

DISEQUILIBRIUM: AN INSTRUCTIONAL COACH'S REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

*When Debbie Miller, educational consultant and author of *Reading with Meaning* (2013) and *Teaching with Intention* (2008) visited a Title I elementary school in Texas, the instructional reading coach was challenged in her thinking about best practices for independent reading. Ms. Miller's visit included modeling interactive read alouds and conducting one-to-one reading conferences during independent reading. Additionally, Ms. Miller, the classroom teachers, and the instructional reading coaches discussed the practice of managed choice of texts during independent reading (e.g., restricting student choice to the genre used during the interactive read aloud). As a result of Ms. Miller's visits, the instructional coaches and the teachers thoughtfully and intentionally changed their teaching practices.*

Just as children might be disoriented after a roller coaster ride, teachers might also experience disequilibrium when their teaching methods are shaken. I was excited that Debbie Miller would present her views on teaching reading and was fully prepared for her to challenge teachers' practices and beliefs; however, I did not expect that I would be the one experiencing the disequilibrium that would cause me, the reading coach, to reflect on my teaching practices. Ultimately, the experience was thrilling and I enjoyed the ride!

THE BEGINNING

Back in August of 2012, I met with my building principal. Students on our campus were not meeting the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading proficiency. She explained that, as a consequence, our campus would receive additional funding for professional development. I immediately suggested that Debbie Miller, author of *Reading with Meaning* (2013) and *Teaching with Intention* (2008), come and work with our teachers, and the principal agreed. Consequently, I contacted Stenhouse, Ms. Miller's publisher, and we worked out the details. As a believer in keeping abreast of recent literature on the teaching of reading, I had read Ms. Miller's books and was looking forward to her presence on our campus.

As an instructional reading coach in a Title I elementary school, I provide professional development and coaching for the teachers on my campus in best reading practices. On our campus and in our district, we implement a version of independent reading that varies slightly from Sustained Silent Reading and Free Voluntary Reading (Krashen, 2004). To set up independent reading at the beginning of the school year, teachers teach mini-lessons, confer with students in one-to-one conferences, and guide students to choose books that they can read and that will hold their interest (Allington, 2001; Miller, 2009). Further, students learn how to use reading logs, reading response notebooks, and what appropriate reading behaviors look like and sound like (Fountas & Pinnell,

2001). Once structured independent reading time has been established in classrooms, teachers meet with students in small groups while the other students read independently. It is difficult for some students to become immersed in a self-selected text (Atwell, 2007) and is a challenge for teachers to pull themselves away from small guided reading groups to conduct one-to-one conferences. During their daily independent reading time, students had complete choice of books from the school library, from the classroom libraries, or from home. Although teachers planned and implemented reading workshop with intentionality, many students still struggled with reading and did not make expected reading progress. Indeed, we desperately needed Ms. Miller's assistance in moving to a more balanced approach in order to meet all students' needs.

THE VISIT

Fast forward to February 2013, and Ms. Miller was on our campus, sharing her valuable knowledge with our teachers. Prior to the visit, I was able to communicate with Ms. Miller about her model of professional development; she was interested in demonstrating lessons and discussing the importance of teachers holding one-to-one reading conferences with students. Additionally, she wished to present information on student agency (e.g., nudging students towards success with literacy by developing their self-efficacy) (Johnston, 2004; Miller, 2008, 2013). I expected that Ms. Miller would challenge teachers' thinking, as balancing one-on-one conferring and guided reading groups would be controversial. Most teachers met with guided reading groups every day during independent reading, and one-to-one reading conferences with students occurred less frequently. While participating in this discussion, I realized that the teachers were not the only ones whose beliefs about reading instruction would be challenged.

In addition to modeling one-to-one reading conferences, Ms. Miller (2013) proposed a type of independent reading that was purposeful and also provided a balance of managed choice and self-selected choice of books. At first, this idea was difficult for me to accept, as I believed that students should be able to have unlimited choice of texts from the classroom library – every day. Ms. Miller agreed that student choice is an absolute, and she has written extensively about the importance of choice (Miller, 2008; Miller & Moss, 2013); however, she explained that sometimes students need to practice reading skills with texts similar to the text that is used for the interactive read-aloud.

