Evidence Based Practices Spotlight: Scaffolding

Specially Designed INSTRUCTION
The Heart of Special Education

What is Scaffolding?

Scaffolding, as outlined in High-Leverage Practice (HLP) 15, is a powerful instructional strategy that benefits a wide range of students, particularly those with disabilities and diverse learning needs. According to the CEEDAR Center and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), scaffolding involves providing temporary supports that help students access content and develop skills they might not yet be able to perform independently.

Who Benefits and Why it Matters

Scaffolding is especially beneficial for students working within their zone of proximal development, where targeted support helps them master new skills. In simple terms, the Zone of Proximal Development is a student's "learning zone." It's what they can learn to do with a little support, even if they can't do it on their own yet. This strategy is especially helpful for students with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Scaffolding is not one-size-fits-all; it is personalized to meet unique student needs. By gradually removing supports as students gain competence, scaffolding promotes independence and mastery. Teachers implementing scaffolding can differentiate instruction, build student confidence, and ensure access to rigorous academic content. Ultimately, scaffolding meets students where they are and helps them grow beyond what they could achieve alone.

What Scaffolding IS:

- **Temporary Support:** Scaffolding provides short-term assistance that helps students perform tasks they cannot yet do independently.
- **Gradual Release of Responsibility:** Teachers start with more support and gradually reduce it as students gain skills and confidence.
- **Responsive to Student Needs:** Scaffolding is tailored to individual learners based on their current level of understanding and readiness.
- **Instructional Strategies:** It includes modeling, guided practice, visual aids, sentence starters, graphic organizers, and prompting.
- **Promotes Independence:** The goal is to help students become autonomous learners who can apply skills without support.
- **Used Across Content Areas:** Scaffolding can be applied in reading, math, writing, science, and social-emotional learning.
- **Supports Access to Rigorous Content:** It enables all students to engage with grade-level standards and complex tasks.
- **Dynamic and Flexible:** Scaffolding is adjusted in real-time based on student progress and feedback.
- **Aligned with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):** It helps students move from what they can do with help to what they can do on their own.
- **Inclusive Practices:** Scaffolding supports equity by ensuring all students have access to meaningful learning opportunities.

What Scaffolding is NOT:

- **NOT the same as differentiation:** While both aim to support student learning, scaffolding is a temporary support that is gradually removed, whereas differentiation involves tailoring instruction to meet diverse needs consistently.
- **NOT simplifying the content:** Scaffolding does not mean lowering expectations or watering down the curriculum. It's about providing strategic support so students can access rigorous content.
- **NOT only for students with disabilities:** All students can benefit from scaffolding, especially when learning new or complex material. It's a universal strategy, not limited to special education.
- **NOT a permanent support:** Effective scaffolding is dynamic. Supports should be adjusted and removed as students gain independence and mastery.
- **NOT just giving students hints or cues:** While hints can be part of scaffolding, it also includes modeling, guided practice, visual aids, sentence starters, and other structured supports.
- **NOT slowing down instruction by taking too much time:** When used effectively, scaffolding can accelerate learning by helping students build confidence and competence more efficiently.
- **NOT only used during instruction:** Scaffolding can also be applied during assessment, planning, and classroom routines to support student success across contexts.
- **NOT a one-size-fits-all strategy:** It must be tailored to individual student needs, prior knowledge, and the specific learning task.

Scaffolding Steps and Examples

Review the charts below to see the steps of the scaffolding process side by side during a co-taught ELA lesson.

Scaffolding Step	*Scaffolding Example*
Step 1: Identify the Learning Goal Clearly define what students need to know or be able to do by the end of the lesson or unit.	**Scenario: Co-Taught 5th Grade ELA Lesson – Writing a Persuasive Paragraph** Students will write a persuasive paragraph that includes a clear opinion, supporting reasons, and a concluding statement aligned to grade-level writing standards and IEP writing goals.
Step 2: Assess Students' Current Knowledge Use formative assessments, observations, or prior work to determine where students are starting from.	The co-teaching team reviews student writing samples and exit tickets from a prior opinion writing unit. They note that some students struggle with organizing ideas and using transition words.
Step 3: Determine the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Identify tasks students can do with support but not yet independently—this is where scaffolding is most effective.	Through observation and conferencing, the team identifies that most students can generate ideas and state opinions with support but need scaffolding to structure their writing and elaborate with reasons.

