"Don't judge a boy by his face":

Creating space for empathy, engagement, and skill building through interactive read alouds

Abstract

In the past few decades, research has shown interactive read alouds to have enormous benefits for developing readers and should be included as an important component of reading instruction. Yet many teachers do not utilize interactive read alouds in their literacy instruction. This is due in part to various curricular constraints and the pressures of high stakes tests. In this case study of an urban, Title I second grade class of Black and Latina/o students, we found a teacher led interactive read aloud of the book *Wonder* fostered a sense of community and empathy, increased engagement and motivation to read, and also helped students develop deeper comprehension skills. The inclusion of all students in the read aloud ritual helped to develop a strong community of readers and identities in the students as competent literate beings, regardless of their reading levels.

Keywords: urban education, early childhood, literacy instruction, interactive read alouds,

children's literature

Jonathan was slowly walking towards me, taking his time. I could see the

familiar look in his eye, the desire to be anywhere but here. The other kids in

his group were already sitting at the kidney shaped table in the corner while

the rest of the class worked on their literacy centers. But Jonathan was

stalling. He didn't want to read.

Hannah shared this example with me as typical of how most of her second grade students responded to guided reading time. Many students expressed a lack of engagement with the texts written for their reading levels. The majority of her students were reading below grade level and thus had little access to complex literature with in-depth character development and culturally relevant themes. Instead, students were reading primarily short texts on their instructional reading levels as mandated by district policy. As a skilled and experienced teacher, Hannah knew that while small group literacy instruction has merit, her students would also benefit from engaging with high quality texts that were more relevant to their lives, full of complex characters and engaging themes. She decided to conduct a read aloud of *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012)*,* an acclaimed novel that addresses issues of difference, disability, and social justice. Hannah chose to conduct an interactive read aloud to foster acceptance, tolerance, and courage to a diverse group of second graders with many life challenges who were reading on widely different levels. She knew her young students would relate to the book and gain important insights and critical thinking skills through a structured read aloud and character study, even if they could not read the text independently.

Reading instruction and Read Alouds

We know that reading high quality children's literature can provide important windows into other worlds as well as mirrors of our own experiences (Bishop, 1990). We also know that

children's literature helps students develop empathy and build community in classrooms by helping us understand ourselves and others in deeper ways (Britt, Wilkins, Davis, & Bowlin, 2016; Gibbs & Earley, 1994). Moreover, interactive read alouds have enormous benefits for developing readers and reading instruction (e. g. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Lewis, 2001; Smolkin & Donovan, 2002; Strong, Amendum & Smith, 2018). In her review of recent research around interactive read alouds, Lennox (2013) concludes that there is little doubt of the value of read alouds as a powerful instructional tool for young children's development in language, literacy, and thinking.

While many researchers have explored the academic benefits of read alouds, few studies relate specifically to empathy and community building. A recent exception describes deep character analysis as an important way to build empathy with elementary students, and read alouds was included as one of many methods of literacy instruction used (McTigue, et al, 2015). In their study, literature was used to teach about emotions and difficult situations through character analysis. They found children were able to empathize with characters regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, or age. In addition, the authors describe potential positive impacts, both socially and academically, as a result. Similar dual outcomes are described by Doyle and Bramwell (2006) where a kindergarten teacher utilized small, dialogic reading groups to foster both emergent literacy and social skills. They found students were motivated to read and were able to transfer social skills learned from the literature into classroom interactions with others.

So if we know all these benefits of read alouds and children's literature, why are there few opportunities for striving readers to engage in reading experiences beyond their instructional reading levels or to be exposed to high quality, authentic literature? One potential reason for this is the narrowing of the curriculum (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Jerald, 2006) to skills-based

reading instruction, particularly with historically marginalized students, a term to describe people and groups who have been systematically excluded from equal resources and opportunities such as Black and Latin@ students in the United States. This narrowing is characterized by a shift in early reading instruction to what have been called *foundational skills* (Allington, 2002; Solari, Denton & Haring, 2017) which include alphabet knowledge, print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics, decoding, and fluency. In many classrooms, these skills become the sole "foundation" for early reading instruction, often pushing out other important components of literacy instruction including comprehension, interest, and motivation. A focus on reading skills, assessment, and accountability in isolation can lead to "manufactured reading" or inauthenticity, and a lack of depth in understanding (Giovanelli & Mason, 2015). Restricting literacy instruction to skills-based practices occurs more often in marginalized communities with striving readers (Hoffman, 2017) and this may exacerbate their difficulties in comprehension and word level understandings (Solari, et al., 2017).