During her visit, Ms. Miller described her one-third/two-thirds framework (see Figure 1) as documented in *Reading with Meaning* (Miller, 2013): Teachers explicitly teach during one-third of the reading block and students read, talk, write, and reflect during the other two-thirds of the block, while the teacher guides and observes. During the two-thirds segment (independent reading/guided practice), Ms. Miller suggested that teachers might give students managed choice of texts (e.g., students select from a particular genre or group of books) and that they might select these from a number of high-quality texts that match the explicit reading instruction taught during the mini-lesson (Miller, 2013; Miller & Moss, 2013). Further, although Ms. Miller expressed that students should self-select their independent reading books, she proposed a balance between free choice and managed choice.

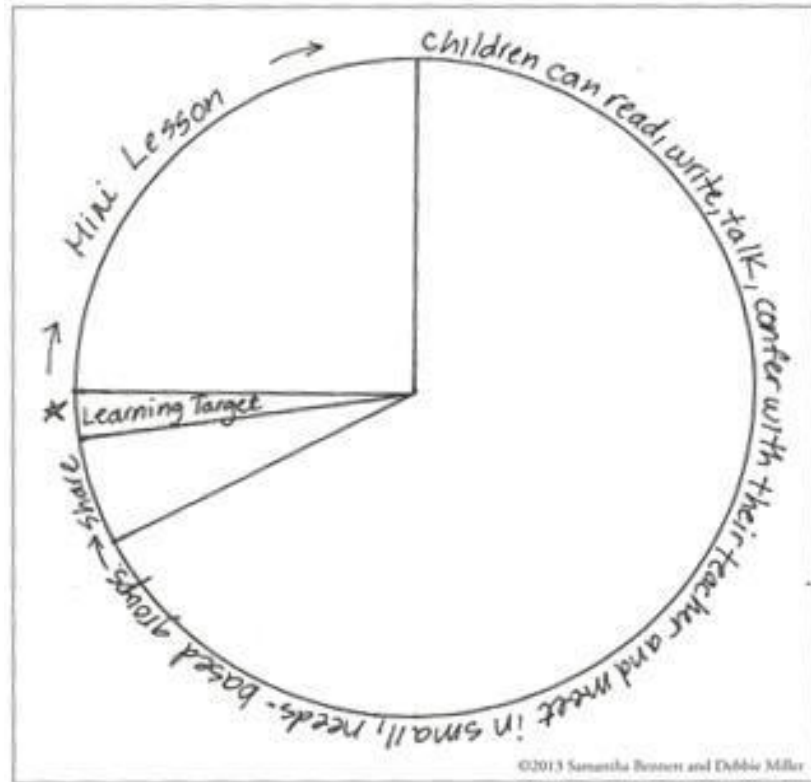


Figure 1. Debbie Miller's (2013) one third/two thirds framework from *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades*, (2nd Ed.) (used by permission).

STUDENT CHOICE IN INDEPENDENT READING

Reading researchers have written about the necessity and importance of student choice during independent reading (Allington, 2001, 2013a, 2013b; Gallagher, 2009; Miller & Kelley, 2014; Kittle, 2013; Krashen, 2004, 2005; Miller, 2008, 2013; Miller & Moss, 2013; Miller, 2009). In a 2004 meta-analysis, Guthrie and Humenick proposed that the two most powerful instructional design factors for improving reading motivation and comprehension were (1) student access to a wide selection of books and (2) personal choice of what to read. Similarly, Allington and Gabriel (2012) stated, "We're not saying that students should never read teacher- or district-selected texts. But at some time every day, they should be able to choose what they read" (p. 10). Sanden (2012) studied exemplary elementary teachers' use of independent reading time in the classroom. Upon analyzing interviews with teachers, Sanden suggested that the teachers believed choice was important: "The teachers indicated that one of the cornerstones of their independent reading is providing students with opportunities to read books of their own choosing" (p. 225). Although a proponent of Free Voluntary Reading and choice, Krashen (2004) asserted that choice alone will not help some students reach the deeper levels of reading they will need as they progress as readers:

Despite the benefits of light reading, a diet of only light reading will probably not lead to advanced levels of development...light reading can serve as a conduit to heavier reading: It provides both the motivation for more reading and the linguistic competence that makes harder reading possible (pp. 114-115).

