



## How to Work with Your Children’s Teachers When You Have Questions About Their Assignments

September 15, 2021 by Educator Barnes

“Where are our ancestors from?” This was a question that came from one of my sons when I was on my way to drop off a clothing donation. I did not understand why I was being asked this question. After some follow up questions, I learned my sons were working on a project for school.

Since my sons are twins and are in the same class this year, his brother added that they had watched a video to learn about different cultures and traditions. Afterwards, they had to answer some questions about their culture, ancestry, and traditions. My son who had asked the question was frustrated because he could not answer the question. He shared that the teacher said he could skip it. His brother said he wrote down Africa and moved on. Not having a specific answer bothered one of my sons.

Here I was in the midst of finally getting rid of all their too little clothes, and I was asked this question. So many thoughts went through my mind on how to respond, so I went with the truth. So I asked, "Why are Black people in America?" My sons explained what they knew about American slavery. Then I asked, "What did enslaved Africans lose from being enslaved?" This question stumped my boys, so I said think about this question with the first question I was asked. Then, they mentioned not being able to learn at school, being separated from their families, and not knowing their ancestry. Then I asked, "Can I answer this question?" From my boys, there was silence. I let the silence sit in the air for a moment.

I then explained how Africa is an answer but where in Africa, I did not know. I also explained that we have European ancestry. One branch of my family was able to trace our ancestry all the way back to the slave owner who also happened to be my ancestor's father. One of my sons said, "Whoa! What?" I answered the questions they had, and we had a really good conversation.

When I got home, I told my husband what had happened but one aspect bothered me. When my son could not come up with an answer, the teacher said to skip the question. I did not believe the teacher had anticipated the impact of telling my child to skip the question nor did I believe the teacher considered the ramifications of the answer for my sons and other Black children in the class.

I emailed the teacher and shared details of the conversation we had. I let the teacher know that I was not requesting the assignment to be removed but for the teacher to have a better understanding about the ramifications in hope that the assignment would be amended or better front loaded for students in the future. From this email exchange, I learned the end goal of the project was for the students to add the information about themselves to a square. All the squares would come together as a culture quilt so students could get to know each other. I believe the end goal was good but the path to the end goal could have been tightened up.

As an educator, unless I am my sons' teacher, I know there will be other assignments I might not completely like. If I want the teacher to make changes or even ditch an assignment, I have to approach the teacher sharing my perspective rooted in factual information, share the impact, and my hopes for the future.

The way some parents approach teachers when they believe their children are being indoctrinated or having to do assignments they don't like, will force some teachers to try and hide what they are doing or force them to refuse to listen to parents. I always start with seeking to understand. If I have done this and the teacher does not respond or the response does not make sense, then I believe it is appropriate to take additional measures to be heard.

About a week after this exchange, I wondered what my sons had put on their quilt squares. One of my sons told me he put the Among Us game and Africa on his square. My son who asked the question, "Who are our ancestors?" put black-eyed peas and Africa. When I asked why, he said, "Part of the assignment was about traditions. A lot of Black people, including us, eat black-eyed peas on the first day of the year." I did not realize that he even paid that much attention and recognized that as a tradition, but the conversations with the teacher in addition with me helped him get a better understanding.

Parents and educators are partners in education. Partnership takes work and the willingness to listen to each other.