Another reason students may not be exposed to high quality literature beyond their own reading ability is that for the past few decades, reading instruction in elementary classrooms has been primarily based on the belief that students should spend most of their time reading on their instructional levels in small ability-based groups (Hoffman, 2017; Kulik, 2004; Loveless, 2013). In the elementary grades, ability based reading groups are primarily within a classroom (rather than across classrooms), and teachers divide students into smaller groups based on their reading levels or abilities as determined by literacy assessments such as running records (Clay, 1993). These leveled groups are meant to be flexible, changing as students move up in their reading abilities or instructional reading levels (Allington, 2002; Betts, 1946; Fountas & Pinnell, 2017). The instructional reading level is considered the "sweet spot" in reading for a student, not too

easy and not too difficult. Betts (1946) described this level as accurate and without fatigue.

Many literacy professionals determine instructional level when a student reading a text

independently reaches approximately 95% accuracy of word recognition – including

pronunciation and comprehension (Miller & Croft, 2011).

While leveled groups can be effective practice for some reading instruction, when it

becomes rigid practice, students miss out on literature that covers important topics, issues, and

themes and is culturally relevant and responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Irvine, 2010),

particularly when books may be beyond a student's instructional reading level (Cliff Hodges,

2010; Hoffman, 2017). Moreover, lack of exposure to higher leveled books may harm students.

A recent study found evidence of long-term negative effects of ability based grouping of reading

instruction during elementary school. In their longitudinal study, Buttaro and Catsambis (2019)

found homogenous ability grouping in literacy instruction in the early years (up until second

grade) kept the majority of students on a low level track and reinforced initial differences in

academic achievement in later years. In other words, students who were in lower level

homogenous reading groups early in their schooling experienced long-term negative

consequences. Other studies have examined the short-term effects of homogenous ability

grouping for literacy instruction with similar outcomes, where students in lower ability groups

learned less than those who were not in such groups (Condron, 2008; Lleras & Rangel, 2008).

Moreover, most of the recent research that supports matching students to instructional reading

level is based in tutoring interventions and tiered instructional models rather than overall

classroom reading instruction (e.g. Ehri, Dreyer, Flugman, and Gross, 2007; O'Connor, et al.,

2002).

We are not suggesting teachers abandon small group instruction such as guided reading or for skills instruction in the elementary classroom; rather we are calling for a critical examination of our practices and asking literacy educators to think about how we can effectively meet our diverse students' literacy needs. We echo Hoffman's (2017) call to question whether what we are currently doing is what we should be doing. Is literacy instruction primarily through leveled texts in small groups resulting in the best outcomes for all students? We also look to Pressley and Wharton-McDonald's (1998) definition of effective literacy teachers as those who included a balance of instructional methods and paradigms. We offer this study of Hannah's classroom as an example of honoring and including diverse students with wide-ranging literacy skills into the literacy club. Conducting an interactive read aloud of an engaging, high level text over time with an entire class of diverse abilities and backgrounds is one way to for teachers to not only reinforce literacy skills but to build empathy, create community, and increase engagement.

Interactive read alouds are literacy events characterized by a teacher or another skilled reader reading a text aloud and sharing authority with students in understanding the text (Smolkin & Donovan, 2002). The reader typically uses various strategies and questioning techniques in a dialogic exchange about the book and to provide multiple perspectives (Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994). Preparing questions ahead of time ensures the inclusion of higher order thinking and inferential questions as part of the read aloud (van Kleek, 2008). During reading, the focus remains on the text while expanding on the content in ways that enrich language and thinking skills. In sum, read alouds provide opportunities for participation in sustained conversations, expanding language use, and concept development (Lennox, 2013) all important skills for developing readers.

The interactive read aloud sessions in Hannah's class created an equitable literacy opportunity for students; regardless of reading ability, all students were able to engage with high quality literature containing complex characters as well as culturally relevant plot elements. As a literacy educator, Hannah stepped out of restrictive district norms where teaching in homogenous ability groups was the predominant stance towards literacy instruction. Such paradigms resulted in a lack of diverse and deep interactions with texts (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017; Giovanelli & Mason, 2015; Sipe, 2008), and Hannah yearned to see her students excited about reading, gathered together eagerly around a common book. She wanted to eliminate the dread described in the opening vignette and to cultivate in her classroom community the pleasures of regularly interacting with diverse texts in meaningful ways. She decided to capitalize on the popularity of the novel *Wonder* (Palacios, 2012) in order to foster community, empathy, and enjoyment as well as to teach important literacy skills around a ritual of interactive read aloud. I joined her in documenting the process and here we share our discoveries.

