

Help Me Where I Am: Scaffolding Writing in Preschool Classrooms

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Abstract

Early writing is important to young children's development – research indicates that writing is predictive of later reading and writing. Despite this, preschool teachers often do not focus on writing and offer limited scaffolding to foster children's writing development. This article shares innovative ways to scaffold early writing across the three component skills of writing – composing, spelling, and forming letters.

Teaser Text

Scaffolding is a powerful instructional tool. This article provides teachers with specific scaffolding strategies to support early writing, including helping children to compose, spell, and form letters in preschool classrooms.

Help Me Where I Am: Scaffolding Writing in Preschool Classrooms

Just like many preschool teachers, Ms. Shepard (pseudonym) begins the day with a morning meeting. During this time, Ms. Shepard collaborates with children to mark attendance and write a message. Ms. Shepard sees the opportunities inherent in these routines to infuse writing and scaffolds children in the process by utilizing a range of teaching strategies that support children's individual skills. At the beginning of the year, Ms. Shepard asked children to mark an 'X' next to their name during attendance. Now, some children are encouraged to write their name or an approximation.

Ms. Shepard unveils the morning message, which she partially wrote before the meeting. Using what she knows about each child's ability, Ms. Shepard asks individual children to help her write the message. Maria is asked to circle all the "M"s in the message. Maria struggles but Ms. Shepard reminds her that an M goes up and down, like two mountains, and it begins her name, "/m/Maria." Jaden fills in letters that Ms. Shepard intentionally left blank (i.e., "_ood morning!"). She helps Jaden isolate the '/g/' sound and asks, "Does a J or a G make a /g/ sound?" Mackenzie is asked to aid Ms. Shepard in composing, by adding a new idea to the message. Ms. Shepard pauses while Mackenzie thinks and is prepared to offer some choices. However, these are not necessary because Mackenzie identifies a meaningful sentence and Ms. Shepard models writing this sentence.

During all these instances, Ms. Shepard supported children's writing by engaging children based on what individual children know and what Ms. Shepard wants each to learn. She scaffolded their writing. Importantly, Ms. Shepard supported children in developing three different writing component skills – composing, spelling, and forming

letters (Kaderavek, Cabell, & Justice, 2009). All three are necessary for later skilled writing.

Despite professional recommendations, scaffolding and writing instruction are still limited in preschool classrooms (Gerde, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2015). In this article, we discuss six strategies for scaffolding that can be used to support children's early writing. While the specific scaffolding strategies offered here are not new, this article demonstrates how to effectively use them to support all components of a comprehensive writing framework—composing, spelling, and forming letters.

Early Writing and Why it Matters

Early writing begins to develop prior to formal schooling and precedes explicit teaching. However, becoming a skilled writer necessitates focused instruction (Tolchinsky, 2003). Thus, it is critical for preschool teachers to offer opportunities to write and instruction around writing, just like Ms. Shepard. Before teachers can scaffold children's writing, teachers should offer a variety of writing opportunities and an environment rich with print.

When teachers scaffold children's writing they might attend to different focus areas that are critical for learning to write, such as composing, spelling, and forming letters. For example, supportive strategies could revolve around a child's ability to generate ideas about what to write, sound out and write words, or make letters (Kaderavek et al., 2009).

It is critical to promote children's development of all three of these components by scaffolding children at their current developmental levels. While many teachers focus purely on forming letters (i.e., name writing and letter formation), less focus is placed on

children's ability to spell or compose text. This represents an important missed opportunity because it is teachers' support in the area of composing that seems to be the most meaningful for children's writing abilities (Bingham, Gerde, & Quinn, 2015). Thus, scaffolded instruction should be used to address all writing component skills.

Scaffolding Strategies for Supporting Writing

Teachers can model, reduce-choices, guide, extend, explain, and make comparisons to promote children's writing. These scaffolding strategies can be applied to address all three component areas of writing.

Low-Level Scaffolds

Some scaffolds offer a lot of support for children. We call these low-level scaffolds as they require the least amount of child effort while teachers are highly supportive.

Low-level scaffolds include:

Modeling.—demonstrating a target task visually and verbally. Modeling allows children to see a particular skill in hopes that they will imitate it (Kostelnik, Soderman, Whiren, & Rupiper, 2014). To model composing, Ms. Shepard uses think-alouds while constructing a thank-you letter to a class visitor with children. For example, "We are writing a thank-you letter to the chef who visited us. In a thank-you letter, we write what we liked about our visitor. Tell me what you liked and I will write your words." Teachers can model spelling by elongating the sound and writing each letter on a separate paper while a child uses the model to write on their own paper (see Figure 1). Ms. Shepard models letter formation by providing print in the environment that reflects her current classroom theme.

Reducing choices.—limiting available choices for a child’s response helps children to narrow their focus and reduce cognitive demand in ways that support early writing (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010). Ms. Shepard scaffolds composing by reducing choices in terms of prompts – “You are writing about your trip to the park. Do you want to write about who you went with or what you did there?” She reduces spelling choices by asking about letter-sounds, “What sound do you hear at the end of ‘bat’, /k/ or /t/?” Ms. Shepard reduces choices in letter formation by asking “I want to write ‘C.’ Should I use a straight or curved line?”

Guiding.—offering direct support, cognitively or physically, so a child may complete a task. Guiding means that a teacher directly supports a child so that he begins to have autonomy in completing tasks before the child can independently complete the task (Kostelnik et al., 2014). Ms. Shepard guides composing by asking children to generate ideas for the title of their graph, “What should our title be if our graph displays our favorite dinosaurs?” She guides children’s spelling by supporting them to sound out words, “What sounds do you hear in ‘mom’?” She stretches sounds as she says the word ‘mom’. Also, teachers may guide word concepts by pointing to where the next letter should be written or where the next word would start in a sentence. Ms. Shepard guides a child in forming letters by employing hand-over-hand writing. Additional examples are presented in Table 1.

