

# Race in the classroom

*Examining the challenges of teaching race, especially in biology class, and how students are affected by these conversations and discussions*

By Jesse Hausknecht-Brown

Teachers and students often feel as though conversations about race can be difficult to navigate in a classroom environment. However, these discussions can influence students' views of race and racial issues.

"I think there's always room for conversation about any topic—especially race. With how things are nowadays, I think it's important that we bring up race and racial issues and have [that] discussion," Millie Garcia '21 said.

Garcia enjoys having the opportunity to talk about race in her classes and thinks that teachers should encourage these conversations.

"I think that there is value in learning about culture and race, especially if it's tied to the curriculum," Dolores Silva, a Spanish teacher at City High, said.

Silva acknowledges that some people do not want to talk about race in their classrooms.

"I can understand that some people don't feel equipped to address something like [race], much less teach it," Silva said. "But I think that being honest, sometimes vulnerable, can be more helpful than turning a blind eye to it."

The curriculum for the Spanish classes discusses cultural and racial issues that come up in the culture-related part of the class.

"The class itself and the curriculum that we do for culture kind of lends itself to [talking about race] automatically, so it's not like I want to, [but] I have to be able to [in order to] explain certain traditions, cultural behaviors and expectations," Silva said.

Jill Humston, who teaches AP Biology

at City High, makes an effort to include race and gender in her lessons.

"I make comments about how all humans are similar, how similar our DNA is [and] how similar we are to each other and how one or two changes to a gene is what can cause the change to a feature," Humston said.

When teaching the human evolution unit, Humston likes to highlight how all humans originated from the same place and how, as they spread out across the world, their traits and features changed.

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CITY HIGH SPANISH TEACHER

"When we do human evolution, I feel like it's really important to talk about how the whole planet has been filled with humans that are all originating from the same place," Humston said. "As people moved and migrated around the planet, they evolved and changed just like every other species or plant or animal on the planet. Moving into a new environment allows for other traits to become advantages."

Garcia took biology as a ninth grader, and experienced race being talked about in a similar way.

"In my science classes, [teachers talk] about how race scientifically doesn't exist, it's just something made up by society," Garcia said.

Silva ties her personal experiences into the curriculum of her Spanish classes and is able to share a different perspective on the culture section of the class.

"I enjoy my teaching because I have obviously a lot of background experience," Silva said. "Sometimes I feel like everybody knows what I feel and think, but then I look at your faces I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, no, they don't get it', because they haven't experienced this."

Garcia is appreciative of the teachers at City High for allowing students to have con-

versations about race when they come up in the class.

"I think we're lucky that City High teachers let us have conversations about [race]," Garcia said.

Garcia noticed that race is talked about most often in her English classes when it comes up in the curriculum, but discussions unrelated to the class are uncommon.

"Do I think [these conversations about race] are productive? Not really, because I feel like it's the same conversation over and over again," Garcia said. "But I'm glad that we have the opportunity to talk about race."

In her AP Biology class, Humston places an emphasis on the ways that historically, women and people of color have been either forced out of scientific fields or not gotten credit for their work in the field.

"[White men] were running the lab, and they had women and scientists of color doing the work but never getting the credit for it, and a lot of times that was probably the case," Humston said. "We end up with these stories like 'Hidden Figures,' [where] these women were doing amazing things, but nobody knew about it."

All AP Biology students read a book from a carefully curated list over the summer before they take the class.

"Guns, Germs and Steel" was one of them. I would love it if everybody read that one and I would love it if everybody read [The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks]," Humston said. "If I could get those two books read by every biology student, [that would be good, because] they address inequality in medicine."

As a teacher, Silva thinks that it is important to reach out to her students and make connections with them.

"Sometimes we feel uncomfortable about topics or things that are unknown to us," Silva said. "That shouldn't be a barrier for us to reach the child. We should also look at it as it's not our identity that we're changing or hindering, but that we're trying to support someone else's."

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of the 2015-16 school year, 80 percent of teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools were white. This is problematic because, according to The New York Times, students perform better academically when they have teachers of the same race or gender as them.

"As a white lady, I don't experience [racism], but it's my job and everyone's job to speak out against it, when we see it," Humston said. "Giving students the vocabulary or tools to be anti-racist [is important]."

Humston acknowledges that she is not perfect, but is always trying to get better.

"We're fighting a history that we didn't build," Humston said. "So how do we break that history in a system that we didn't build,

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but how do we break it because it is such a system? I guess I'm not sure how to do that. There are ways that we can do a better job and I want to try for sure."

Humston expressed frustration with the current

environment regarding race, gender, and sexuality issues in America.

"I think I'm really hopeful that students of this generation are going to be the ones that help the grown-ups [make change]," Humston said. "I want all of these changes to happen, but I'm seeing your generation be the most vocal and the most outspoken and the ones that are going to force that change that has to happen."



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