

Lesson 5: Grades 10 & Up

Understanding Gender Identity

Overview

In this lesson students learn about gender identity and explore the impact of rigid gender role expectations and stereotypes. Using various media—an audio interview and a video of a spoken word performance—transgender people and issues are personalized and clarified for students. Students then discuss real-life scenarios depicting conflicts around gender expression in school settings, and brainstorm ways to be an ally to transgender and gender non-conforming people.

[NOTE: This lesson explores LGBT issues in an open and direct way. Given the absence of this topic in the curriculum and the disproportionate rates of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment, it is important to educate students about these issues. When discussing any new or sensitive topic, however, there is the potential for some students to react in stereotypical or disrespectful ways. It is therefore imperative that educators carefully review the lesson, assess students' maturity and readiness to engage in the lesson prior to implementation, and establish clear parameters with students that will ensure safe and constructive dialogue. See "[Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#)" and "[Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment](#)" for guidelines on building safe forums for discussing sensitive issues.]

Objectives

- Students will increase their understanding of concepts related to gender identity.
- Students will learn new vocabulary and clarify their understanding of terminology related to transgender issues.
- Students will increase their awareness about gender related stereotypes and discrimination.
- Students will explore ways to be an ally to others.

Time

1½–2 hours or 2–3 class periods

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- Jamison Green [Interview Backgrounder](#) (one copy) and student reading (one per student)
- *Hir*, spoken word performance video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmfkdOAq-xk (2½ mins., Brave New Voices)
- [Hir](#) poem (one per student)
- [Gender Identity and Expression Scenarios](#) (one scenario per small group)
- [How to be an Ally to Transgender People](#) (one per student)

Other Material:

- Unheard Voices [audio interviews and transcripts](#) and [interview backgrounders](#)
- Chart paper, markers, tape, scissors
- SMART Board or computer/projector/screen, speakers

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Prepare to play audio and video pieces (see Part I #1 and Part III #2).
- Chart definitions, continuum and quote (see Part I #2, Part II #1 and Part III #1).
- Cut Scenarios into separate strips (see Part III #4).

Key Words

Advocate
 Ally
 Assume/assumption
 Attire
 Conform
 Continuum
 Discrimination
 Gender expression
 Gender identity
 Gender-neutral
 Harassment
 Intersex
 LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender)
 Prejudice
 Sexual orientation
 Stereotype
 Transgender
 Transition
 Transphobia
 Transsexual

Techniques and Skills

analyzing media, brainstorming, case study, connecting past to present, cooperative group work, critical thinking, forming opinions, historical understanding, large and small group discussion, listening skills, reading skills, social action, writing skills

Procedures

Part I: Jamison's Story (20–40 minutes)

1. Tell students they will listen to an audio [interview](#) and provide the following introduction:

Jamison Green is an activist and writer who has worked on behalf of transgender men and women for more than 20 years. Jamison transitioned from female to male in 1988. Here, he speaks with his daughter, Morgan Green, about what life was like for him as a child.

2. After students have listened, process Jamison's story using the discussion questions found in the [backgrounder](#) that accompanies the [interview](#).

Optional: If time allows, have students read and discuss the handout about Jamison Green included in the interviewee's backgrounder. This can be done individually, in small groups or as a whole class.

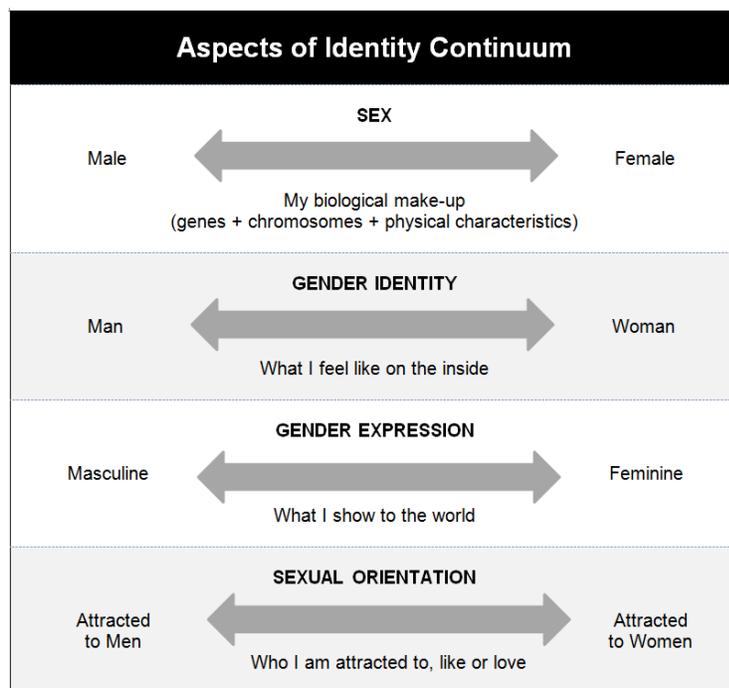
3. Note that the terms transgender and transsexual are both used to refer to Jamison. Clarify that transgender is a broad term that includes transsexual people (i.e., all transsexual people are transgender, but not all transgender people are transsexual). Post and review the following terms and definitions, and make sure that students understand their meaning.