High-Level Scaffolds

Although children need less support to complete a task over time, they continue to benefit from scaffolds that push thinking. High-level scaffolds require the child to be

more self-sufficient as he/she must use his/her own skills and knowledge to achieve the task, so many may be too advanced for some children while being appropriate for others.

High-level scaffolds include:

Extending.—asking the child to take present concepts and apply in other contexts. Children who are able to extend knowledge they have from one context to another, demonstrate stronger language, comprehension, and cognitive skills (Sigel, 1986). Ms. Shepard uses extending to tap into composing by making connections between past and present compositions. For a child who plans to make a list of what they need to build a birdhouse, Ms. Shepard draws the child’s attention to a grocery list they made previously in the classroom kitchen. She notes that to make a list, the child should write one item or idea on each line (see Figure 2). Ms. Shepard extends children’s spelling by connecting the letter sounds she writes to those needed later, “I wrote the letter ‘m’/m/ when I wrote ‘mouse,’ and we will write ‘m’ again for /m/‘market.’” Ms. Shepard uses print materials around the classroom to promote letter formation. For example, she includes pictures with labels of castles, skyscrapers, barns, and/or houses so children can write signs for their structures (see Figure 3).

Explaining.—asking the child to explain what, how, or why, requires the child to externalize his thinking, leading to deeper understanding of the writing process (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007). For composing, Ms. Shepard asks children to verbally communicate their ideas for writing. “What will you write about today?” “How will you decide what foods to include on your grocery list?” She includes opportunities for children to share their writing with peers at group time, providing more chances for explaining. To scaffold spelling, she asks children to justify their spelling choices, “How

did you know ‘dog’ begins with a ‘d’?” This facilitates a discussion of letter-sound correspondence. Ms. Shepard asks children to explain specific letter formations. For example, “Caleb, can you describe how to make the letter ‘b’ for Issa so she can write the word bear on her chart?”

Comparing.—asking the child to make comparisons between objects, concepts, and ideas. Making comparisons helps children to better comprehend the concepts at hand and perceive contrasts and similarities (Gonzalez et al., 2014). Ms. Shepard scaffolds composing by asking children to compare the stories they wrote to picture books. Prompting the children to examine how their writing looks like storybooks deepens understanding of the connection between oral and written language. “You wrote about your family under your drawing, just like in this book where there are illustrations and words.” Also, “Your story has illustrations. How is your story different from the picture book?” For spelling, Ms. Shepard asks children to compare the sounds they hear in various words, “What sounds do you hear at the beginning of ‘kite’? Does it remind you of any other words?” Ms. Shepard uses comparing to support letter formation by requesting that children compare their writing with her writing or that of peers. Table 2 includes additional examples of high-level scaffolds.

Conclusion

This article provides six strategies that teachers can use to support young children’s composing, spelling, and forming letters. Recognizing that some children need low-level supports while others need high-level supports, the strategies provided can support children with a range of writing skills. Providing writing opportunities, and offering individualized writing scaffolds can support children’s writing development.

Take Action!

1. Plan one writing opportunity and how you will use one low-level and one high-level scaffold.
2. Consider how you can use the two scaffolds to address each writing component skill (composing, spelling, letter formation).
3. After your lesson, reflect on how well the scaffolds worked. Would other scaffolds work better for children? Think about which scaffolding strategy you want to utilize next.

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Table 1
Modeling, Reducing Choices, and Guiding Examples

Scaffolding Type	Forming Letters	Spelling	Composing
Modeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writes the letter “R” and describes the form. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Models spelling of a word by saying the letters or sounds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thinks aloud while writing a story to demonstrate how she makes decisions about writing.
Reducing choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks, while writing the letter ‘T’, “Does the line across go on the bottom or the top?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limits options while spelling a word (what letter begins /c/ cat? Is it “C” or “B”?). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks about particular words “Should we begin our letter ‘hello’ or ‘Dear ’?”
Guiding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers feedback while child is writing her name “an E and two M’s, Emma, now you just need the last letter. Remember how it is one of our circle and stick letters?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers support while child sounds out a word “You sounded out the word ‘hat.’ I heard the /h/ sound too. What comes next?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports children’s story construction “What do you remember next from your trip?” You could write about that.”

Table 2
Extending, Explaining, and Comparing Examples

Scaffolding Type	Forming Letters	Spelling	Composing
Extending	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connects letter forms in known contexts “We need to write a ‘Q’ but that is a hard letter to remember how to write. Let’s look for someone’s name that begins with a Q so we 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draws attention to known words/names “Whose name does the beginning of ‘dog’ sound like?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connects writing content “Yesterday you drew pictures of what to buy at the store, this week let’s try to write the list of seeds for our garden” or formats “Last

	know how to write it.”		week you wrote about your cat. Let’s think about what happens next in your story.”
Explaining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elicits explanations around letter formation “Think about when you write ‘H.’ Where do you begin? How do you write it?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elicits explanations around letter sounds “ How do you know that ‘s’ comes first in the word, ‘sad’?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elicits explanations around story choices “What will happen next to the balloon in your story? Why do you think that would happen next?”
Comparing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compares between child and teacher/commercial writing “Look how I wrote the letter, ‘P.’ Look at your letter, ‘P’. Does it look the same?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compares sounds in words. “I hear ‘/m/’ sound in ‘mitten’ – it sounds like another word from the story, like ‘kitten.’ How should we write ‘mitten’?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compares between child and teacher compositions. “Do you remember how we started the letter we wrote this morning? How will your letter be similar?”