The context

To understand Hannah's classroom, you need to understand Hannah as a teacher and get to know more about her students. Hannah describes herself as deeply committed to understanding students' lived experiences and home lives in order to build on what students bring to the classroom community. At the time of the study, Hannah had taught at this urban, Title I elementary school in a large, extremely segregated city in the Southwestern United States for two years. The school is made up of 99% students of color, the majority are Latin@s. Twenty percent of the school population is Black and many students are English Learners. Historically, the school has served as a focus to the neighborhood, attracting families looking for a school with a good reputation and strong teachers yet recently the student

population has become very mobile due to increasing property taxes in the area. Hannah's second grade class was made up of twenty-two students who were either Black or Latin@ or of mixed race. All of her students were on free and reduced lunch. Most of them spoke non-standard varieties of English and performed below grade level on standardized measures of academic success. Many students had family members who were incarcerated, had experienced trauma, and some had experience with the foster care system. It was common for her students to live with multiple family members and have caretaker roles within the home. In addition, the school population was very mobile; in this class of 22 students, 3 enrolled after January which added challenges in maintaining a cohesive classroom community. Hannah used this knowledge when creating groups as well as planning for literacy instruction.

Since Hannah had such a different lived experience than her students, it is important for her to keep in mind various ways her students can connect to the curriculum. She believes in creating a classroom space where student identities are honored and their voices are heard by the books she selects and lessons she creates. In order to better know her students, Hannah held weekly class lunches where she learned about students' home lives, passions, and interests. She also made weekly phone calls with families to form more engaged, positive relationships with them. These experiences gave her insight into her students' strengths as well as needs. Hannah credits this approach as shifting from a focus on deficits to a framework that perpetuates, fosters and sustains linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). As a result, she describes her stance towards literacy as changed from "something stale and standard to personal and meaningful for my students as a result of acknowledging that a student's family structures, personal experiences, home lives or linguistic backgrounds could influence them and their learning." Hannah thoughtfully selects read alouds, shared reading materials, and other

literacy materials and activities based on her students' interests as well as racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and experiences.

While understanding her students and their *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) is key for Hannah, so is fostering community at school through literacy and other shared experiences. For her, literacy instruction is not just about teaching students to read words; it is offering them a window on the world and the role that language plays in generating and perpetuating power along with shared community (Freire, 1970). Hannah's stance towards read-alouds and literacy instruction echo those described by Lewis (2001) as classroom ritual that can be used to foster culture, community bonds, shared history, safe place. As such, Hannah is passionate about using interactive read-alouds of complex and meaningful literature to provide her students a means to understand themselves and the world and to build community, while also improving literacy skills. Through interactive read-alouds, Hannah gives students opportunities to question a text and to share their own perspectives about topics they encounter, something they may not engage in as deeply in more leveled reading instruction.

The interactive read aloud ritual

Every day after lunch, Hannah called her students over to the rug to sit, recline, lie down, or lounge comfortably. She sat in the center on a stool and conducted an interactive read aloud of a chapter or two of *Wonder* for about fifteen to twenty minutes. Before the reading, Hannah carefully planned questions and activities related to the book that would enhance students' awareness of their own feelings and choices (i.e., Have you ever felt scared? When do you feel proud of yourself? How do you respond if someone says something mean to you? Do you ever feel different from your friends?) as well as their sense of community and empathy (What should we do if we get a new student? What would you do or say to Auggie if he came to our school?).

During reading, she would elicit responses in various ways, by asking them to stand up or sit down, sharing their thoughts and feelings with a partner in a think-pair-share format, or responding whole group. After reading, students responded to the reading in their notebooks (i.e., Draw what you think Auggie looks like, or Why did August feel nervous about going to school? What would you have done in this situation?) or engage in a variety of activities in small groups (such as role play or character analysis in groups). Hannah frequently encouraged them to independently decide how they would respond to that day's reading.

