take a brief detour to discuss left- and right-handedness. Author and researcher Julia Serano explained it like this:

During the twentieth century, in many Western countries, there was a precipitous rise in left-handedness. For instance, in Australia, the prevalence of left-handed people increased from 2.0 percent to a whopping 13.2 percent! Apparently, a social contagion

swept through these nations, and children suddenly began feeling peer pressure to experiment with handedness and to adopt left-handed identities. Then, the left-handed deviants began pushing their “left-hander agenda” in order to recruit . . . oh, wait, sorry, that’s not what happened at all.

In actuality, left-handedness (like being transgender) is a part of human variation—both are pan-cultural trans-historical phenomena. In the case of left-handedness, roughly 10 to 12 percent of children inexplicably express this tendency from as early as infancy. In the beginning of the twentieth century, there was intense stigma targeting left-handedness, which led parents and schools to force all children to be right-handed, often against their intrinsic preferences (this still happens in many places). But eventually, there was a realization that this stigma was unnecessary and unfair, and people started letting children decide for themselves which hands to use. In other words, there wasn’t really a rise in left-handedness so much as there was a rise in left-handed acceptance.

Granted, it’s not a perfect analogy. For starters, I highly doubt that 10 to 12 percent of the population is predisposed toward being transgender! Also, it appears that children who display early left-handed tendencies can often be trained to use (perhaps even favor) their right hands without experiencing overwhelming dysphoria. (In contrast, we know from the countless trans narratives that I alluded to earlier, the same is not true for many trans people who are forced to adopt an unwanted gender.) Despite these differences, this parallel does hold true in the following sense: you don’t need to concoct half-assed theories to explain the mysterious appearance of transgender children. All you need to do is recognize that we have always existed. It’s just that we were long rendered invisible via stigma, punishment, and ostracization.¹⁷

Dr. Kristina Olson, an academic researcher with Princeton's TransYouth Project, has uncovered some of the best available evidence that trans youth absolutely know who they are:

It's funny, I always say our main findings from [the TransYouth Project] are things that, if you know trans youth, are basically “duh” findings. But I'll repeat them, because sometimes there are points in which it is useful to have a scientific citation to say something that folks already know.

One [finding] is that a youth cohort who identify [as genders other than the ones they were assigned at birth] very, very early in development—almost all by the age of four—the majority of those kids are very consistent in their gender identity. Our latest data are five years out from social transition, and we see that more than 90% identify still as binary trans youth, about 3.5% as non-binary youth (which for some of them felt like a change, or some of them didn't feel like a change [but] is a better label).

Only about 2.5% are identifying as cisgender today, which we tend to refer as having “*re-transitioned*,” without the loaded onus of the word *de-transition*. And we're still following them; our goal is to follow them for 20 years.

So one [finding] is the general consistency of identity, with the recognition that that's obviously not going to be true for everyone.

Ultimately, researchers estimate that, out of every 100 young people in the United States, at least one or two are transgender. Specifically, a Williams Institute study found that 1.43% of 13- to 17-year-olds identify as trans, while a study from the CDC found an average of 1.8% of high school students identify as trans.¹⁸ This means that there are hundreds of thousands of trans youth across the United States, in every city and state—if your school has 500 students, it's likely that at least a handful of them are trans (see Figure 1.2).

How Many Adults and Youth Identify as Transgender in the United States?| 10

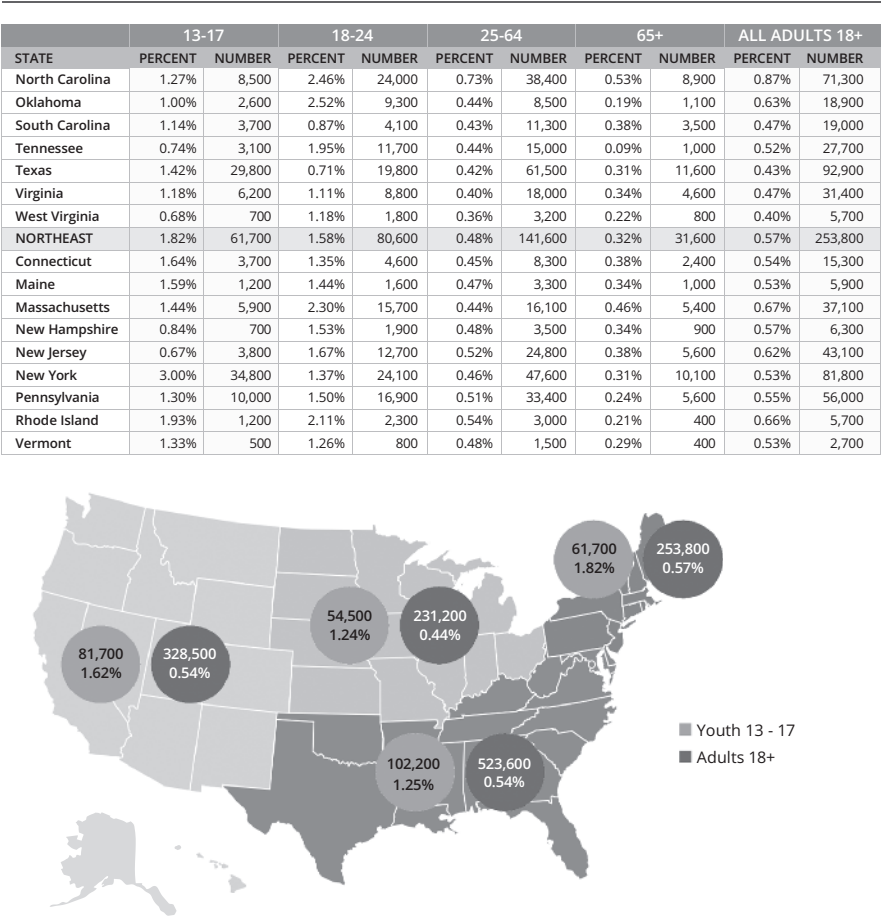


FIGURE 1.2 U.S. youth who identify as transgender.

Source: The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. For the complete chart of state population breakdowns, visit <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/subpopulations/transgender-people/>

Putting It into Practice

Following are scenarios to consider about addressing real-world challenges and personal reflection questions to ask yourself. We encourage you to take some time to reflect and catch your breath before taking action.

Personal Reflection Questions

1. What training or education, if any, did you receive about how to support trans students?
2. What new information did you learn from this chapter? What did you already know?
3. Was any of the background information surprising to you? Was there anything you disagreed with?

Addressing Real-World Challenges

1. Let's say you're a classroom teacher and the principal says there are no transgender students in the school and therefore you don't need professional development about supporting them. Using this chapter as evidence, what could you say to your principal? Alternatively, let's say you're a school leader and the district notes that this is not a population that needs additional focus in your area. What might you say?
2. Given your current role and situation, what real-world challenges does this chapter bring up for you in your community? How might you approach those challenges? What resources currently exist from your school/district/board of education to handle these challenges?
3. If your current role changed, how would your thoughts on these challenges change? Think about how you might answer differently as a classroom teacher, a school principal, a district administrator, and so on.

Notes

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