

A White Teacher Reflects on Race

Lisa Gimbel

Our English textbook is missing some important pages. It has pages that describe hair and eye color, height, and weight. But it doesn't have a page to describe race. A student asked me about a housing application, "How should I answer the questions about race? I'm from Brazil. Black or African American? White? Asian?"

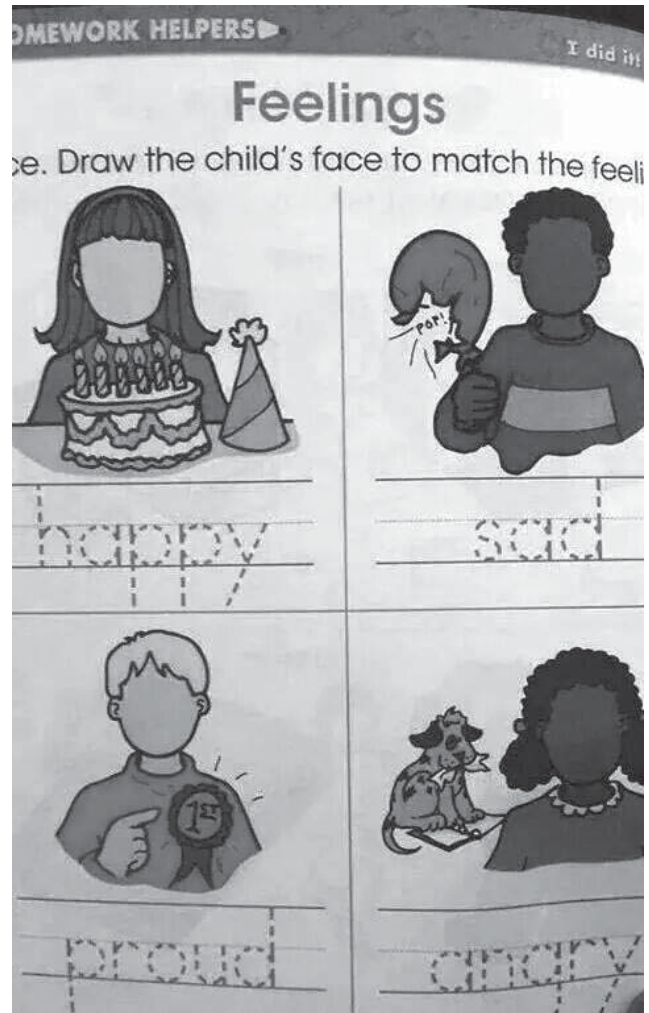
The book has dialogues practicing what to say at the library, at the store, and talking to the landlord. There is no practice, though, for answering a neighbor's racist comments. There is no dialogue for responding to a person yelling, "Go home, terrorist!" at the supermarket. My students tell me about many difficult situations that are not in the textbooks. The situations are also not in my experience because I am white.

My students are learning English. They are also learning what it means to be Black, Latino, white, and Asian in the U.S. My students are people of color and I am white. I know the language and can teach about it. But I don't have the experience of

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being a person of color in the United States. Can I teach about it? What can I say? The textbook pretends race isn't important, but I know it is.

What do I do? I talk about race and about being white. I ask students their experiences. I ask students to see race. When we describe what is happening in a picture, we include the races of the people. We read stories and watch videos by people of color about their experiences. We practice situations responding to racism. We have the city Commission on Discrimination come to our class. We learn about people resisting racism now and in the past. Sometimes, I need to say, "I



This is a page from a children's textbook. What does it communicate about race?

don't know," and ask other people. Sometimes I'm uncomfortable, but that's okay. Most English teachers are white, and many people who write the textbooks are white. But we must still support students as they learn what it means to be Black, Latino, or Asian in the United States.

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