

CHAPTER 6

Questions and Possibilities

Questions. We love questions. They keep us growing, keep us thinking. When we share our thinking with students and colleagues, spelling is one topic that never fails to generate many questions. Through many conversations about spelling questions, we have come to the conclusion that there are very few single answers or “quick-fix” solutions to most of the issues that perplex us. Instead of answers to questions, we need ways to make good decisions in our teaching with regard to spelling. Sometimes the “answers” that inform our decisions will be different. What we need are ways to think about our questions—points that help us consider our own beliefs and that structure our looking to children for the answers they may hold.

Below are six questions that have come up in one form or another in many of our conversations about the teaching of writing. In response, we offer points to consider that we believe will help you in your own classroom decision making.

Question One: When do you stop letting children use constructed spelling? Points to consider:

- First, let’s look closely at the question. The word *letting* seems to convey the idea of “granting permission” to

children to use constructed spelling. This is not an issue of permission, however; it is an issue of understanding. We don't *let* children construct spellings, as if they had some other options to say what they need to say; we understand that they *must* construct spellings if they are to do the work of writers.

- All writers construct spellings throughout their lives for words that are unfamiliar. The more experience writers have, the more strategies they develop and the fewer constructions are needed. This is always true. Constructing spellings is not a stage a writer outgrows, with conventional spelling being the end goal. It is something writers learn to handle throughout their lives.
- We always encourage children to write for audiences *using all the powerful things they know* about writing—including strategies for spelling, and we have high expectations for our students. If we feel a student is not using all her knowledge about writing, for example, we intervene and try to teach her past this. At the same time, we also understand that all writers will need to seek spelling assistance when writing for certain audiences. There is no time when this need is not present—not in our entire writing lives.

Question Two: What about word lists? Points to consider:

- Let's think about the general assumption behind word lists: that we learn to spell one word at a time—that there is a moment when we don't know how to spell a word, and then a later moment when we do. We do not believe that the conventional spellings we hold come to us in moments of time. We believe they come in layers of experiences with reading and writing. The "moment in time" learning may happen with a very few words that we own—words such as *Mississippi*, where the gim-

mick of the spelling was fixed in our minds the first time we heard it—but this is a rare occasion.

- Spelling instruction can focus on spelling patterns and strategies, growing out of the context of the writer's work and questions.
- Some writers do, in fact, use a sort of listing strategy to help them remember tricky words that they use often. Our friend Barbara keeps a little note on her computer to help her remember the difference between the spelling of *chose* and *choose*. Our friend Jane keeps a reminder on her desk to help her with *familiar* and *similar*. "Those *i*'s and *a*'s can be so confusing!" she says. The significant point to remember here is that this is a very selective "list" initiated by the writer as a strategy for spelling troublesome words.

Question Three: Should I have my students keep personal dictionaries of words they need help remembering? Points to consider:

- One important thing to think about here is, "Whose purpose will this serve?" As teachers, we must ask ourselves if we want children to keep personal dictionaries because it's a good strategy for a writer, or because we hope to see fewer constructive spellings in children's writing.
- Another thing to consider is how we envision children using personal dictionaries. We need to articulate a vision of use for any structure that we put in place for all students in our classrooms. Once children begin to use a structure we've put in place, we must continuously reflect on its use to see if it matches what we envisioned.
- For writers to use dictionaries for spelling help in any productive way, they must own the spellings of most

words they need in their writing. A writer can't stop again and again to look up words. Many adult writers never interrupt their writing for this, choosing to deal with spelling issues after all their writing is complete. For us to expect young writers to look up words they don't know, in the same way adults would use this strategy, is unrealistic. There are just too many words for which young writers don't own the spellings. There is no way they could employ this strategy without it interfering with their meaning making.

- When teachers encourage children to use dictionaries for spelling help, they often see these children begin to limit themselves to using words that are in their dictionaries. Remember the example of Paola in Chapter 3.

Question Four: When children are writing and don't know how to spell a word, should I spell it for them if they ask?

Points to consider:

- First, ask yourself, "Why is the child asking for a spelling?" The answer to this question always lies with the child. If eight-year-old Robert routinely and confidently constructs spellings for words he needs in his writing, his occasional asking for a spelling is a good strategy—one that many writers use. Robert has probably asked for the spelling because the word perplexes him in a way that most unfamiliar words do not. On the other hand, if Sara seems afraid to construct spellings for most unfamiliar words, she likely asks for spellings because she is reluctant to take risks or because she has a limited repertoire of strategies. She needs more work with strategies for constructing spellings for unfamiliar words.
- We must consider the possibility that when we routinely offer spellings to children we may be creating codependent relationships. Although feeling needed as teachers can be satisfying, it does little to make our students the independent writers we want them to be.

Question Five: Why do children spell words conventionally on a spelling test, and then misspell them in their writing?

Points to consider:

- On spelling tests, the point of children's work is to get correct spellings for specific words. The focus of their attention is clearly on generating conventional spellings. In writing, the point of children's work is on making meaning, so the focus of their attention is understandably diverted away from spelling.
- A spelling test is essentially an act of simple memory and recall. Writing, on the other hand, is a much more complex act of continuous generation—generation of ideas, sentence structures, text features, and, of course, spellings.
- Related to this question is the difference between very young writers spending their writing time copying text versus spending time generating text. You may have observed what many wise teachers have: when encountering unknown spellings, the “generators” come up with much better spellings than the “copiers” because they've had so much more experience at what a writer must do when unknown spellings are encountered. Copying in no way replicates or gives children experience generating text. Preparation for spelling tests, likewise, gives writers no experience in generating text as needed.

Question Six: Should I give grades in spelling? Points to consider:

- The things we give grades for should reflect what is valued most in the classroom.
- On the other hand, a grade by itself, on anything, is an extremely narrow evaluative view of a child's learning and/or performance. The grade itself doesn't help the child's learning or the teacher's teaching. There just isn't

enough information in a grade, and it represents merely a small part of the child's total literacy development.

- Sandra Wilde has noted that we feel compelled to give grades in spelling because it is a feature of writing that is very visible, even though it is not in any way the most important feature. She has said that giving separate grades in spelling and writing is like giving separate grades for multiplication and mathematics.
- If you as a teacher want a way to look evaluatively at children's spelling use, refer to Chapter 3 and look closely at the index of control. This index can give you a qualitative and quantitative picture of children's conventional spelling use. Although we realize that the numbers generated from the index could be converted to grades for spelling, we feel strongly that this should not happen. If children know that they are being graded for conventional spellings, they will begin to focus on this at the expense of meaning making, and it is likely that they will take fewer risks as writers.

Question Seven: What about spelling books? Should I use the exercises as extra resources for my writers? Points to consider:

- The exercises in spelling books are made-up work where there is no work to be done. This is why the exercises often seem so senseless and, when they are assigned as homework, require whole families to figure out what's to be done. There just isn't any work to be done on "practicing" with spelling. There are not any layers to understanding spellings. You don't deepen your knowledge of how to spell a word, so any attempts to make the study of individual words into meaningful study are purposeless.