Transgender: Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transsexual: An older term for people whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex at birth who seek to transition from male to female or female to male. Many do not prefer this term because it is thought to sound overly clinical.

Part II: Aspects of Identity (15 minutes)

1. Copy the continuum pictured here on a sheet of chart paper or the board, and post where all students can see it.
2. Draw students' attention to the continuum. Explain that most people understand gender and sexual identity as consisting of two categories—male or female, gay or straight—and that most people feel as though they fit into one of those “boxes.”
3. Point out that for the majority of people, their identities line up along the left or right side of this chart. While pointing to the left side of the chart, tell students that most people born biologically male (sex) feel like a man inside (gender identity), dress and act in a masculine way (gender expression) and are attracted to women (sexual orientation). While pointing to the right side of the chart, tell students that most people born biologically female (sex) feel like a woman inside (gender identity), dress and act in a feminine way (gender expression) and are attracted to men (sexual orientation).
4. Add that for some people, their identities don't line up as neatly. For example, Jamison Green was born biologically female (sex) but felt like a man inside (gender identity), dressed and acted in a masculine way



(gender expression) and was attracted to women (sexual orientation). Conclude that to make things even more complicated, some people don't feel that they fit in either "box," but somewhere in the middle or outside the continuum. For example, some people feel neither male nor female, express themselves in both masculine and feminine ways, or feel attracted to both sexes.

- Acknowledge that these aspects of our identity are complex and can be confusing. Ask students to silently reflect on where they fit on each continuum, emphasizing that they may find themselves in a different place for each category. Answer any questions students may have and help to clarify any misperceptions about these aspects of identity.

NOTE: During this discussion, students should not be asked to disclose any aspect of their identity and should be discouraged from labeling others in any way.

Part III: The Impact of Rigid Notions about Gender Identity (45–60 minutes)

- Post or read aloud the following quote from the young adult novel, *Parrotfish*, by Ellen Wittlinger:

People changed their hair and dieted themselves down to near death. They took steroids to build muscles and got breast implants and nose jobs so they resemble their favorite movie stars. They changed names and majors and jobs and husbands and wives. They changed religions and political parties. They move across the country or the world—even changed nationalities. Why was gender the one sacred thing we weren't supposed to change? Who made that rule?

Allow students to react to the quote. Ask them what they think the rules are with regard to gender in their community (or society at large), who creates and enforces those rules, and what the consequences are for people who break the rules.

- Tell students that you will show them the video of a spoken word performance that explores the experience of a transgender student who feels imprisoned by "the rules" of gender. Play [Hir](#) by Alysia Harris and Aysha El Shamayleh. Optionally, distribute the [handout](#) with the text of the poem as a reference for students. After they have listened, discuss some of the following questions with them.
 - Who is Melissa? Why is she described as "not here" and "not what she seems"? Why doesn't Melissa want to be noticed?
 - Who is James? Why is he described as an "abstract reality"? Why does James go unnoticed by others?
 - Why does Melissa feel "trapped in the flesh of a stranger"? What does she do to try and free herself?
 - How do the people in Melissa's/James' environment add to those feelings of being trapped? Is there anything that they could do to lessen those feelings?

NOTE: The poem, "Hir," is part of HBO's *Brave New Voices* (www.bravenewvoices.org). As of this writing, the video is available on multiple sites, including www.youtube.com, www.dailymotion.com, www.vbox7.com and www.zootool.com.

- Following on the last discussion prompt above, highlight that when people express their gender in ways that fall outside community norms, they often face obstacles and resistance. Tell students that they will spend some time considering how some of those barriers might be removed. Divide the class into six groups and have each group select a recorder and a reporter. Provide each group with a sheet of chart paper and a marker.
- Assign each group a case study from [Gender Identity and Expression Scenarios](#) and provide them with the relevant scenario. Explain that these are real-life situations that have been "ripped from the headlines." Direct each group to read their scenario and discuss the questions below. Have the recorder write down the group's responses to the third question only. Allow 10–15 minutes for group discussion.
 - How was gender expression obstructed by community members or barriers in the physical environment?
 - Were there ways in which gender expression was supported by community members or accommodations in the physical environment?
 - What more could have been done to support gender expression? (Think about people's behavior, school rules/policies and changes to the environment.)
- Reconvene the class and post each group's chart. Have the reporters read aloud their scenario and share some of the ideas they charted. After all groups have shared, ask the class for additional ideas about ways to support gender expression in general and chart their responses.

