Second Reaction: Small Acts of Kindness Can Make a Big Impact


*Jackie Sydnor*

In her book, *The Invisible Boy*, award-winning author Trudy Ludwig once again takes on the complex and sometimes disconcerting dynamics of children’s social interactions. Ludwig states on her website that she strives to “mak[e] a difference in kids’ lives, one book at a time” and shares a clear message that even small gestures can make a big difference (“The Author”). Accessible to even the youngest audience, *The Invisible Boy* provides encouragement and optimism in the all-too-familiar position of feeling left out. Complete with a thorough discussion guide and suggested supplementary texts for both children and adults, this an ideal book to share with a class of students.

I had the privilege of doing just that with a first grade class. Before I began reading, I asked the students to turn and talk with a neighbor about similarities and differences between the two of them that were both visible and invisible. This exercise allowed students to find common ground and concretized the terms “visible” and “invisible.” Students shared similarities and differences ranging from the color of their eyes to their shared love of dinosaurs.

Students then predicted what the story would be about. Unsurprisingly, most were confident it was about a boy who could not be seen. As we delved into the book’s beautiful illustrations and important message, students began to notice one very powerful tool the illustrator, Patrice Barton, used. Throughout the story, the main character, Brian, who is left out by his
classmates for no discernable reason, is drawn in simple gray scale sketches juxtaposed with the full-color illustrations of his classmates. It didn’t take long for the students to modify their predictions and recognize the symbolism in the drawings—“Brian just feels invisible because no one is including him!” they exclaimed.

The book is filled with situations to which most children can relate, which led to discussions about how to thoughtfully navigate these situations. Brian is left out when teams are selected on the playground, so we discussed more equitable ways to choose teams (girls vs. boys and numbering off were a few suggestions). Brian was the only child not invited to a party, and at lunch Brian heard others talk about all the fun they had. The students and I discussed the difference between being mean on purpose and hurting others by not thinking about their feelings, coming to the realization that someone is hurt and excluded in both circumstances. Given the highly relatable contexts in which the characters find themselves, students were quick to make connections to their own experiences in feeling invisible.

Things begin to look up for Brian as a new student arrives in the class. While other students are hesitant to engage as they “try to figure out if he’s cool enough to be their friend” (unpaged), Brian smiles at him warmly. When the new student, Justin, brings something unusual for lunch, his classmates laugh at him—everyone except Brian. The author poignantly writes, “He sits there wondering which is worse—being laughed at or feeling invisible” (unpaged).

Brian reaches out to the new boy through a small act of kindness: he leaves a drawing and note of encouragement in Justin’s cubby. When Justin reciprocates this kindness by talking to Brian and including him in class projects and games, Brian slowly but surely begins to evolve from gray sketches to colorful drawings. The first graders with whom I shared this book immediately noticed this transformation. This segued to conversations about how just one person showing one small gesture of kindness can make all the difference to someone who feels excluded.

Following our reading of *The Invisible Boy*, students were prompted to think about someone they know who might feel invisible sometimes. With that person in mind, students shared ideas of little things they could do to make him or her feel valued and included. Ideas ranged from including them in activities to persuading other friends to include that person on the playground. We further discussed the importance of noticing when someone is being left out. Just like Madison and her friends chatting about her birthday party, exclusion is not always intentional or mean-spirited.

As with her other books, including *My Secret Bully* and *Trouble Talk*, Trudy Ludwig has provided children and teachers with a book that serves as an effective discussion starter to help kids sort out the complicated and difficult situations we all encounter when growing up. Through her creation of highly relatable characters and situations that are sure to resonate, Ludwig provides the perfect springboard for discussion on how to take action to make the world a little kinder for everyone.
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Works Cited

About the Author
Jackie Sydnor is an assistant professor of elementary literacy education at Ball State University. Her research and teaching focus on supporting aspiring teachers’ professional identity development and reflective practice through the use of digital storytelling and video annotation.