

## Lesson 6: “Under the Radar: Identity Politics and “Passing”

### Summary

Students will learn about Billy Tipton, an American jazz musician and bandleader. He was born Dorothy Lucille Tipton. After his death, Billy was discovered to be female assigned at birth. Students will discuss whether you can be both out and “in the closet” and debate whether it was okay for Billy Tipton’s family to “out” him as trans\* after his death.

**Materials:** Index cards

### Goals:

1. Students will gain an understanding of social and individual constructed identities

### Objectives:

1. Students will discuss the differences between being “out” as a LGBTQ person versus a trans\* person and debate the idea of “passing” as a particular gender identity, sexual orientation, etc.

### Session Outline

1. **Opening Essential Question:** Do you think LGBT people should always “come out”?
  - Ask this question to the entire group, and either answer around the circle or as a “pair share.”
2. **Activity Preparation**
  - Before the meeting, prepare index cards that list various intersectional identity categories. Suggested topics: biracial, transgender, learning dis/abled, lesbian, gay, immigrant, autistic, muslim, low-income, bisexual, hiv-positive, jewish, latina/o, queer, low-income, wealthy, christian, liberal, republican
3. **Identity Card Activity:**
  - such as “mixed race, transgender, dis/abled, Muslim, etc.” (see list below).
  - Give each student a card. Ask students whether they would or wouldn’t want to “pass” if they were the person described on the card. Students should also discuss whether or not choosing to disclose that someone is mixed race, disabled or LGBT really means that they are trying to “pass” as something else. *(Note: the term “passing” refers to a person’s attempt to appear that s/he may not be part of a particular group. For example, an LGBTQ person who is attempting to “pass” may be trying to appear straight to avoid discrimination.)*
4. **Discussion Questions**
  - Of the identities assigned to group members, which would be the easiest to live as? The most difficult? Which ones would most tempt you to try to “pass” as something else? Why?
  - Think about the cards that were distributed. Why might a person with this identity want to “pass?” Why might they want to be “out?”
  - Think about the identities on the cards. What qualities might some of these identities display that would make it difficult for them to “pass?” Should these qualities be sources of pride or shame? Should they be hidden?

- If someone chooses not to disclose that they are LGBT (or another identity), does that mean they are trying to “pass?” Does this indicate shame?
- **Role Model (Optional):** Ask the role model to briefly share their coming out story and opinions about the coming out process.

**Consider asking the role model to briefly address the following questions:**

- Briefly tell the group about your coming out experience.
- Why did you decide to come out?
- Tell a story about a time when you tried to “pass.” Are there still times when you feel the need to “pass”?

**Divide the group into two “teams” for a debate**

- Focus of the debate is whether LGBT people have an obligation to “come out.” One team should be given the position that LGBTQ people show their pride by coming out and have an obligation to our community to be out and proud. The other team will argue that no harm is done when LGBTQ people choose to “stay in.”
- Encourage the groups to discuss the concepts of “passing” and “outing” during their arguments.

**The role model may use the following questions during the debate:**

- Does anyone ever have an obligation to tell someone else that they are LGBT?
- Do you think Billy Tipton was lying to his family by not “coming out” as trans\* or was he just being himself by living his life as a man?
- If you were a mixed race person who looks “white” or a student with a learning disability who doesn’t “seem” disabled, should you tell people you are?