Methods and Data

The objective of this case study (Creswell, 2007) was to understand how reading literary fiction with diverse students through an interactive read aloud provided opportunities for them to gain empathy and grow as a community while also developing skills as readers. Together, we used qualitative ethnographic methods to uncover how Hannah and her twenty-two Black and Latin@ students grew as a literate community in this second grade classroom in an urban Title I school in the Southwest. Hannah and I collected and analyzed several types of qualitative data including artifacts such as lesson plans, student responses and journals, and we wrote field notes and reflective journals, and interviewed students. We analyzed the data using the constant comparative method for thematic coding (Merriam, 1998). To code the data, we read and reread texts to inductively code units of words that had meaning independently. We thoroughly read field notes, transcripts, journals, and student responses, labeling words and phrases for open coding (e.g., "understanding", "empathy", "inference", "vocabulary", etc) in a technique designed to understand texts after multiple readings (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992). Documents were compared and codes were defined and categorized into emerging themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as each category was reexamined, redefined, and combined with other similar categories.

For example, initial codes were based on multiple or repeated occurrences of words or phrases with similar meanings (e.g. "understanding others" and "empathy" came together as "empathy") and were grouped together to create themes. From our analysis we identified several themes; community and empathy, increased engagement and motivation to read, and comprehension skills.

The text

Although Hannah utilized multiple texts for her read alouds throughout the year, the data for this study centers around the interactive read aloud of *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012). The book is described as "a classic middle grades chapter book" (Wheeler, 2013, p. 335) featuring August or "Auggie", a ten-year-old boy with a facial deformity caused by a rare genetic condition. He has undergone various surgeries and been homeschooled until we meet him in fifth grade, attending school for the first time. We follow him as he navigates the world of a new school while managing his own feelings of belonging and who to trust both at home and in the community. The novel is immensely popular, a *New York Times* bestseller and has been made into a movie with incredible star power. Some argue the novel's appeal lies more in the way the community transforms around Auggie, rather than how he himself is transformed (Wheeler, 2013). The themes of disability, friendship, family, and community made this book a compelling and timely selection to read aloud.

Findings

The relatable and universal themes provided the foundation for most of Hannah's conversations with her students around the text. Our findings suggest that engaging in an interactive read aloud with *Wonder* fostered a sense of community and empathy, increased engagement and motivation to read, and developed deeper comprehension skills for Hannah's

second grade students. Through classroom behaviors, discussions, and individual journal

responses, this group of students showed increased empathy and sense of community. Through

verbal and written responses, many students described how they would help new students by

showing them around the school or befriending them. Ashlynn (all student names are

pseudonyms) wrote, "I would treat a new student nice, kind, sweet. I would ask them if they can

be my friend." Discussions occurred regularly around friendship and how it feels to be left out

of a group. The students vowed not to do that to each other. Figure 1 is a response by Monty,

who wrote, "I would act like Jack. I would treat a new student by helping them." As the plot

progressed and Auggie experienced teasing at school, the class continued to call for speaking out

against injustice and bullying, what some call "core values" in classrooms (Gibbs & Earley,

1994).

In another example related to core values and empathy, the teacher in *Wonder,* Mr.

Browne, shares a precept with his class on the first day of fifth grade that sets the tone for the

rest of the school year. It is a quote from Dr. Wayne Dyer, "When given the choice between

being right and being kind, choose kind". Hannah asked her class to respond in their journals

and elaborate on what this meant to them. Some responses were straightforward such as,

"choose kind means to be nice to others, to share and play with them…" or "to invite kids to

your birthday party". An insightful response by Sherrod is depicted in Figure 2. Sherrod wrote,

"Don't judge a boy by his face. You don't have to mean to hurt someone to be mean." The class

continued to discuss this concept of intentionality around various experiences Auggie goes

through in the text as well as their own personal experiences. The class continued with a very

profound and complex conversation. Students provided textual evidence from the book where

characters reacted strongly to Auggie's facial deformity and, even though they did not intend to

hurt his feelings, their reactions hurt him. The second graders discussed how at times our actions can hurt others even when we do not intend for them to do so. The phrase, "Don't judge a boy by his face" became a common phrase in this classroom community to call out friends who were judging others or not giving students a chance. The phrase became both a call for increased empathy and a symbol of solidarity, signaling membership in this classroom community.

