Scaffolding and the provision of balance: The application of scaffolding within a state-wide literacy program

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The concept of "scaffolding" has been used widely across education contexts. This article considers its application within an early literacy program in Victoria, Australia. Analysis of professional development materials from the program discerns two different concepts of scaffolding. One of these, "a broad scaffold of support", is linked to the provision of balance in the program's approach to daily writing instruction. Discussion considers the application of scaffolding to balance in this literacy program and concludes that research is required to substantiate this particular use of the concept.

Purpose

This paper examines the use of scaffolding to conceptualize an approach to daily literacy instruction in the early years of schooling. The Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) in Victoria, Australia, is a state-wide literacy program that was mandated for use in government schools in 2000. Initially it was developed for Grade Prep to Grade Two students. These grade levels form the first three years of primary schooling in Victoria. The program was intended to address standards for early literacy instruction established by the Australian Commonwealth Government (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998; Hill & Crévola, 1997). It encompasses the provision of a "balanced program" (Department of Education, Vic., 1998a, p. 66) for daily writing instruction, and draws on the concept of scaffolding.

The paper is informed by an analysis of professional development materials from the EYLP. It establishes that two concepts of scaffolding are used in the program. Discussion considers "a broad scaffold of support", the use of research to explain the concept and the use of the concept to substantiate a balanced approach to classroom instruction. It is concluded that the program's claims about scaffolding and balance have not been supported adequately in its professional development materials.

Perspective

It is over thirty years since "scaffolding" (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976; Bruner, 1978) first entered our educational vocabulary. Not only has the concept proved to be an enduring one, its incorporation into a diversity of education contexts suggests that the concept is a flexible and adaptable one (Clark & Graves, 2004). Apart from studies of scaffolding between mothers and their children (see Wertsch, 1984; Snow, 1977; cited in Cazden, 1988) and tutoring (Lepper, Drake, & O'Donnell-Johnson, 1997), classroom instruction has been a main focus for scaffolding research (Hogan & Pressley, 1997).

The increasing application of scaffolding has also attracted the criticism that scaffolding has been used "loosely to refer to rather different things" (Hammond and Gibbons, 2001, p. 2/1). Palincsar (1998) emphasised that scaffolding needs to be understood from the perspective of social-constructivism rather than applied atheoretically. From a social constructivist perspective, knowledge results from "a constructive process of bringing personal meaning to experience" and the process differs according to what individuals bring to it (Palincsar, 1998, p. 370). According to Palincsar, social constructivist theory reminds that although scaffolding involves the social it requires the negotiated meanings of individuals.

Criticisms of the uptake of scaffolding in diverse ways, together with the proliferation of scaffolding within education, informs this examination of one way that scaffolding is currently defined and employed in an approach to literacy instruction.

Methods

Professional development for teachers, in all features of the structured classroom literacy program, is compulsory in the EYLP. All professional development materials in the program were developed in collaboration with the Victorian Department of Education and published through a commercial publishing company. The program was implemented in stages; reading materials were developed in Stage 1 and writing in Stage 2. The program was later extended to encompass oral language and Grades 3 and 4.

This paper examines professional development materials developed for writing instruction in Stage 2. These inform the in-service of teachers about the daily approach to writing instruction. The analysis addresses three questions: what concept of scaffolding is used in the program? How is the concept employed in the program? What theory and research is used in the materials to develop teachers' understandings of the concept of scaffolding?

Data Sources

The analysis examined definitions of scaffolding provided in the professional development materials. The use of scaffolding in the program is encapsulated in the following excerpt:

> The term 'scaffolding' is used to describe how a teacher can assist a student to construct their own understanding, not by simplifying the task but by providing appropriate support to assist the student's development. The instructional approaches facilitate teaching that provides a broad scaffold of support, for example, Shared writing is more supportive that Guided writing. By incorporating all approaches we ensure that we are implementing a balanced classroom program. (Department of Education, Victoria, 1998b, p. 5).

The excerpt from the professional development materials employs scaffolding in two ways: "assistance provided to a student" that leads to the construction of understanding, and "a broad scaffold of support" that results from teaching. Further information is provided about each of these in the EYLP's materials.

First, scaffolding is said to be support provided by teachers (Department of Education, Vic., 1998b, p. 5) in the daily writing program. Scaffolding is described as "how a teacher can assist a student to construct their own understanding" (Department of Education, Vic., 1998b, p. 5) and "when a more competent person attempts to develop the understanding of a less competent person" (Bruner, 1976, cited Department of Education, Vic., 1998b, p. 5). Scaffolded learning is "temporary support that teachers give to students to move beyond their unassisted efforts, nudging them from one level of competence to the next and eventually to a level of independence in relation to the task." (Department of Education, Vic., 1998b, p. 5).

