

Through the Miscue Window:

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Miscues or Mistakes: Two Teachers and Two Students

Miscue analysis is more than a procedure for evaluating students' reading. A teacher who has an understanding of miscue analysis also has an understanding of the reading process. Below I present scenes from two different first-grade classrooms, each called whole language by their respective teachers. Their differences lie in, among other things, the teachers' use of children's unexpected responses in reading, the risk-taking they inspire in their students, and the ways in which they build on the strengths of their students.

Classroom 1

Ms. K has been teaching for over twenty years. She prefers whole language because it finally frees her from the basal reader. Ms. K has her children read silently first thing every morning. Some mornings she reads with the children and other mornings she listens to individuals because she wants to monitor their progress over the course of the year quite carefully because she is not using basal end-of-level testing. The morning I observe she calls Jennifer to read to her near the listening center, as it is off to the side and will not disturb the other children. Jennifer begins, clearly proud that she has risked choosing this book that she has listened to for many years and can now read herself this crisp February morning (she is reading *Days with Frog and Toad* by Arnold Lobel [1979, Scholastic Books]).

Jennifer (reading): Frog and T . . .

Ms. K: Read the title.

Jennifer: Oh yeah. *The Kite*. Frog and Toad went to . . .

Ms. K (pointing to the word): out . . .

Jennifer: went out to fly a kite. The . . .

Ms. K: They

Jennifer: They went to a large mee . . . meea . . . (Jennifer stops and looks at Ms. K)

Ms. K: meadow

Jennifer: meadow when

Ms. K: where

Jennifer: where the wind was strong. O . . . o . . .

Ms. K: O-u sounds like the beginning of "ouch."

Jennifer: Ou . . . ourrrr . . . our kite will fly up and up, said Frog. It will fly way . . .

Ms. K (pointing): all

Jennifer: all the way up to the top of the sky. Toad and . . .

Ms. K: said

Jennifer: Toad, said Frog, I will hold the ball of string. You hold the kite and run.

[Jennifer has finished the first two pages of the twelve-page story.]

Ms. K: Do you like this story?

Jennifer: Ummm, it's a little hard, but I like it. My brother read this to me once a long time ago.

Ms. K: Okay. You may return to reading by yourself. Thank you Jennifer.

[Ms. K notes in Jennifer's folder that she is confusing "said" and "and," and that she is not using strategies such as context, but relying instead on phonics as she tries to sound out words like *meadow* and *our*.]

Ms. K allows the children to read in groups because she has multiple copies of texts and she allows them to listen to each other read or take turns when there is only one copy of a text. She

is resourceful and creative, and her classroom is rich in print, which the children are encouraged to read and rely on in their own writing.

Ms. K's classroom offers many of the environmental facets of a whole language classroom. Her comfort with using trade books is supplemented by the minilessons she does with the entire class. Today, after listening to some children read individually, she offers the class a lesson on context by using a big book and having the children guess what words would make sense in sentences within the book, which has words covered by removable stick-on notes. Quite correctly for Jennifer and other readers she has heard on previous days, she offers a lesson that could help children use the entire text.

From this brief encounter with Ms. K we do know some of what she knows about reading and what her definition of reading might be. She expects Jennifer to focus on each word and render each word as it is offered by the printed text. In so doing, Ms. K has changed Jennifer's relationship with the text. Rather than a focus on the meaning of the story as being of primary concern, Jennifer must concentrate on the exact rendering being demanded of her. Ms. K believes that calling Jennifer's attention to words and sounds as she reads is helping Jennifer; Jennifer comes to believe, over time, that this is the nature of help and the nature of reading, and she relies on and looks to adults for help whenever she reads aloud. It is a mistake-based focus. Jennifer is coming to rely on others for help with words rather than developing independent risk-taking and meaning-making in her transaction with text.

Classroom 2

Quite coincidentally, observing Ms. M's class, I found Nellie reading the same *Frog and Toad* story as Jennifer did, except that Nellie's teacher does not offer assistance except when things run quite aground. Ms. M respects Nellie's construction of meaning as she transacts with the text and has modelled this commitment many ways over the course of the school year. It is February and the children have a classroom that physically resembles Ms. K's. Ms. M has been teaching for nine years and has taken a course on miscue analysis at a nearby university. Nellie is called over to Ms. M for much the same reason that Jennifer was called to Ms. K. Ms. M keeps a continuous record of the children's reading. She tapes the children and includes the tapes as part of each child's portfolio. Ms. M knows how cumbersome the miscue process is; for that reason, she only does a complete inventory (with various record sheets, etc.) on children she has concerns about. But she listens to all her children read aloud at some point during their reading conference.

The children in Ms. M's first grade will have many reading conferences with Ms. M over the course of the year and she will tape them reading or take notes on their reading, writing about

the miscues that the children make. She might borrow a child's text overnight to listen to the tape if she wishes to examine the miscues in greater depth. Ms. M knows that as she studies her children's miscues; she has a window into their reading process.

Nellie: The Kite . . . (pauses and looks at Ms. M)

Ms. M: Good title . . . sort of fits the picture.

The following display shows a comparison of Nellie's expected responses (those labelled text) and her observed responses (what she actually

Expected Response (Text)	Observed Response (Nellie)
1. The Kite	The Kite
2. Frog and Toad went out	Frog and Toad went out
3. to fly a kite.	to fly a kite.
4. They went to	They went to
5. a large meadow	a log made.
6. where the wind was strong.	There the wind was strong.
7. "Our kite will fly up and up,"	"Our kite will fly up and up,
8. said Frog.	said Frog.
9. "It will fly all the way up	"It will fly all the way up
10. to the top of the sky."	to the top of the sky."
11. "Toad," said Frog,	Toad and Frog
12. "I will hold the ball of string.	will hold the bail of string ball of string.
13. You hold the kite and run."	"You hold the kite and run."

said). This is another way to show miscues in printed form. Each line in the original text is numbered (including the title page) and shown below.

You may wonder how a teacher can tolerate this kind of reading; certainly this book must be too difficult for Nellie. But Ms. M is very knowledgeable and understands that Nellie's independent reading provides important information. She let Nellie read the entire book with no help and Nellie knows that the teacher respects her construction of meaning and would rarely interrupt her reading. And, at the conclusion, Nellie retold what she remembered of the story. Ms. M and Nellie engaged in a discussion about the story as well. The retelling and ensuing discussion revealed that Nellie knew what the story was about, and she engaged in a quality discussion with Ms. M about the book.

Ms. M has taped the entire session, including the retelling. She makes notes of what areas she might consider for minilessons with Nellie. The tape becomes part of Nellie's portfolio. Ms. M has enjoyed the conversation with Nellie following the reading, as Nellie is a prolific writer and shares some ideas about animal friends she can write about in her own stories.

Ms. M believes that reading is a meaning-based and meaning-making process. Grapho-phonetic, syntactic, and semantic miscues that Nellie makes provide information that Ms. M will formulate into minilessons and that will offer Nellie strategies for increased efficiency in her reading. Ms. M inspires risk-taking and self-reliance in Nellie, encouraging her to build meaning from text and to share her understandings with other readers and writers. She understands miscues as valuable information about what the reader is doing with the written text. Ms. M works to use the information Nellie provides in her oral reading to increase Nellie's efficiency as a reader.

→ See: Goodman, p. 20, 53, 58, 72, 73, 146, 147, 148; Meyer, pp. 141, 148.

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