
Gunther Kress. 2000. *Early spelling: Between convention and creativity*. London: Routledge: pp 237.

An interest in and concern with spelling has too easily been dismissed as an indication of a 'back to the basics' commitment. In exploring spelling, Kress shows that a very different view is possible. He ties early spelling to some fundamental aspects of literacy. In so doing, he reveals valuable insights into processes of learning to write in exploring the ways in which freedom and control operate in dynamic tension with one another.

Of immediate interest to him are the complex factors at work in the world which demand

dispositions towards innovativeness, creativity, the challenge of the established, the existent. The fundamental question for education – it it still to serve its society well – is: How can this be done? What changes in curricula will there need to be? What changes in pedagogic practices? What changes in values, contents, ethics? (x)

Kress takes a close look at points in the spelling development of particular children to show how an area dominated by convention can be seen as offering the space for the creativity and innovativeness. It is clear from the start that his purpose is a deeply serious one. He is not advocating that spelling no longer be taught or be learnt. However, he is concerned that many teaching practices do not take account of the process of thought revealed in children's spelling. He sets out to effect what he considers as essential changes in thinking and practices in education by presenting some insights into the ways children think as they try to represent their engagement with their social and cultural world.

Kress places his work in relation to work published on the social, political and ideological dimensions of language since the late 70s. In a sense he is right in saying that there is nothing new in this book (xvii), but in other ways it is groundbreaking work: his work invites educators to see what they have missed. His work is a powerful challenge to see the learning of spelling as a highly complex way of making meaning.

The book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, *Why and why now*, he looks at the way in which our world is being shaped by technology and soberly argues that the strong focus on images must have implications for education:

What will spelling become as an effect of these interrelated changes, of shifts in technology, culture, and our use in modes of representation – the shift, that is, from writing to image? And what consequences arise for the teaching of spelling to and the learning of spelling by: say, 5-7-year-olds, who will be living their adult lives in that changed environment?

In Chapter 2 ('A framework for thinking about the issues'), the concern Kress shows throughout for reflective academic inquiry is evident in careful way in which he presents his

arguments. At the same time, he is unequivocal about his own beliefs. He argues that children at first equate spelling with visual representation of ideas. For that reason when they ask how to write something (only later do they ask how to spell something) they expect a 'picture' of what they want to write.

In Chapter 3 ('The many meaning of spelling'), he develops an argument that form (signs children make on the pages) should be seen as synonymous with meaning. He has chosen pieces of writing which lend strong support to his view. But his purpose is not a rhetorical one: by showing the range and complexity of children's spelling he wishes to persuade educators 'to see children's actions the traces of intelligent minds engaging. Invented spelling is not to be seen as random but related to the reality of the world that is the prompt for their spelling: it reveals what guides how they make sense of the world and what guides their spelling. There are important implications for approaches to spelling. Clearly, what children write when they attempt to spell cannot be seen as a set of errors or mistakes. Second, spelling is not a mere re-instantiation of conventions. Third, creativity should be viewed as usual and normal and at the same time a process of making use of existing things. Finally, form and meaning are identical. The educators approach should be to focus on the interest of the child and create opportunities for meaning to be understood. One such way would be to teach the history of words.

I found Chapter 4, the most interesting of the chapters. Here he poses the question: *What do children try to spell?* He returns to a point made earlier in the book that children are trying to represent ideas (the language-as-ideas principle). He explores three issues: What do we regard as being part of spelling (a narrow view would ignore tone and intonation, for instance?); The range of things children do with spelling and the meanings made by them in their spellings; The abstractness with which children approach spelling. Here as in other parts of the book his concern is to persuade those who work with children of the great conceptual, cognitive, imaginative effort involved in children's early spelling and the degree of abstractness that they achieve so effortlessly (p. 149). Approaches to spelling (what he terms the forms and methods) must take account of these.

In Chapter 5, he develops the argument that spelling correctly in terms of the conventions of English, particularly, depends on knowing the written version of the language and thus developing a strong sense of what the language looks like. Children have, for instance, to have an understanding of words as visual units. Early writing such as *wosapontim* (once upon a time) occurs as a result of hearing the phrase.

In Chapter 6, the main concern is with misspellings which can be related to sound. He believes that about half of children's 'misspellings' are the result of eliding sound that exists only in ideal/idealized pronunciation. This supports his view that children are transcribing what they hear. This should be read in the light of his point in chapter 2 that the reality of English (or any language for that matter) is that it occurs in a multiplicity of varieties.

Kress points out that sometimes a kind of mishearing occurs, which is evident in what is written. The child imposes the syllabic and phonological rules on what he or she hears. On other occasions, like for instance the explanation of the child's writing of 'dided' is probably that the child has applied the generalisation that *-ed* is added to the end of the verb to form the past tense.

The book makes absorbing reading. I found the illustrations all the more telling because the samples were photocopies of the children's actual writing. They provide powerful evidence of the engagement with meaning. This book should form part of the mandatory reading for foundation phase teachers, teacher educators and students doing their initial training. It offers a valuable means of placing early spelling/writing within a meaning-making perspective. The focus is on the child's learning perspectives.

The book is also concerned with broader concerns such as conforming to authority, on the one hand, and creativity and innovation, on the other.

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