

# Cooper's Lesson by Sun Yung Shin, illustrated by Kim Cogan

## Identities & Themes

- East/Southeast Asian American (Korean)
- Bi/Multiracial identity or relationships
- Immigration/Migration
- EL/Language barrier
- Multigenerational relationships
- Feelings
- Friendship
- Identity safety
- Identity affirmation

## Teacher Reflection Questions

1. Which of your identities might be subjected to microaggressions and why?
2. Which students in your classroom/school might experience daily microaggressions?
3. How can you interrupt and reframe microaggressions directed at you, your colleagues, and your students when you hear them?

## Background Information for Teacher

In this book, the main character, Cooper, is a second generation Korean American. He feels lost between his Korean identity and American identity. This is very common for second generation American immigrants, biracial/multiracial children, and transracial adoptees.

Many are asked “*What are you?*” in regards to their race/ethnicity. This is not only an invasion of privacy but can make children, adolescents and even adults feel that they must justify their existence and, in some instances, choose which race/identity/culture they identify with the most. As your students approach adolescent years, they yearn to “fit in”. Being biracial can cause students to feel uncomfortable with their complex identities. It is important to recognize and support students in all of who they are.

**Discussion Note:** Discuss the term microaggressions and its meaning with students before reading the book. As you read the book, point out the microaggressions Cooper and Mr. Lee have experienced.

**Microaggressions:** “The everyday slights, indignities, put-downs, and insults that people of color, women, LGBT populations, or those who are marginalized, experience in their day to day interactions with people. Microaggressions often appear to be a compliment but contain a metacommunication or a hidden insult to the target groups in which it is delivered. People who engage in microaggressions are ordinary folks who experience themselves as good, moral, decent individuals. Microaggressions occur because they are outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator.” (Derald Wing Sue, *What Is a Microaggression?* <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/what-is-a-microaggression>)

Share the **Author's Note** in the back of the book with students. See also the **Racial Identity/Racial Bias Primer** in the back of this guide.

## Anti-Bias Education Tenets

- Empathy & Understanding
- Healthy Complex Identities
- Respect Across Differences
- Notice, Name, & Reject Bias
- Responsiveness & Action

## Social-Emotional Learning Competencies

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Responsible Decision Making
- Relationship Skills

## Read this to the students before reading the book:

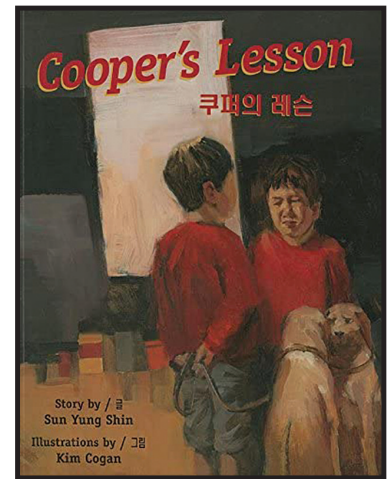
Cooper is a boy who has struggled with his biracial Korean American identity. One day, he steals a hairbrush from Mr. Lee's Korean grocery store. After being caught, he works to make up for it. In the meantime, Cooper and Mr. Lee share how they both have felt like they don't belong because of their identities. Listen to hear about how Cooper learns an important lesson about identity and builds a friendship with Mr. Lee.

## Discussion Questions (essential questions bolded)

1. What are the main events in the story?
2. What do the microaggressions, "What are you?" and "Where are you from?" imply?
3. **In what ways does Cooper feel different from his family? From Mr. Lee and other Korean Americans in the community?**
4. Why do you think Cooper says that he doesn't feel like he's really Korean if he can't speak Korean? What is the connection between language and identity?
5. What does Mr. Lee mean when he says, "People like things to be simple, easy to put in a box"?
6. **What lesson does Cooper learn from Mr. Lee?**
7. Why does Cooper want to try to speak Korean to his mother at the end of the book?
8. **How can cross-cultural and intergenerational friendships help us learn more about ourselves?**

## Journal Prompts & Extension Activities

1. Describe a time when you felt like you didn't belong. What was the situation? How did you feel? Did anything change to create belonging for you?
2. Which of your identities might be subjected to microaggressions and why?
3. What is an important lesson you've learned from someone older than you?
4. **Micrography Self Portrait:** Guide students in creating a micrography self portrait as a way to emphasize the importance of recognizing and celebrating all the parts of our identity. Instructions for creating micrography self portraits can be found here from the Issaquah Schools Foundation: <https://isfdn.org/art-docent-lessons/5th-grade/micrography-portrait/>.



## Literacy Connections

- Realistic fiction
- Identify details in the text
- Compare and contrast events
- Compare and contrast characters
- Identify theme or main message
- Describe setting
- Describe characters/  
Character development
- Character point of view
- Use illustrations/pictures/  
photos to gain information
- Make predictions
- Make inferences
- Make text connections (to  
self, text, the world)
- Describe major plot events
- Sequence events
- Vocabulary in context