6. Conclude the lesson by distributing the handout, [*How to be an Ally to Transgender People*](#), and reviewing the points that are most relevant to your community.

Hir

Poem by Alysia Harris and Aysha El Shamayleh

Melissa sits in the back of the classroom afraid to speak up.
She pulls awkwardly at her extra loose khaki cargo pants.
She doesn't want the boys to notice her.
James finds himself at the back of a classroom.
His baseball cap casts a shadow on his pimple stained forehead.
A wide shirt hangs on his broad shoulders,
But no one ever noticed him.

Melissa,

The teacher asks,
And she says nothing because she is not here,
And Melissa has never been here,
Because Melissa is just some abstract jumble of syllables that doesn't fit her position.
She is not what she seems,
She doesn't want to have to explain to her mother for the 232nd time why she doesn't want to wear a dress to prom,
Doesn't paint her face, it's 'cause her whole body is painted on.

Melissa, Melissa.

James doesn't want to have to explain where he came from,
'Cause with the exception of Melissa he has been deemed an abstract reality by everyone.
All he wishes for is to get to wear a tuxedo to prom.
And Melissa's been tucking in breasts that'll be growing for three years now,
Been using duct tape to press them down and mold them more into pecs.
She just wishes that people would understand that at birth her genitals didn't know which way to grow,
Mad at God who couldn't relay a message directly to her hormones that they should produce more testosterone.
The only person who understands her is James,
And they have been playmates since the age of four,
Around the time girls notice boys and boys notice girls.
See, James' family wanted daughters instead of sons,
And Melissa was always like that male beetle that everyone called a ladybug.

Melissa, Melissa, where is she?

Sometimes she wishes she could rip the skin off her back,
Every moment of everyday she feels trapped in the flesh of a stranger.

Melissa.

As she stands to her feet wanting to say
“I’m here, and I’ve been here since I was born, so quit asking me if I’m a him or a her,
‘Cause when you combine the two pronouns you get H.I.R, Hir,
And God combined the two genders and put me in this body transgendered.
I’m here, so quit talking about me like I’m not here.”
James falls back into Melissa’s skin,
And the two comfort each other in syncopated heartbeats,
Waiting for the day when Melissa can finally scrub off this made up genetic makeup,
When the teacher asks for James and he can say “I’m here.”

“Hir” is part of HBO’s *Brave New Voices*, www.bravenewvoices.org.

Gender Identity and Expression Scenarios

1. When 17-year-old Ceara—an honor student, trumpet player and goalie on her school’s soccer team in Mississippi—wore a tuxedo for her senior photograph, school officials sent her a letter stating that only boys could wear tuxedos. “I feel like I’m not important,” commented Ceara, “that the school is dismissing who I am as a gay student and that they don’t even care about me. All I want is to be able to be me, and to be included in the yearbook.” Ceara’s mother, who claims there are no regulations about the issue in the student handbook, says, “The tux is who she is. She wears boys’ clothes. She’s athletic. She’s gay. She’s not feminine.”
2. When Justin, an 11th-grader in Florida, showed up at school in female attire—including high heel boots, earrings and make-up—he was called into a meeting with the school principal and asked to leave school for the day. “It wasn’t anything overdramatic,” Justin said of his attire. “It’s an expression of yourself, no matter what. To dress out of your own gender shouldn’t be anything.” Justin’s principal disagreed. “He and I had a conversation about what reaction he would get from peers,” she said. “A decision was made that it would be best for him to go home. This was a group decision after healthy conversation. There was no kind of animosity. Discipline wasn’t the tone of the conversation.” A spokesperson for the school district said school administrators are permitted to call a student out on his dress if they feel his clothing is “inappropriate” and “disrupts the school process.” The County Code of Student Conduct states students must dress “in keeping with their gender.”
3. A family in Maine sued the local school district for discrimination after they prohibited a sixth grade male-to-female transgender student from using the girl’s bathroom. The parents of the child said that she experienced anxiety and depression after school officials forced her to use a gender-neutral bathroom and her peers picked on her. The school stated that they accommodated the child by training the staff, educating the students and giving the transgender student her own bathroom and locker room. This was done in response to reports of mean comments from other students and after one boy followed the transgender student into the girl’s room and harassed her by calling her “faggot.” The family feels that their child should be able to use the bathroom that matches her gender identity without harassment, and that the private bathroom only serves to isolate and alienate her from the other students.
4. Andii said she “was in shock” when she was crowned prom queen at her Florida high school. A transgender student who has gone by the names Andii and Andrew, she says she doesn’t identify completely as either a female or male, and her parents still refer to her as a male. Andii fought to get her name on the prom queen ballot after other students who didn’t feel she had the right to compete started a petition against her. In response to students who say that Andii could run for prom king, she says, “Why would I run for prom king? I’ll have to wear a tux, which I’m not going to do. I’m going to wear an evening gown.” Andii received the most votes over 14 girls for the title at her school.
5. Kevin—who likes to be called “K.K.”—was refused entrance to her senior prom when she arrived wearing a pink ankle-length gown. The Indiana high school senior—who describes herself as “an African-American transgender person whose sex is male but whose expression of gender is female”—filed a lawsuit saying the school trampled on her right to free expression and to be free from discrimination. The lawsuit says that K.K. frequently wore women’s clothing, jewelry and make-up to school, and that nearly all of the students and teachers supported her identity, including when she appeared at pep rallies as a member of the high school drill team. Although K.K. had an assistant principal’s permission to wear a dress to the prom, the school principal said she could only wear a pant-suit. When prom night came, the principal physically blocked K.K. from entering the building. The school district’s attorney stated that the lawsuit “has failed to identify how a male student has a constitutionally protected right to wear a dress to a prom.” K.K.’s attorney stated, “What should have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for [K.K.] to share memories with friends before graduation became an episode in humiliation and exclusion.”