Another important aspect of students' membership in this community of learners and readers was the camaraderie and democratic nature of the read aloud experience. This group of diverse, mostly striving readers were often divided into ability groups and pulled out for various purposes. But during the read aloud ritual, all of that changed. The playing field was leveled. Students were not pulled out; they were not divided. Everyone had the same opportunity to participate. This was an important aspect of how this shared ritual built the classroom community. Now **everyone** was reading this engaging novel together. And they all thought it was fun! The entire class looked forward to the read alouds and protested if there were constraints that prevented it on any given day. Too often students' literacy experiences are restricted to rote skills-based instruction rather than meaningful, enjoyable interactions with text. In this context, when *Wonder* was at the height of its popularity, engaging students in reading a text that may have been inaccessible to them otherwise was a way of connecting them to a community of literate beings, of being in the club (Smith, 1987) and "as intimately connected to the web of life" (Sipe, 2008. p. 245). As their teacher, Hannah read a book aloud to them that they wanted to read, giving students ownership and responsibility for what counts as literacies in their classroom (Ivey, 2014; Strickland & Alvermann, 2004). This sent an important message to the students that disrupted the deficit perspectives pervasive in their academic lives and aligned with Hannah's philosophy of teaching. It gave them identities as readers. Lewis (2001) describes

the positive impact of a pedagogical approach that touches on themes and relationships that are important to students as important in making new identities available to students. These new possibilities of selves can lead to increased individual and classroom growth. Reading a book together that was challenging, meaningful, engaging, and popular was a way of telling students that they could be a part of the literacy club and that reading was a way to connect with your own feelings and experiences and those of others. Marisol's entry into her journal (Figure 3) depicts this sense of pleasure and pride in being a part of the club, "I am proud of myself because I read."

Limitations

While we witnessed engagement and joy around the book in addition to expressions of empathy and development of vocabulary and inferencing skills in this case study, one limitation is that it is not clear what exactly led to the increased levels of engagement and comprehension of the text. Was it students' identities as readers? Was it motivation? Was it that the highly routinized or ritual nature of Hannah's read alouds gave her students a predictable setting and method for understanding literature? Was it something else or a combination of factors? We do not know for sure which aspects of the experience had the most impact, but we do know students looked forward to this time of joyful and purposeful interaction with literature and that they became more skilled readers as a result of the experience.

Conclusion

The interactive read aloud ritual provided these second grade students with the opportunity to build progressively more and more knowledge about literature and literacy and Hannah's careful planning assisted "in the formation of a classroom interpretive community" (Sipe, 2008, p. 229) that may not have existed outside of the read aloud space. When students

were in small, leveled reading groups, they were less likely to engage in interpretations of text and to deepen their knowledge about characters and literary elements. Instead, students were practicing foundational skills related to reading instruction. Their responses were less imaginative and lacked the dynamics of literary understanding necessary for the deepest levels of interaction with text (Giovanelli & Mason, 2015; Lewis, 2001; McTigue, et al., 2015; Sipe, 2008). This is critical for underperforming, marginalized readers in particular. When their reading instruction is a restricted diet of short, leveled readers, they may not have opportunities to build essential comprehension and inferential skills and engagement suffers (Ivey, 2014).

The young students in Hannah's classroom felt part of something and experienced pleasure as they participated in the interactive read aloud of *Wonder*. They were also motivated to read more books by the same author or on related topics. While some teachers and schools are decreasing the time spent reading aloud due to pressures around skills and high stakes testing (Buttaro & Catsambis, 2019; Davis & Vehabovic, 2017; Jerald, 2006), there is much value in reading books aloud at levels beyond what students can read independently in order to build empathy, create community, and explore complex characters and themes such as disability, differences, and fighting for social justice. In Hannah's class, the community and "membership in the literacy club" mentality supported and motivated her students in ways small homogenous ability groups did not. Experiencing the interactive read aloud together allowed for more cross-ability follow up that emerged from the students themselves. We noted during this study that students independently read books on higher reading levels more often than they had prior to reading *Wonder*. Students borrowed *Wonder* and the sequel from the class library, reading parts of it together in their free time, and scaffolding each other's reading comprehension spontaneously, without a teacher directive. We believe this kind of peer support was possible

because the interactive read aloud was not conducted in ability groups but was a practice that conveyed to the whole class that **everyone** was capable of participating in the reading of this book. Teachers have long been instructed to match texts to readers (Betts, 1946) and to carefully scaffold any difficult texts for readers, particularly those who may be reading below grade level. However, through the spontaneous reading of additional books connected to *Wonder*, we began to see confirmation of what Strong, et al. (2018) and others have suggested, that sometimes more difficult texts are more motivating for readers, and therefore, readers step up to the occasion.

