Scaffolding in Group-Oriented Japanese Preschools

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Akira, a 4-year-old boy, wanders into a classroom of 3-year-olds, observing the younger children. The teacher is aware that Akira is in the room, but she does not say anything to stop him from interacting with the younger children. Akira goes over to Masaharu, who is working on a puzzle, and asks him, “How are you doing with the puzzle?” Masaharu, who is having a problem making a piece fit, says nothing. Akira says, “You want me to help you?” Masaharu nods and gives the puzzle piece to Akira. Akira works on fitting the piece into the puzzle while the 3-year-old watches. After a few attempts, Akira says, “You might want to turn this piece to fit here, okay? Now you try it!” Finally, Masaharu succeeds, and his mentor applauds his efforts.

This interaction shows an older child supporting a younger child through scaffolding (Vygotsky 1978). Using scaffolding, a more mature or more competent peer or an adult might offer hints—without actually providing the solution—to help a child progress in a task. You can better understand the concept of scaffolding by referring to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development—“the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky 1978, 86). Teachers and parents can provide quality learning experiences when they effectively scaffold children’s learning (Leong & Bodrova 2012). For example, when teachers ask open-ended questions, such as “Can you tell me why you think the toy car flies off the ramp?” and then “What can you do to make the car go
slower?,” they guide children in taking a new perspective and help promote their thinking, one step at a time.

Allowing children to meander in and out of classrooms may seem inappropriate to early childhood teachers in the United States. But in many Japanese preschools, which serve 3- to 5-year-olds, one way teachers and administrators encourage children's self-regulation, or management of their own behavior, is by letting them interact with children in other classrooms (Izumi-Taylor 2009). Akira’s teacher knew his whereabouts and did not require him to stay in his own classroom, because the teachers at this school watch over all the children, even those who are not in their care. If Masaharu’s teacher had interrupted Akira’s and Masaharu’s interactions and sent Akira back to his classroom, this peer-to-peer scaffolding might not have occurred.

The interaction between Akira and Masaharu is indicative of how children in many Japanese preschools help each other. In Japanese preschools that subscribe to group-oriented approaches that strongly encourage children’s social interactions, scaffolding between children, as well as between teachers and children, is evident everywhere.

Scaffolding

For scaffolding to be effective, the task or activity must be meaningful and interesting to the learner (Berk & Winsler 1995). When a more mature peer or an adult scaffolds a child’s learning to help her complete a task or move to a higher level of thinking, the task or activity itself does not change (Leong & Bodrova 2012). As the learner’s problem-solving or thinking skills develop, the peer or adult lessens his guidance, allowing the learner to assume more responsibility for completing the task.

In effective scaffolding, the two participants work toward the same goal. To do this, they need to communicate with each other. When the interaction is between teacher and child, the adult needs to communicate with the child using language the child can understand. To maximize communication, teachers at Japanese schools practice certain steps when scaffolding children’s learning (see “Eight Steps for Scaffolding Japanese Children’s Learning,” p. 72).

Anecdotal examples of scaffolding

The following are three anecdotal observations of scaffolding collected between 2006 and 2009 at four preschools in Kawasaki and Chiba, on the main island of Japan.

A teacher’s use of scaffolding

Many Japanese teachers read to children throughout the day. The storytellers at this school used kamishibai (paper play), which usually consists of five or six descriptive pictures of events in a story printed on one side of a stiff paper board. The narrative is written on the back of the board so the teacher can read the story while the children view the progression of pictures. There are many different kinds of stories with colorful and vivid pictures, and the pictures generally measure 14½ by 10¾ inches, although some kamishibai are larger.

Creating Kamishibai

At a school in Chiba City, the teacher announced to the 5-year-olds in several han (small groups) that each han would create its own kamishibai by drawing descriptive pictures and creating stories to go with them. She explained that when the children were finished, she would read the stories to the class.

The members of one han drew illustrations of themselves visiting monkeys at a zoo, while children in another han drew pictures of a shopping trip to a toy store. Members of a third han drew amusing pictures of themselves on a trip to a restaurant where they overindulged, so their stick-figure self-portraits had large stomachs. Other children drew pictures of houses, trees, rainbows, butterflies,
flowers, and a dog with a doghouse. One han took a different approach: its members drew a large maze.

After they had completed their drawings, the teacher asked the children in each han to tell the stories behind the pictures. Some wrote their stories on the back of their pictures. The others dictated their stories to the teacher, who transcribed them. The teacher read the children’s stories to the class, showing the pictures one at a time.

Then the teacher said, “Hmmm, we have several pictures, and each picture has its own separate story. I wonder, is this the way kamishibai really works?” The children responded with a resounding “No!” The teacher asked another question to get the children to think about the situation: “How do you think we can handle this so it will be like the stories in traditional kamishibai?” A child said, “We have to connect the pictures together.” The teacher responded, “Okay, can you tell me how we can do that?” Another child replied, “I know, kamishibai have beginnings.” After much discussion, a child shouted, “We need to put the pictures and their stories together to make a real kamishibai!”

