



Professional Teacher:

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Teachers Ask About Melissa, a Middle-Grade Reader Who Needs Lots of Teacher Support: Integrating Meaning

In this article, I will discuss how I use Melissa's miscue analysis for reading instruction. First and foremost, Melissa needs to do more reading. All students are given time to read in school, and they are expected to read during that time. Melissa might read anything she likes, but I expect her to read something. At first Melissa may only read because it is required, but eventually I trust that good authors will compel her to read for her own reasons. I also encourage reading at home each day by making that the major homework assignment.

I also provide many different materials for students to read. The classroom is filled with a variety of fiction and nonfiction books, and we make frequent use of the school library and the public library. Selecting a book is a neglected reading strategy. It is a valued "assignment" in my class. I spend a lot of my "teaching" time helping students find books that interest them, and often go to libraries and bookstores for one special interest or title. We also share books in a variety of ways. We read together and separately as we study and research interesting topics. I read to and discuss novels with the class. We form literature study groups to discuss a shared book, a single author, or an interesting genre. We use reflective logs to think about what we are reading and reflect our understandings in writing.

At the same time, I also provide strategy lessons that help Melissa to use her reading strategies with a focus on constructing meaning. Helping Melissa to be aware of her strengths may be important in convincing her that she can be a reader. Melissa also needs to know that "good" readers are students who do a lot of reading. In Melissa's case, I can use an adapted cloze procedure to help her feel comfortable focusing on using context to construct meaning, rather than focusing on producing graphically similar substitutions.

But when they are that far behind "grade level," don't we need to provide them with something more?

Let me address the issue of grade level by looking at these excerpts from Melissa's retelling of *Monster Manners*:

T: Okay. Could you tell me what you read about?

M: I read about a monster named Rose and . . . her whole family didn't like her because she did good . . . and the monsters said that you supposed to do bad.

T: Okay . . . and the monsters said?

M: The monsters said, "You supposed to do bad things." But Rose didn't do bad things, she did good things. So . . . the family got mad, but then she saved their lives from the house being flooded up.

T: Okay. Is there anything else you want to share with me?

M: They were at the table once, and they had . . . and she scared the waitresses and stuff . . . and she would call people up on the telephone . . . they would call people on the telephone and people would hang up on them.

T: Who's "she"?

M: The mother and the sister and the father and all of them . . . they'll call . . . people . . . call them and they'll hang up on them because they'll yell at them in the phone. Then they'd

get scared . . . and she saved their lives.

T: And she what?

M: Saved their lives.

T: Is there anything else you remember from the story?

M: Like when . . . Rose liked her family, but she didn't like them doing stuff that was wrong. But her family didn't like her because she always she did stuff that was good. But she didn't care.

T: She didn't care?

M: She cared but she knew that someday that they'll like her.

Profile of Reading Strategy Strengths and Weaknesses Student Form			
Name _____		Date _____ Grade _____	
PRE-ICTING		Semantic	Syntactic
CONFIRMING			
INTEGRATING		Objectives	
		1. _____	
		2. _____	
		3. _____	
		4. _____	
		5. _____	

Melissa is reading a book that we might consider a second-grade story, although it certainly has a sophisticated irony that even adults can appreciate. But Melissa isn't reading the story like a second-grader. Melissa starts her retelling by supplying a very concise plot statement, summarizing characters and problems. In the second section, Melissa shows an understanding of the story that, as we might have predicted, goes beyond her surface-level reading of that section of the story. Melissa ends her retelling by explaining what the story really meant to her as a reader. This empathetic description of Rosie shows why Melissa took so much time on the sentence, "She realized how unhappy she had made everyone." Second-graders are rarely able to give a plot synopsis or discuss story themes. Melissa is able to integrate this story into an understanding that goes far beyond any second-grade level. For this reason, I have a very hard time assigning a grade level to books or children.

Melissa's miscue analysis shows that Melissa learned to read key concept words such as *manners* as she was reading. Her retelling reveals her understanding of how this concept was developed in this story, and it reveals Melissa's integration of Joanna Cole's manners into her own

experiences. I have watched many children make dramatic growth through daily opportunities to read. Some students, labelled remedial readers, have selected teen romance books or *Sports Illustrated* paperbacks. With strong interest and determination, they slowly read the chosen text. It may take months, but they are confident, independent readers by the time they finish. Being a good reader is a decision that each child makes. Any book or other text that a child selects becomes the child's reading teacher.

You mean I'll see a change in my students if I just let them read?

Yes. It might not always be dramatic, but you will see a change. This doesn't mean that the teacher doesn't have an important role to play. But it does change our job description. Instead of teaching reading skills, we need to provide opportunities that encourage, and even demand, reading. We need to provide a classroom organization that will allow a child to take several months to read one book, if necessary. We need a classroom with materials that will interest and excite the children in that room. This involves keeping abreast of children's literature. It also involves understanding the developmental interests of a particular age group. Fifth-graders, for example, usually enjoy *Encyclopedia Brown*, the *Ramona* books, and the *Little House* books because each chapter tells a short story. They are less likely to read novels with extended plots.

Finally, we need to be knowledgeable enough to match a child with a book. If Melissa enjoyed *Monster Manners*, she might like to read other humorous books such as *Sideways Stories in Wayside School*. I ask a student, "What's the last book you really loved?" and work hard to find a similar book that will inspire the child to read. Sometimes I search libraries and bookstores for the perfect book, and I begin the reading period by handing children books I have selected because I thought they might enjoy them. I always ask the child if they want help selecting a book and try to give them several choices so they won't feel they must read my selection. Ultimately, however, one book can be a turning point in a child's life. I have seen it happen time and again. If Melissa wants to read more illustrated books, I will help her to find them. If she wants to read a chapter book, she will. If it's difficult for her to get started, I might read aloud to her for a time. But it is the daily opportunity to read and enjoy books that will really allow Melissa to become a reader.

I guess I just have to trust the kids more and see what happens?

I know it's a dilemma. If we get out of the way and allow kids the time to read, we may wait for months and see very little change. If we teach them skills lessons, at least we can feel like we're doing something for them. We feel very responsible for our students' progress. It's hard to feel comfortable trusting and waiting for the kids to choose to read. Still, in the end, learning is the responsibility of the learner. We can lead them to the bookshelf, but we can't make them read. In the meantime, the RMI can be a good tool for assuring ourselves that our "nonreaders" have many strengths and are learning as they interact with text.

→ For more about Melissa, see pp. 53 and 73.

→ See: Goodman, pp. 20, 47, 58, 62, 73, 79, 88, 99, 114, 115, 120, 121, 146, 147, 148.