In a similar manner, Cambourne (1988) maintained, "Immersion, when applied to literacy learning, can take a number of forms...At another level it can be teacher-controlled immersion or learner-controlled immersion" (p. 45). Choice is important, but there can be iterations of choice (Cambourne, 1988; Krashen, 2004).

Because of my passion for total student choice, I was torn between managed choice and free choice of independent reading books. As a classroom teacher and instructional coach who had always encouraged free choice of texts during independent reading, I was firmly entrenched in my beliefs; however, I clearly understood the benefit of students practicing the explicit strategy from the read-aloud lesson. I wondered, How do we find the time for daily independent reading where students have choice in the books they read (learner-controlled immersion) while simultaneously providing a more scaffolded version of independent reading in which teachers have more control over book selection (teacher-controlled immersion) (Cambourne, 1988)?

SECOND GRADE CLASSROOM DEMONSTRATION

During her visit, Ms. Miller demonstrated lessons in classrooms while teachers observed and took notes. She then met with teachers after each lesson to debrief. During the one-third segment of the framework (e.g., explicit teaching) of a second-grade lesson, Ms. Miller gathered the students, read a high-interest nonfiction book, and modeled how she located interesting facts and jotted them on sticky notes. When students returned to their seats, they found three teacher-chosen, independent reading level, non-fiction books on their desks, and Ms. Miller asked them to choose the most interesting book from their pile. During the two-thirds section of the framework of the lesson (independent and guided practice), students read their books, found interesting facts, and wrote the facts down on sticky notes while Ms. Miller conferred individually with students. During these conferences, she told students that she would check back with them after giving them more time to practice, and then followed-up with an additional conversation. After about fifteen minutes, Ms. Miller asked the whole class to pause, so that she could explain one "smart thing" one of the students had tried. She called this a "catch and release" moment, or a time to check in with students and nudge them all forward in their thinking (Miller, 2013; Miller & Moss, 2013). Next, after about 30 minutes of independent reading and sticky note-writing, Ms. Miller brought the students back to the carpet and asked them to share their thinking and to reflect about what they found out about themselves as readers. What I noticed, again and again, was the way in which Ms. Miller spoke to the children. She said things like, "What have you learned as a reader, that you didn't know about yourself yesterday?" and "Smart is not something you are, it's something you get" and "What did you learn that you didn't know fifteen minutes ago?" The students then moved to small groups based on the nonfiction book they were reading and shared their thoughts and sticky notes with

each other while Ms. Miller listened in. Finally, students moved back to whole group to debrief with Ms. Miller about what they had learned. This lesson was a solid example of how teachers can use managed choice for independent reading.

FOURTH GRADE CLASSROOM DEMONSTRATION

In the fourth-grade classroom, Ms. Miller modeled inferring theme in fiction using picture storybooks. The day before, she had met with the class, book-talked several picture books, and asked students to pre-select the book they wanted to read during the forthcoming demonstration lesson. An example of a managed choice book selection for Ms. Miller's lesson can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Example of Managed Choice for Theme for Independent Reading

Title	Author	Date
<i>Each Kindness</i>	Woodson	2012
<i>Goin' Somewhere Special</i>	McKissack	2001
<i>Mr. Lincoln's Way</i>	Polacco	2001
<i>Sister Anne's Hands</i>	Lorbiecki	1998
<i>Sparrow Girl</i>	Pennypacker	2009
<i>White Socks Only</i>	Coleman	1996

During the modeled lesson, Ms. Miller employed a think-aloud about theme while reading *The Other Side* by Woodson (2001). Next, she sent the students out to read their books and practice what she had taught them about inferring the theme by writing their inferences on sticky notes. While students were reading and writing, Ms. Miller met with them in one-to-one conferences. Then, students moved to small groups to discuss their picture books. There were several copies of each book, and students were grouped with those that shared the same book. Finally, they returned to the whole group to share their thinking with Ms. Miller. In a manner similar to the second-grade lesson, the fourth-grade lesson reflected the use of managed choice of texts during independent reading; however, unlike the second-grade lesson, these students chose their independent reading texts collaboratively.