Scaffolding Step	*Scaffolding Example*
Step 4: Select Appropriate Scaffolds Choose supports based on student needs and the task. Examples include: • Modeling • Visual aids • Graphic organizers • Sentence starters • Think-alouds • Guided practice	The team selects the following five supports: • **Modeling:** teacher writes a sample paragraph aloud, explaining each part • **Graphic Organizers:** opinion-Reason-Conclusion template • **Sentence Starters:** "I believe...", "One reason is...", "In conclusion..." • **Think-Alouds:** verbalizing how to choose strong reasons • **Guided Practice:** students co-construct a paragraph with the teacher
Step 5: Plan for Gradual Release Structure the lesson so that support is reduced over time (e.g., "I do, we do, you do" model).	Lesson is structured using "I do, we do, you do": • "I do": Teacher models writing. • "We do": Class writes a paragraph together. • "You do": Students write independently using scaffolds.
Step 6: Monitor and Adjust in Real Time Observe student responses and adjust scaffolds as needed. Some students may need more support, others less.	During independent writing, teachers circulate to observe and confer. One student needs additional modeling; another is ready to write without sentence starters. Supports are adjusted accordingly.
Step 7: Encourage Student Reflection Ask students to reflect on what helped them learn and how they can apply strategies independently.	Students complete a quick reflection: • "What helped you write today?" • "Which strategy will you use next time?"
Step 8: Fade Supports Strategically Remove scaffolds gradually as students demonstrate mastery, promoting independence and confidence.	As students demonstrate mastery, sentence starters and graphic organizers are removed. Students begin drafting without templates.
Step 9: Provide Feedback Offer specific, constructive feedback to reinforce learning and guide improvement.	Teachers give targeted feedback: • "Your reason is strong, can you add an example?" • "Great use of transitions. Let's work on your conclusion."
Step 10: Evaluate and Reflect After the lesson, reflect on what worked, what didn't, and how scaffolding impacted student learning.	After the lesson, the co-teaching team debriefs: • Which scaffolds were most effective? • Which students need continued support? • How did scaffolding impact SDI delivery and writing outcomes?

Example Scenarios

The next three scenarios include examples of scaffolding at elementary, middle, and high school levels. Note the inclusion of universal supports for all students and targeted supports for students with various disability diagnoses in the planning document. These examples demonstrate how scaffolding can be adjusted within the same lesson to meet unique learner needs.

Scenario 1: Elementary School (Grade 2, Reading Comprehension)

Content: Understanding the main idea of a story

Step 1: Identify the Learning Goal
Students will identify the main idea of a short narrative text and support it with key details.

Step 2: Assess Students' Current Knowledge
Teachers use a quick formative check:

- Students read a short paragraph and circle what they think is the main idea.
- Results show some students focus on minor details or personal reactions.

Step 3: Determine the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
Most students can retell events but struggle to distinguish between key ideas and supporting details.

- Students with Emotional Disability (ED) require emotional regulation supports to remain engaged.
- Students with Autism need help interpreting implied meaning.
- Students with ADHD will need their IEP accommodations to support sustaining attention and organizing thoughts.

Step 4: Select Appropriate Scaffolds
The co-teachers realize that not all students will receive the same type of scaffolding. They integrate universal supports that benefit all students as part of their instructional delivery and plan for their students with ED, Autism, and ADHD.

Universal Supports:

- **Think-alouds:** teacher models identifying the main idea using verbal reasoning
- **Graphic organizer:** "Main Idea & Details" template with visual icons
- **Modeling:** teacher reads aloud and highlights key sentences
- **Sentence starters:** "The story is mostly about..." / "One important detail is..."

Targeted Supports:
These scaffolds and targeted supports are also documented in student IEPs.

- For students with ED:
  - Predictable routine and visual schedule
  - Calm-down corner or fidget tool access
  - Positive reinforcement for participation

- For students with Autism:
  - Visual icons for “main idea” vs. “detail”
  - Literal language prompts and concrete examples
  - Structured partner work with clear roles
- For students with ADHD:
  - Chunked text with movement breaks
  - Color-coded highlighting for key ideas
  - Timers or checklists to guide task completion

Step 5: Plan for Gradual Release

- “I do”: Teacher models identifying the main idea using a read-aloud and graphic organizer.
- “We do”: Class works together to identify the main idea of a second story.
- “You do”: Students read a short story independently and complete the organizer with support as needed.

Step 6: Monitor and Adjust in Real Time

Both teachers circulate and use prompts:

- “What is this story mostly about?”
- “Can you find a sentence that supports your idea?”