6. Aaron, a senior at a New Jersey university, started transitioning from female to male during high school. As college approached, Aaron felt concerned he would have difficulty living with a female roommate since he does not identify as a female despite what his records indicate. After contacting the school's Residence Life office, Aaron was placed in a double converted into a single in a dorm known for being a safe place for LGBT students. Aaron said he spent most of his first year alone. "When you're gender non-conforming, it's very easy to keep the door shut." Despite keeping to himself, when some in Aaron's building found out about his gender identity, they reacted negatively. Aaron says it is often difficult for transgender students to feel accepted. On campus, he has experienced verbal abuse. "It's kind of a daily fear that you live with." Aaron now advocates for gender-neutral housing, where men and women can reside together if they choose. More than 50 U.S. universities currently have gender-neutral residence hall options.

How to Be an Ally to Transgender People

1. Don't assume you can tell what gender a person is, what bathroom they belong in or what pronoun they go by simply by appearance. Avoid assigning labels, identities or categories to people based on your perceptions or what you've heard from others.
2. Use pronouns that reflect people's gender presentation, not their biological sex (e.g., use "he" for someone born female but who identifies and expresses himself as male). If you are uncertain which pronoun to use, ask in a respectful way. Be aware that some people prefer gender neutral pronouns (hir instead of his/her; sie or zi instead of he/she). Never call transgender people "it," "he-she," "she-male" or other insulting names.
3. Use gender-neutral language when possible, such as partner or spouse instead of boyfriend/girlfriend or husband/wife; and try to opt for terms like police officer or member of Congress rather than policeman or Congressman.
4. Be aware of evolving language around gender and try to use the most current and respectful terms. For example, cross-dresser (not transvestite), intersex (not hermaphrodite) and transition (not sex-change) are preferable.
5. Don't ask transgender people their "real name," birth-assigned name or ask to see photos of them as a boy (if they now identify as female) or a girl (if they now identify as male). Transgender people should not be expected to satisfy your curiosity about their past.
6. Don't describe transgender people as trendy, exotic or cool, even if you mean it as a compliment. Transgender people are simply trying to live as their true selves. No person should ever be made to feel like a curiosity, freak or token.
7. Don't assume that transgender people are gay or lesbian, or that they transition to become straight. Gender identity and sexual orientation are separate identities. Transgender people may be gay, bisexual or straight, just like anyone else.
8. Don't assume anything about a transgender person's transition process. Some people take hormones or get surgery as part of their process, but many don't. In any case, transition is a personal subject, and information about anatomy and sexuality should be considered private.
9. Avoid questioning or policing other people's restroom usage or choices. Since restrooms are often the site of harassment, challenge negative remarks from others and offer to escort a transgender friend to the bathroom if that will provide an extra level of safety.
10. Never gossip about or share the identity of a transgender person, even if you think their status is evident. Coming out is a personal process that should be determined by the individual rather than spread through rumor. If a friend comes out to you, be open, supportive and non-judgmental.
11. Challenge your own ideas about gender roles and expectations by reading, talking to others and educating yourself. Think expansively about gender and be open to new ideas and ways of thinking about the issue.
12. Don't stand for jokes or rude remarks about transgender people. Challenge prejudice in yourself and others, and show friendship and support to those who are targeted by transphobia.
13. Work to change the policies and the environment in your school or community to be more transgender-friendly. Advocate for safe restrooms and locker rooms, inclusive language on forms and records, anti-bullying and other policies that include gender identity, and school traditions (e.g., yearbook, prom) that don't discriminate on the basis of gender expression.