It is important to note that we are not suggesting small group instruction such as guided reading groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012) and other forms of skills based literacy instruction be eliminated from elementary reading instruction. Rather, we argue for more intentional inclusion of interactive read alouds for pleasure, enjoyment, and community building as well as to foster important literacy skills such as comprehension, inference, and word knowledge. It is critical for students from historically marginalized groups to be exposed to well-developed literature with complex characters and relatable themes. Interactive read alouds of such literature adds to student engagement with text, which can lead to increased desire to read. Our case study with Black and Latin@ students in a Title I school confirms prior research (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Arnold, Lonigan, Whitehurst, & Epstein, 1994; Barrantine, 1996; Britt, Wilkins, Davis, & Bowlin, 2016; Gibbs & Earley, 1994; Lewis, 2001; Smolkin & Donovan, 2002; Strong, Amendum & Smith, 2018) on interactive read alouds and underscores the importance of using compelling, complex literature with diverse students of all reading levels to build community and empathy, increase engagement and motivation to read, and also develop deeper comprehension skills. This created a space for ALL students to be part of the literacy club, regardless of background or reading level.

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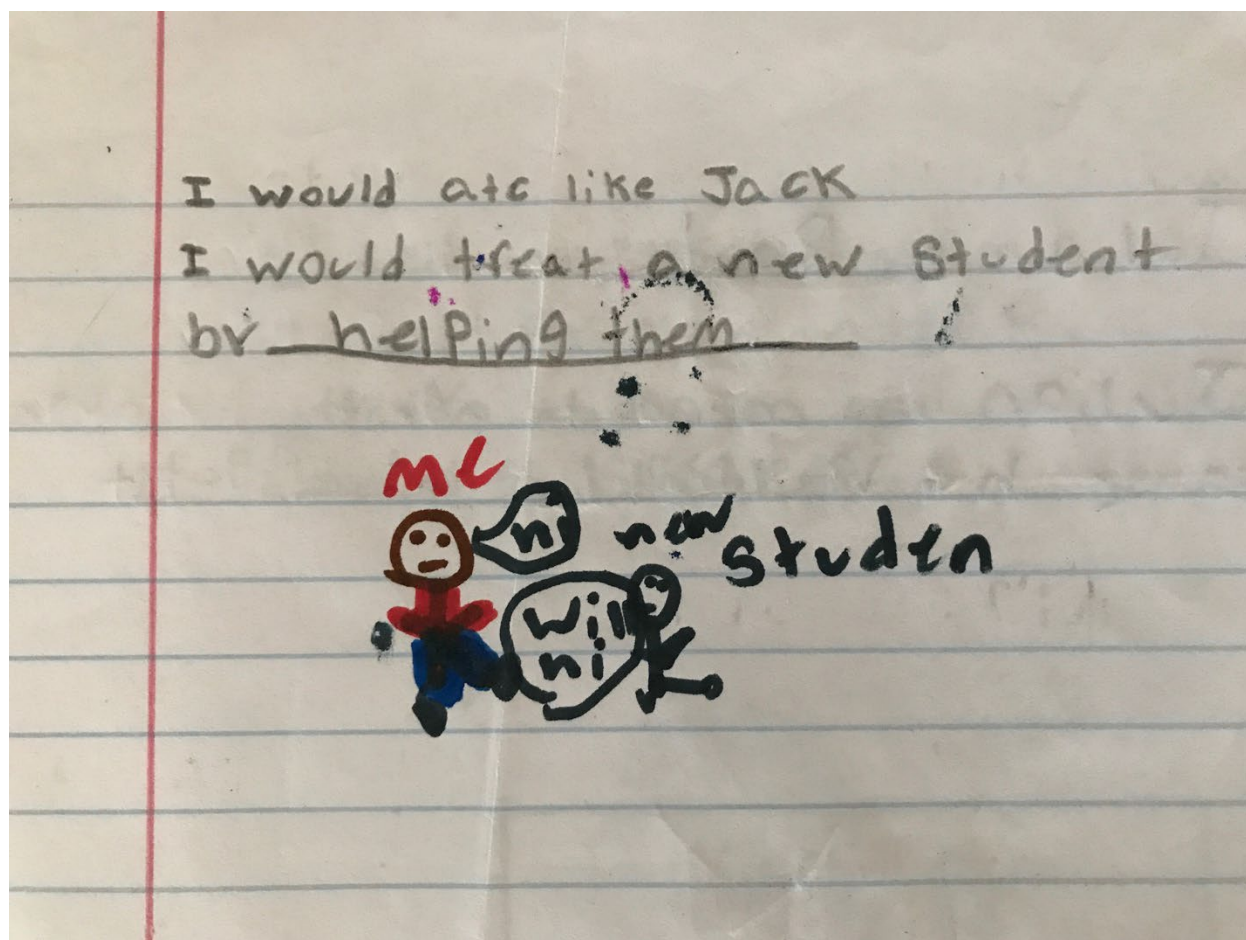
    10.1353/chq.2013.0044