Adjust scaffolds based on engagement and accuracy.

Step 7: Encourage Student Reflection

Students complete a quick exit slip:

- “What helped you find the main idea today?”
- “What strategy will you use next time?”

Step 8: Fade Supports Strategically

- Students who demonstrate mastery begin using blank graphic organizers.
- Sentence starters are removed gradually.
- Students with ADHD transition from color-coded supports to self-monitoring checklists.

Step 9: Provide Feedback

Teachers give specific praise and guidance:

- “You found a strong main idea, can you add one more detail?”
- “Great job using the organizer to stay focused!”

Step 10: Evaluate and Reflect

Co-teaching team debriefs:

- Which scaffolds supported SDI delivery?
- How did students with ED, AU, and ADHD respond to scaffolds and attempts to fade supports?
- What adjustments are needed for tomorrow’s lesson?

Scenario 2: Middle School (Grade 7 Science, Understanding the Water Cycle)

Step 1: Identify the Learning Goal
Students will describe the stages of the water cycle (evaporation, condensation, precipitation, collection) and explain how energy drives the process.

Step 2: Assess Students' Current Knowledge
Teachers use a quick concept map activity and a short quiz to assess prior knowledge.

Findings:

- Some students confuse condensation and precipitation.
- Three students with ADHD struggle to organize ideas.
- Two students with Autism need help interpreting diagrams.
- A student with ED is disengaged during whole-group instruction.

Step 3: Determine the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

- Most students can name water cycle stages but need support explaining how they connect and how energy drives the cycle.
- Students with disabilities benefit from structured visuals, predictable routines, and chunked tasks.

Step 4: Select Appropriate Scaffolds

Universal Supports:
The co-teachers incorporate strategies that support all students first.

- **Visual aids:** labeled water cycle diagram with arrows and icons
- **Think-alouds:** teachers model how to describe each stage
- **Graphic organizer:** "Stage–Definition–Energy Source–Example" chart
- **Guided practice:** class completes a diagram together
- **Sentence starters:** "Evaporation happens when…", "Condensation is caused by…"

Targeted Supports:

- For the student with ED:
  - Calm entry routine and preview of lesson structure
  - Positive behavior reinforcement for participation
  - Option to work in pairs or small groups
- For students with AU:
  - Clear, literal language and step-by-step visuals
  - Structured partner roles during guided practice
  - Visual schedule and predictable transitions
- For students with ADHD:
  - Chunked tasks with timers
  - Movement breaks between stages
  - Color-coded diagrams and checklists for task completion

Step 5: Plan for Gradual Release

- » "I do": Teacher models the water cycle using a diagram and think-aloud.
- » "We do": Class completes a graphic organizer, with partial teacher support and prompts.
- » "You do": Students complete a diagram and explanation independently, using scaffolds as needed.

Step 6: Monitor and Adjust in Real Time

Teachers circulate and use prompts:

- » "What happens after condensation?"
- » "Can you show me where energy is involved?" Adjust scaffolds based on engagement and accuracy.

Step 7: Encourage Student Reflection

Students complete a quick reflection:

- » "Which strategy helped you understand the water cycle?"
- » "What part was hardest, and how did you work through it?"

Step 8: Fade Supports Strategically

- » Students who demonstrate mastery begin using blank diagrams.
- » Sentence starters and color cues are removed gradually.
- » Students with ADHD transition to self-monitoring checklists.

Step 9: Provide Feedback

Teachers give specific, constructive feedback:

- » "Great job explaining evaporation, can you add what causes it?"
- » "Your diagram is clear. Let's work on connecting the stages."

Step 10: Evaluate and Reflect

Co-teaching team debriefs:

- » Which scaffolds supported SDI delivery?
- » How did students with ED, AU, and ADHD respond?
- » What adjustments are needed for tomorrow's lesson on energy transfer?

Scenario 3: High School (Grade 10 Algebra – Solving Quadratic Equations)

Step 1: Identify the Learning Goal
Students will solve quadratic equations using factoring, completing the square, and the quadratic formula.

Step 2: Assess Students' Current Knowledge
Teachers use a warm-up with three quadratic equations and a quick poll on preferred methods.

Findings:

- Some students confuse factoring with distributing.
- Students with ADHD skip steps or lose track of the process.
- Students with AU struggle with abstract reasoning and symbolic notation.
- Students with ED show frustration when errors occur.