DEMONSTRATION LESSON DEBRIEFING

After each demonstration lesson, Ms. Miller met with teacher teams to debrief and answer questions. During both sessions, every teacher asked questions, clearly demonstrating their curiosity and their excitement about the instruction they had observed. Ms. Miller and I had planned an hour for each debriefing session, and we *under-planned*: one hour simply was not long

enough for Ms. Miller to answer all questions. Having provided teachers with plenty of food for thought, we could have conversed for hours.

On the way to the airport, Ms. Miller asked me what I thought the expectations for teachers should be, based on the professional development experience she had provided during the past two days. We discussed that teachers might consider implementing some of the ideas after the upcoming State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) testing. We agreed that a balance of managed choice and free choice during independent reading would be a likely next step. Little did I know that teachers had begun implementing Ms. Miller's suggestions immediately after returning to their classrooms!

The following day, I met with my principal. I explained that the teachers were excited about the one-third/two-thirds teaching framework (Miller, 2013), but that during the debriefing, they had expressed their concerns that consistent use of the model might interfere with scheduled guided reading time. Therefore, the principal advised me to visit some classrooms and observe how teaching time was utilized. For the next few days, I did just that. In all but one classroom, I saw teachers applying Ms. Miller's strategies. I observed teachers holding one-to-one conferences and students reading and talking with each other about their reading. It was apparent that teachers were realizing the power of the one-third/two-thirds teaching framework (Miller, 2013) in their classrooms.

TEACHER IMPLEMENTATION

Later that month, during our Professional Learning Community (PLC) conversations, teachers' feedback on Ms. Miller's visit was extremely positive. One teacher admitted that she had learned more about one student's reading skills and needs after just one reading conference than she had in multiple guided reading sessions during the year. One teacher said:

I tried the Ms. Miller's ideas on Thursday. I had them looking for main idea, and used a strip like [she had]. I sent students out with the strip. I had chosen Social Studies books for the students. The one-on-one conferring was very powerful. Only two students didn't get it. I had more intention in my conferences.

Another teacher responded: "I used the Debbie Miller ideas with Spanish students for tutoring." And yet another teacher commented: "I tried some of the ideas. They [the students] wanted to quickly read through their book. If I had set it up, and modeled it, it would have worked better."

One day, I observed in one of the classrooms. The teacher had chosen several nonfiction texts to use during her one-third/two-thirds reading framework lesson. One group had chosen *Giant Pandas* (Reeder 2005), and the members were discussing the book. During the one-third segment, the teacher had urged the students to go deeper in their reading and thinking to really infer the important details in the nonfiction text. The students in this group were discussing that pandas give birth to two pandas. They had just read that one of the pandas usually dies in the wild, but not in

zoos. Students were making attempts to infer why the baby pandas might not die when born in the zoo. The conversations were rich and purposeful. Observing this research in the classrooms was heartening, hearing the feedback from excited teachers was energizing, and all of this was happening in classrooms just three weeks before students would take the STAAR reading test.

RETURN VISIT

Ms. Miller returned in May of the same year, and we met with second-grade through fifth-grade teachers during their Professional Learning Community (PLC) conference time. All teachers had read the first two chapters of *Teaching with Intention* (2008), and we had a fruitful book club discussion with Ms. Miller. Teachers were quite reflective and, with Ms. Miller's input, we began making instructional plans for the upcoming school year.

DISCUSSION

As a campus, we continue to reflect on our learning and practice and experience disequilibrium about teaching reading as a consequence. To address our primary teachers' concerns regarding guided reading, Ms. Miller suggested that during the one-third/two-thirds reading framework, all students read independently, and that we might search the schedule for other times for guided reading. We still need to find a balance, but balance is not easy. I recently queried a few teachers who participated in Debbie Miller's consulting visit in 2012, and asked how they are incorporating managed choice during independent reading. For the most part, teachers feel that managed choice is an excellent idea; some implement managed choice every week, and others feel that they cannot keep up with the preparation required to provide the managed choice texts. We are on an educational roller coaster, continuously teaching and reflecting, always with the goal being the most intentional reading teachers we know how to be. We owe a lot to Debbie Miller. We thank her a million times over. She is amazing, inspirational, and oh, so intentional.

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