Figure 1: I would act like Jack. I would treat a new student by helping them.

Always choose kind

Dont   Jadge   a   bov br his
Race

You   dont have to   mear
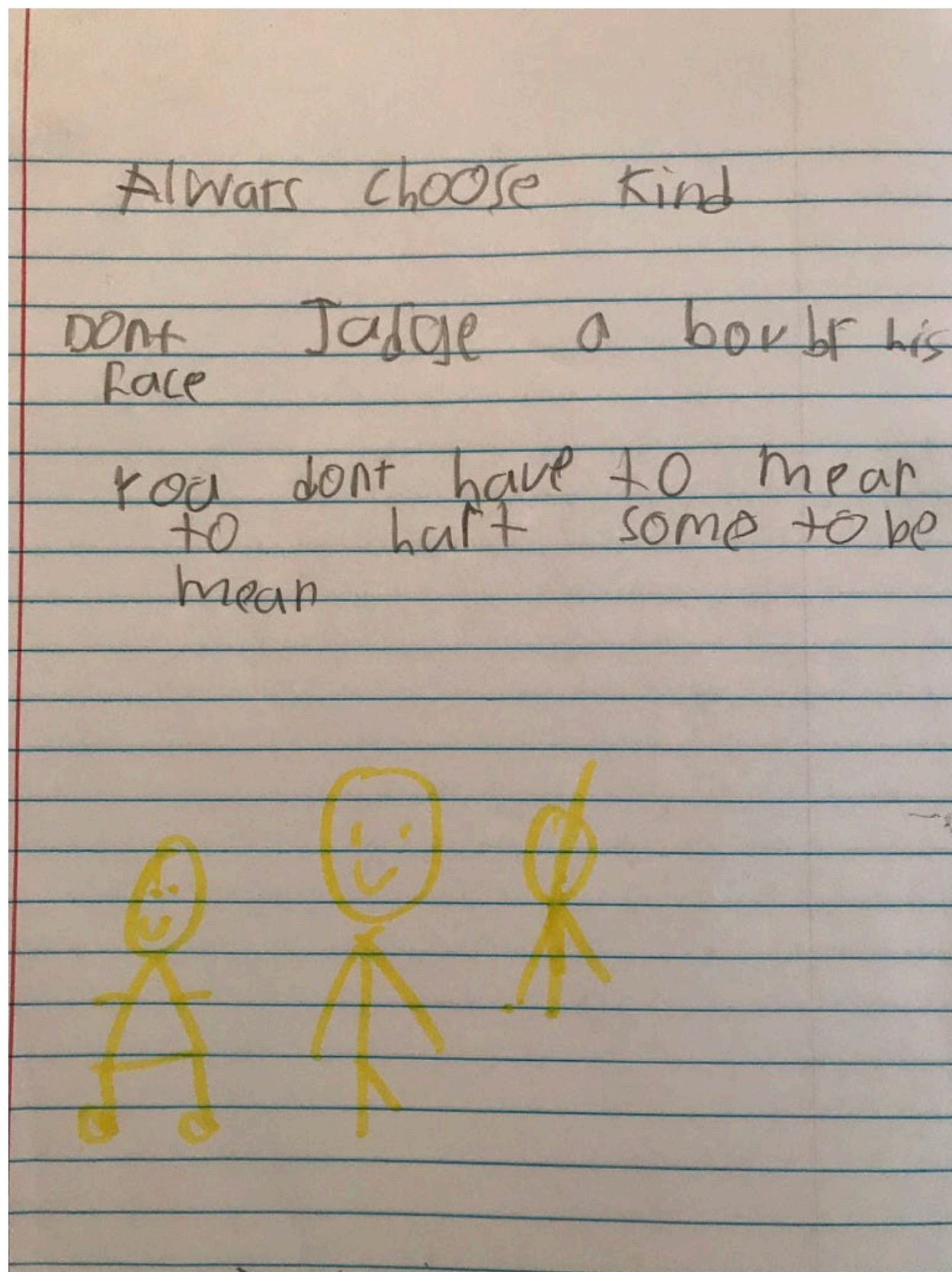   