



TEACHERS NEED TO TALK DIRECTLY ABOUT RACE AND GENDER IF THEY WANT TO DO A BETTER JOB OF EDUCATING STUDENTS, BLACK AND LATINO MALES, IN PARTICULAR.

LOOK TO TODAY TO TEACH ABOUT RACE

BY LINDA K. WERTHEIMER

THE STUDENTS in Malcolm Cawthorne's African-American studies class at Brookline High School were divided. In Baltimore, rioters were setting cars on fire and burning down drugstores in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death from injuries received in police custody. Some students struggled to understand how people could wreck their own community. Others, speaking with emotion, questioned how anyone could not grasp the hopelessness many African-Americans felt.

When a student called the rioters "degenerates," the teacher interceded. "I said, 'Do you really believe that? So everybody who does that is a criminal?'" recalls Cawthorne, who has taught social studies for 17 years at Brookline High School.

Cawthorne, who is African-American, has never shied away from teaching about race issues highlighted by current events. This year, he added a sophomore elective called Racial Awareness and recruited a white colleague to co-teach the class because he wanted students to realize that whites also view talking about race as a priority. But now

Cawthorne is being joined by more educators, administrators, and education researchers around the nation pushing to make teaching about race a higher priority, particularly in required social studies classes that have traditionally wrapped up somewhere around the Civil Rights era.

Only recently has race begun taking a larger role in regular social studies classes, mostly due to news events, including the Baltimore riots and the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African-American shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. "Kids are hungry, and they want to know why this is happening: Why are so many blacks being shot by white police officers?" says Kaylene Stevens, the department chairwoman of history and social science at Framingham High School.

Some teachers are equipped to react, but others are not. In Boston Public Schools—where 41 percent of the 54,000 students are Hispanic, 34 percent are African-American, and 8.5 percent are Asian American—a report in April urged city teachers and administrators to stop using a

"color-blind" approach in the classroom. Rather, teachers need to talk directly about race and gender if they want to do a better job of educating students, black and Latino males, in particular, according to the study. The school system is now providing more training on cultural competence, hoping to help teachers feel more comfortable teaching about race.

Boston also is working to fill what textbooks lack, teaching more about the role of African-Americans and other racial and ethnic groups in history. This year, the social studies department is focusing on helping teachers understand the diversity of the student body, says Kerry Dunne, the school system's director of history and social studies. The Boston Public School system has set up 14 walking tours and historical site visits to highlight different racial and ethnic groups in the city. It also has created units that link the 1970s protests over Boston's busing to more contemporary racial challenges here.

Meanwhile, fear of teaching and talking about race, particularly among white educators—who are

largely overrepresented in the teaching ranks of many schools—remains a persistent issue. While growing up, "I had been taught you don't see race. You don't talk about race. You just ignore it," says Framingham High's Stevens, who is white. "Then you're a teacher and you have all of these kids of different backgrounds, and it doesn't make sense."

Stevens doesn't deny the challenges for a mostly white teaching force often nervous about broaching the topic of race in the classroom. She used to be that way. The 34-year-old's wake-up call came her first year of teaching at Framingham in 2005, when she walked into the cafeteria and noticed that many kids of color were sitting at tables around the perimeter of the room and white students were sitting in the middle.

Since 2008, she has taught a unit about race in a sociology class. When she talks about white privilege, Stevens finds that some students, particularly working-class whites, bristle at the term. She responds with questions like this: "So if you're white, what is the color of Band-Aids?" White students often say flesh-colored and then realize that leaves out people of color.

State standards make the job harder for teachers, education researchers say, because they do not require teaching about contemporary race issues. "There is no curriculum. You need the support of your administration. You also need to not succumb to the testing culture," says Stevens. "Breaking stereotypes and reducing prejudice is not something you can measure on a state-mandated test."

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