The second use of scaffolding in the professional development materials refers to "a broad scaffold of support" (Department of Education, Vic., 1998a, p. 65). This is said to result from teaching facilitated by the teaching approaches that are mandated within the program (Department of Education, Vic., 1998a, p. 65). According to this use of scaffolding, teaching approaches are conceptualized along a continuum (Department of Education, Vic., 1998a, p. 66) and it is stated that "by incorporating all approaches we ensure that we are implementing a balanced classroom program." (Department of Education, Vic., 1998a, p. 65).

Figure 1 A balanced classroom program (EYLP)

Most supportive --least supportive
Modelled writing-shared writing-language experience-interactive writing-guided writing-independent writing

Figure 1 provides an ostensive definition of the concept of "a broad scaffold of support" – it shows all teaching approaches and these are ordered from most to least supportive. According to this every teaching approach provides some support, and each teaching approach provides more or less support that the others. For example, according to the continuum, shared writing is less supportive than modelled writing, but provides more support than language experience. This second use of scaffolding introduces additional understandings of scaffolding into the program: scaffolding is provided by each teaching approach, it is provided in "more" or "less" degrees in teaching approaches and it leads to a balanced classroom program. Analysis in the final paper considers how the descriptions of each teaching approach allow them to be aligned along the continuum.

The concept of "a broad scaffold of support" is used to underpin the program's provision of a balanced classroom program (Department of Education, Victoria, 1998b, p. 5). That is, it is claimed that the teaching facilitated by instructional approaches provides "a broad scaffold of support", so the incorporation of all teaching approaches ensures the implementation of a balanced classroom program. (Department of Education, Victoria, 1998b, p. 5). No other information is provided in the program materials about balance

and no research is employed to underpin the concept of "a broad scaffold of support" and the claim that it provides balance.

Results and conclusions

Although the EYLP's professional development materials use scaffolding in two distinct ways, the analysis established that the concept of scaffolding as "assistance to students" is supported in professional development materials. The concept is defined and authoritative sources are used to develop understandings of it. Program materials specifically draw on Bruner (Bruner, 1976, cited in Department of Education, Vic., 1998b, p. 5), Vygotsky (x) and Palincsar (a).

The concept of "a broad scaffold of support" and the claim made in relation to the concept (Department of Education, Victoria, 1998b, p. 5) requires further consideration. Analysis established that "a broad scaffold of support," equates teaching approaches with "more" or "less" support and sequences these along a continuum that represents a balanced classroom program. Thus, the employment of "a broad scaffolding of support" introduces a shift in understanding of the concept, from scaffolding that is the "temporary support of students" (Bruner, 1976) to scaffolding that results in balance (Department of Education, Victoria, 1998b). This shift is an important one if we return to the criticism that scaffolding has come to be been used rather loosely to refer to different things (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001).

Hill and Crévola (1998), whose research informed the development of the EYLP, provide an insight into the use of "balanced classroom instruction" in the EYLP, and the part played in it by the concept of "a broad scaffold of support". They acknowledge that the program's approach to daily instruction draws on a "balanced reading programme" (Ministry for Educ., NZ, 1985, p. 56) developed in New Zealand during the early 1980s. According to Hill and Crévola, teaching approaches from this program as provide "a rich resource to the present day" (Crévola & Hill, 1998, p. 14) although they have been used "often in a partial and *ad hoc* manner without the necessary organizational procedures in place to enable them to be maximally effective" (Hill and Crévola, 1997, p. 5). This

criticism by Hill and Crévola suggests that the concept of "a broad scaffold of support" has played an important part in transforming the "balanced programme" from New Zealand (Ministry of Education, N. Z.,1985), previously taken up in an unsystematic way, into an approach to classroom instruction which is a "balanced and structured approach to the teaching of writers" (Department of Education, Vic., 1998a, p. vii).

According to the analysis of professional development materials in this study, it is evident that the concept of "a broad scaffold of support" is different from scaffolding understood as assistance provided for individual students. The use of 'a broad scaffold of support" in the EYLP teaching materials needs to be substantiated by research, and to address research that would appear to question the program's employment of "a broad scaffold of support". Specifically, professional development materials need to take account of Palincsar's (1987) influential study of reciprocal teaching which established that using a specific teaching approach does not provide scaffolding, merely by its use, and that scaffolding is support provided by certain teachers some of the time, but not by all teachers, all of the time. Otherwise, teachers are led to think that it is the employment of approaches that provides scaffolding.

Educational importance of the study

Overall, this analysis highlights that concepts such as scaffolding cannot be taken-for-granted in their application. Since the EYLP is a mandated approach to literacy instruction in all Victorian state schools, it beholds program developers to provide professional develop materials that substantiate claims made about the programs provision of balance. The concept of scaffolding has been expanded (Hammond and Gibbons, 2001) since it was first applied to assistance provided in the tutoring situation. Nevertheless, it must be carefully defined and understood if is to retain meaning in the many and varied contexts in which it is applied.

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