ON PARENTING

My daughter’s imaginary Colonial town has a mosque. It led to an unexpected discussion.

Perspective by Cynthia Miller-Idriss
May 17, 2018 at 9:15 a.m. EDT

Original artwork. (Courtesy of the author)

The social studies assignment was straightforward: Imagine you are an apprentice in early America and draw a map of your Colonial town, complete with the locations of places you go regularly, such as a friend’s house, a general store and a church.

I started prepping dinner while my daughter pulled out a sleeve of colored pencils.

“I’m going to draw a mosque instead of a church,” she mentioned casually, rolling out a poster-size sheet of paper.

I stopped chopping. “Well,” I said gently, “it might be more accurate to draw a church. There weren’t many Muslims in New England then.”

As the only Muslim kid in her fourth-grade class, this didn’t strike her as surprising. But she looked up from the drawing anyway, slightly exasperated.

“Mama,” she said with a sigh, “it’s an *imaginary* map.”

Touché, I thought.

The power of representation

My daughter's words — and the importance of being able to imagine herself in Colonial America — stuck with me over the coming weeks.

Scores of research studies have shown how inadequate representation of diverse identities in curriculum — and in the media more generally — affects young people's confidence and ambitions. As the scholar and educator Laura Thomas explains, children's early experiences "shape what they imagine to be possible for people who look like them."

This realization has helped shift educational approaches to diversity and inclusion toward what we call "windows and mirrors" — referring to the need for children to have not only ways of seeing others' experiences but also mirrors that reflect their own reality.

American history curriculum has made progress on the "windows" side of curriculum, so that textbooks now narrate a more inclusive account of the nation's founding and regularly expose young people to diverse stories and perspectives. But too often, such perspectives are shared through the addition of celebratory, multicultural curriculum in separate, add-on units. These make for limited windows into others' lived experiences. And such activities don't automatically mean that young people see themselves reflected in the curriculum in everyday ways.

Some strategies to add "mirrors" to everyday school life are quite simple: using

diverse names in word problem examples, or assigning readings from authors of a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. But to truly develop curricular mirrors that reflect students' own reality, we have to dig deeper.

Teaching hard history

In units like the Colonial-era one, building in "mirrors" means tackling hard histories and finding age-appropriate ways to address the everyday, lived experience of slavery and indentured servitude as an integrated part of discussions of early American life.

Many teachers avoid discussions of hard history, especially in the early grades. When I asked my daughter whether her class had talked about the experience of African Americans in the Colonial unit, she was flummoxed. They had discussed slavery, she explained, but in a separate unit.

Her experience is typical. A report by the Southern Poverty Law Center argues that U.S. elementary curriculum about slavery often focuses on "feel-good" stories: Students learn a lot about Harriet Tubman and the underground railroad, the authors point out, but much less about the realities of slaves' lived experiences or the legacy of slavery for inequality and racism today.

Using lived experiences as the starting point would help reorient history curriculum in ways that investigate these harder aspects of history, while simultaneously opening up discussions of minority students' experiences today.

My daughter's map is a good example of how this can be done. A few days after she finished the map, she showed it to her grandfather, who is a retired minister with a doctorate in theology. "I know there weren't Muslims in Colonial America," she preemptively noted, unrolling the map.

"Actually," he interrupted, "there were." He explained that Muslims in early America were mostly slaves, which led to a deeper discussion about what it meant to be a person who didn't have the freedom to practice religion in early America.

This also led us to look into the early history of Islam in America. Some 10 to 15 percent of African slaves were Muslim, we discovered, many of whom were forced to convert to Christianity. Other Muslim immigrants arrived in the 18th and 19th centuries, especially from Syria and Lebanon, before wider Arab immigration arrived in the 20th century.

I wouldn't have learned any of this if my daughter hadn't insisted on her imaginary map.

By drawing a mosque on the town green, in fact, she transformed a simple assignment into something potentially much more meaningful, sparking a conversation about diversity and inclusion, the right to practice religion freely and the experience of being a minority, whether in Colonial America or in the United States today.

The fact that those discussions ended up only taking place around our dining room table, not at school, is a loss for her classmates. My daughter's map might have sparked class reflection in ways that deepened and extended student learning — and similar "mirrors" could do the same in units across the curriculum.

Rewriting history?

Is it rewriting history to draw a mosque on a town green? Conservative and

right-wing protesters — who have critiqued public school teachers for teaching about Islam and have raised concerns about the teaching of hard history more generally — might think so.

They would be wrong. My daughter knows there were no mosques in Colonial villages; she has a clear understanding of what the real history was and how her map differs from that. But her imaginary village included a place for her, too.

Sometimes, it's the students who teach the teachers. And sometimes, they teach their mamas something, too.

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*(*Correction: The Southern Poverty Law Center report was originally incorrectly attributed to the Institute of the Black World 21st Century.)*

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