to   hurt some to be
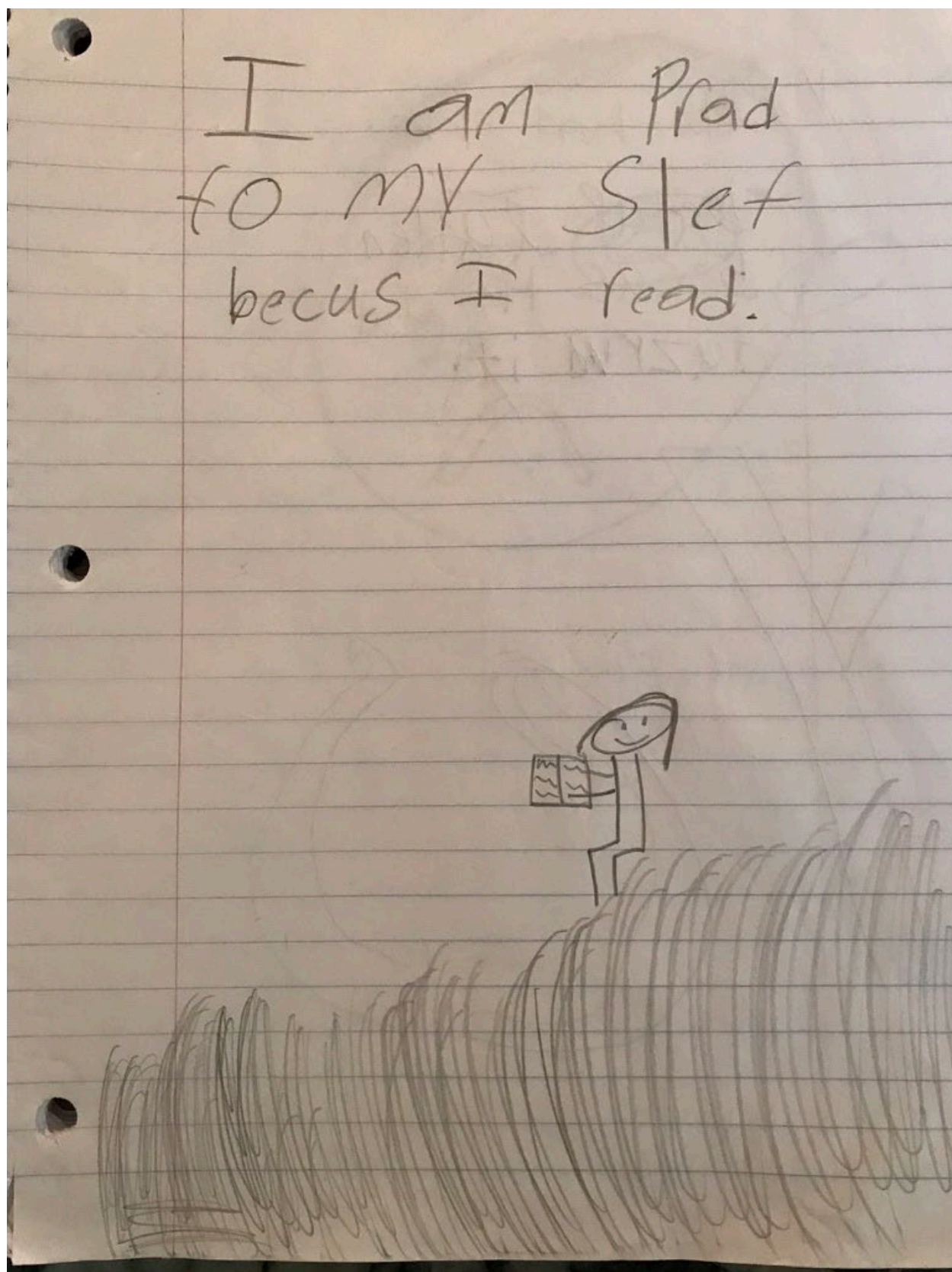mean

Figure 2: You don't have to mean to hurt someone to be mean.

Figure 3: I am proud of myself because I read.