



Professional Teacher: Debra Goodman



Teachers Ask About Melissa, a Middle-Grade Reader Who Needs Lots of Teacher Support: Looking for a Reader's Strengths

The Reading Miscue Inventory benefits the teacher even more than the child. Each time I share Melissa's reading with a group of teachers, I gain new insights myself. Studying one reader in-depth can give us new ears to hear with. Talking about this reader with other teachers has given me new questions to consider.

What do you do with nonreaders?

My student teacher came to me one day to inform me that fifth-grade Melissa was a nonreader. I suggested that we do a Reading Miscue Inventory to see what was going on. Before the RMI, we sat down with Melissa in an informal session. We started with *Song of the Trees*, by Mildred Taylor, which Melissa was attempting to read in class. Her reading was labored, and her retelling indicated that her miscues had contributed to loss of meaning and misconceptions about details of the story. She had been able to get the gist of what was going on, but she appeared deflated and discouraged.

Next, I asked Melissa to read some predictable books for beginning readers, such as *The Bus Ride*. Melissa breezed through these books with no problem. This informal preamble to the RMI helped the student-teacher to see that Melissa was not a nonreader. Melissa was able to read and construct meaning, given the right text. This first experience was also a positive one for Melissa, who successfully read the books I had selected.

At the same time, I was able to see what Melissa could do as a reader, so that I could select an RMI text that was appropriate for her. I wanted a text that was difficult enough to cause miscues, without being totally frustrating. I also wanted a text that would be sophisticated enough to interest a ten-year-old. I chose Joanna Cole's humorous picture book, *Monster Manners*, in which the hero, Rosie Monster, "misbehaves" by being good instead of bad.

My student-teacher did the taped reading and retelling of the story using photocopies of the book to mark the miscues as she listened to Melissa read. Then we sat down to listen and go over the marked typescript together. Melissa's reading of *Monster Manners* turned out to be a wonderful example of how all readers use a variety of language strengths and strategies as they read.

On the first page of the text, Melissa reads:

Rose' Mother looked like a \$perflnt little monster. She had nice star feet, and shape little \$crowels and green ears that glowed in the dark. Rose had just one problem. She was always forgetting her mother's magic . . . meant.

In these four sentences, we can see evidence of all of the common strategies that readers use when they read.

Semantic strategies: Melissa is focusing on meaning when she substitutes *Rose* for *Rosie*, *feet* for *teeth*, and *ears* for *eyes*. All three substitutions maintain the basic purpose and syntactic structure of the author's text and do not change the overall meaning of the story.

Syntactic strategies: Melissa also shows her control over the syntactic or grammatical system in the *feet/teeth* and *ears/eyes* substitutions, maintaining the grammatical functions of the

Monster Manners

Rose^d mother
Rosie Monster looked like

Ⓢper-flnt
a perfect little monster.

star feet
She had nice strong teeth,
shape \$crowels
and sharp little claws,

ears
and green eyes that

glowed in the dark.

Rose
Rosie had just one problem.

She was always forgetting
mother's Ⓢ. magic z. meant
her monster manners.

words. Her substitutions of *Mother/Monster* and *magic/manners* also maintain the grammatical function of the story. In fact, Melissa's understanding of English syntax leads to some confusion in her reading of the word *monster*. She reads *monster* without difficulty when it appears as a common noun: *little monster*. She has trouble reading *monster* when it appears as a proper name: *Rosie Monster*, and later as an adjective: *monster manners*. In the first case, she predicts that *Monster (Mother)* is a common noun, her intonation suggesting that she has turned the name *Rosie* into a possessive. In the second case, she recognizes that *mother* must be possessive to appear in front of a noun.

Graphic strategies/illustrations: Before Melissa reads each page, there is a pause on the tape as she studies Jared Lee's illustrations. The pictures in this book are significant in adding to the humor and irony of this story and also include speech balloons. I have used this tape with several groups of teachers, and many have noticed the shape of Rosie's feet, possibly suggesting Melissa's construction of the phrase "little star feet."

Graphic strategies/graphophonic system: All of the eleven miscues on this page have a strong graphophonic relationship with the printed text. Beginning and ending sounds are the same in all of the miscues except for *mother's/mother*, where Melissa's sense of English syntax caused her to add the possessive *s*, and *star/strong*, where Melissa's use of the picture to predict a different adjective again overruled her graphophonic strategies. In the two cases where Melissa substitutes nonwords (*\$perflnt/perfect*, *\$crowels/claws*), she produces close graphophonic substitutions.

These miscues show that Melissa gives close attention to graphophonics and relies upon them entirely when other strategies fail her. In the last sentence, however, she abandons a

meaningful sentence, "*She was always forgetting her mother's magic,*" and produces an ungrammatical sentence with a miscue that is closer to *manners* graphically: "*She was always forgetting her mother's meant.*" This unsuccessful attempt at correction indicates that Melissa may actually rely too heavily on graphophonic strategies.

But what are you doing to help Melissa?

At this point reading teachers get very concerned for Melissa. Although we can find many strengths in her reading, it appears clear that she is in trouble. Our inclination as reading teachers might be to stop Melissa and make sure she understands the concept carriers *monster* and *manners* so that she will gain more understanding of the story. A skills approach would suggest that we introduce these words in vocabulary lessons, while a shared reading might explore these concepts in a prereading discussion of the story.

In a situation where the understanding of a text is very important (for content-area learning, for example), we would support Melissa's reading by a general discussion of the important concepts before and after Melissa reads the text. We might want to pair Melissa with another reader or read the text to her if we were concerned that she have the fullest understanding of all of the concepts presented. In this case, however, our goal is not for Melissa to understand this one story, but for ourselves as teachers to discover what Melissa's strengths are as a reader. Before settling on a plan for Melissa, we may need to adjust our goals for Melissa. Do we want her to know the meaning of all the words she reads? Do we want her to "comprehend" each text to our own satisfaction? Or do we ultimately want her to gain internal reading strategies that successfully allow her to construct a meaningful text for herself as she reads?

→ For more about Melissa, see pp. 58 and 73.

→ See: Goodman, pp. 20, 47, 58, 62, 73, 79, 88, 89, 99, 114, 115, 120, 121, 146, 147, 148.

Excerpt from *Monster Manners*, by Joanna Cole (New York: Scholastic, 1985). Reprinted with permission of Scholastic, Inc.



The Funny Side

A Literary Disease

When I taught kindergarten, I was fortunate to have a group of faithful parent volunteers who helped in the class. One parent, Julie, and I became very good friends. Julie had another son, Mark, in grade three in our school. She constantly worried about him as he was not yet an independent reader. Mark had been given every standardized test known to mankind, and no one could tell her why he could not read! We talked about him a lot, and I did my best to alleviate her concerns. One particular morning I saw Julie coming into the school. She popped her head in my door and told me she was going to yet another meeting regarding Mark. About an hour later she came back to my room, ten feet in the air. "Oh Marie," she said with elation. "They finally found out what's wrong with Mark . . . he has Miscue Analysis!"

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