Step 3: Determine the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
Most students can identify quadratic equations and attempt factoring. Students need support choosing appropriate methods and completing multi-step procedures. Students with disabilities benefit from visual models, step-by-step guides, and error-tolerant environments.

Step 4: Select Appropriate Scaffolds

Universal Supports:
The co-teachers incorporate strategies that support all students first.

- **Anchor chart:** visual summary of all three solving methods
- **Completed examples for modeling:** color-coded steps for each method
- **Graphic organizer:** "Equation–Method–Steps–Solution" chart
- **Guided practice:** solve one equation together using each method
- **Sentence frames:** "I chose factoring because…", "My first step was…"

Targeted Supports:

- For students with ED:
  - Calm entry routine and preview of problem types
  - Encouragement for effort and strategy use
  - Option to use peer support or teacher check-ins
- For students with AU:
  - Explicit instruction on symbols and structure
  - Visual flowcharts for each solving method
  - Predictable routines and clear transitions between methods
- For students with ADHD:
  - Step checklists for each method
  - Movement breaks between problem sets
  - Use of highlighters and timers to pace work

Step 5: Plan for Gradual Release

- “I do”: Teacher models solving quadratic equations by factoring with color-coded steps.
- “We do”: Class completes a problem using completing the square.
- “You do”: Students solve a quadratic equation by using the quadratic formula independently, with scaffolds.

Step 6: Monitor and Adjust in Real Time

Teachers circulate and prompt:

- “What method fits this equation?”
- “Can you explain your first step?” Adjust scaffolds based on accuracy and persistence.

Step 7: Encourage Student Reflection

Students complete a reflection:

- “Which method felt easiest and why?”
- “What helped you stay focused or organized?”

Step 8: Fade Supports Strategically

Students begin solving without graphic organizers. Sentence frames and checklists are removed gradually. Students with ADHD transition to self-monitoring strategies.

Step 9: Provide Feedback

Teachers offer specific feedback:

- “Great use of the square completion steps, can you double-check your signs?”
- “You chose the right method. Let’s refine your final step.”

Step 10: Evaluate and Reflect

Co-teaching team debriefs:

- Which scaffolds supported SDI delivery?
- How did students with ED, AU, and ADHD respond?
- What adjustments are needed for tomorrow’s lesson on graphing quadratics?

Research

- **University of San Diego** – *"7 Scaffolding Learning Strategies for the Classroom."* This article explains scaffolding as a segmented instructional strategy that gradually reduces teacher support. It includes examples across grade levels and emphasizes the benefits of scaffolding for retention and engagement. Available at https://pce.sandiego.edu/scaffolding-in-education-examples/.
- **University of Georgia Pressbooks** – *"Scaffolding – Instructional Methods, Strategies and Technologies."* This chapter provides a deep dive into scaffolding theory, including Vygotsky's ZPD, fading, and individualized instruction. It outlines key features and elements of effective scaffolding. Available at https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/teachingdiverselearners/chapter/scaffolding-2/.
- **American College of Education** – *"What Is Scaffolding in Teaching?"* This blog post offers practical scaffolding strategies for K–12 classrooms, including visual aids, modeling, and chunking. It highlights how scaffolding supports diverse learners and promotes independence. Available at https://ace.edu/blog/what-is-scaffolding-in-teaching/.
- **Schools That Lead** – *"How to Quickly Apply Scaffolding in Education Strategies."* This guide emphasizes the adaptability of scaffolding across subjects and grade levels. It includes actionable strategies like sentence starters, graphic organizers, and guided practice. Available at https://www.schoolsthatlead.org/blog/scaffolding-in-education-strategies.
- **Edutopia** – *"Powerful Scaffolding Strategies to Support Learning."* This article categorizes scaffolding into cognitive, metacognitive, and procedural types, offering creative techniques like mind movies, concept clouds, and phased instructions. Available at https://www.edutopia.org/article/powerful-scaffolding-strategies-support-learning.

Resources

- Aceves, Terese C., and Michael J. Kennedy, editors. *High-Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities*. 2nd ed., Council for Exceptional Children and CEEDAR Center, Feb. 2024, Available at https://ceedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/High-Leverage-Practices-for-Students-with-Disabilties-updated.pdf.
- Council for Exceptional Children. "Provide Scaffolded Supports." *High-Leverage Practices in the Inclusive Classroom*, 2021, Available at https://exceptionalchildren.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/HLP 15 Admin Guide.pdf.
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