The teacher then asked, “I wonder how we could combine the different stories into one, so it would be like a kamishibai story?” After some more discussions, with prompting from the teacher, one child suggested a way to merge all the elements into a single story: “Let’s make a new picture showing the end of the story.” Then the teacher asked the children, “Well, that sounds good. Now people have said that we need to have the beginning and the end of the story. What else do you think we need for your kamishibai?” A child said, “We need the middle of the story.”

The plot of the resulting kamishibai unfolded like this: First, the children went to the toy store, where each child got a toy. The children then took a trip to the zoo to show their toys to the monkeys. Well, the trip to the zoo made them
very hungry, so they went to a restaurant where they stuffed themselves and grew large in their midsections. Because they had eaten too much, the children felt sleepy and decided to go home and take naps. However, they got lost, so they looked at the maze to find their way home. By following the maze and the rainbows in the sky for guidance, they at last reached their destination, where there were houses, trees, butterflies, flowers, and the dog with its doghouse. To represent the conclusion of this complex plot, all the children worked together to create a picture in which stick-figure children with bloated stomachs slept on their futons inside a house, holding their toys, while the dog napped nearby.

This use of scaffolding promoted children’s thinking while also advancing their reading, writing, and problem-solving skills.

**Children’s use of scaffolding**

Since all the children know and interact with each other within each of the four preschools, there are plenty of opportunities for them to experience scaffolding. According to Berk and Winsler (1995), “Vygotsky emphasized the importance of mixed-age groupings of children, which grant each child access to more knowledgeable companions and permit each child to serve as an expert resource for others” (134).

**Digging for Sweet Potatoes**

Many schools hold seasonal events such as apple picking, crab catching, maple leaf gathering, and lightning bug collecting. As is customary in Japan, children often visit farms, and the farmers invite the children to help them harvest their crops. At a mixed-age preschool in Kawasaki City, the 5-year-olds rode the school van to a nearby farm to dig up sweet potatoes.

Beforehand, teachers talked to all the children about the upcoming experience and showed them pictures of children who had harvested sweet potatoes the previous fall. The teachers and children read books about sweet potatoes and discussed how they would unearth them. The 5-year-olds and their teachers told the younger children that they would cook and share the sweet potatoes with them at a potato event the day after the farm visit.

When the older children arrived at the farm and began digging, they were understandably excited. “Look!” shouted one child, “This is a family of potatoes. Here is a mommy, and these are some babies, and this big one is the daddy!” Another child observed, “This one has so many whiskers!” After a day of frenzied sweet potato digging, children brought their prizes back to school.

The next day the teachers and 5-year-olds washed and cooked the sweet potatoes and shared them with the younger...
children while telling them about their adventure. Photos of the children pulling potatoes from the dirt entertained the younger children and inspired some curious questions from them. “Sweet potatoes come from the dirt?” inquired one child. “They don’t come from the supermarket?” asked another. And then we heard the somewhat surprising comment, “I thought sweet potatoes came from trees!”

Kenji, a knowledgeable 5-year-old boy, answered, “No, they come from the dirt. First you plant pieces of sweet potatoes in the dirt, and then they grow up to become more sweet potatoes.” He explained to the younger group members just how farmers plant sweet potatoes.

Later, Kenji selected photos and asked his teacher to create a PowerPoint presentation about the sweet potato trip to show all the children. The children then had another opportunity to review, ask questions, and become familiar with the process of growing and harvesting sweet potatoes. They asked many questions and made many comments during the presentation. For example, a younger child asked Kenji, “I don’t get it. How many pieces of sweet potatoes do you have to put into the dirt?” Kenji responded loudly, “It doesn’t matter how many. You just have to dig and put them in deep and far apart.” The children benefited from Kenji’s willingness, patience, and enthusiasm.

Effective scaffolding depends on teachers’ ability to engage children’s interest and on their asking open-ended questions that support children’s thinking and reflection.

Many children enjoy Christmas parties at Japanese preschools. One example of children and teachers scaffolding children’s learning took place during the Christmas holidays.

Santa’s Bag

The teachers at the preschool in Chiba City had created a piñata shaped like Santa’s big red toy bag and planned to hang it from a tree limb in the schoolyard. The piñata activity was scheduled for early afternoon. In the meantime, the teachers decided to place the bag on top of the tree, out of children’s reach. They were confident that the children could not reach it, since the tree was too tall for them to climb. However, children seem to have unique skills where piñatas are involved.

The children decided to form a human pyramid, with the smaller children at the top. The older children assured the younger ones that they would support them. Having devised this plan to liberate the piñata from the treetop, one by one the children climbed up on each other, with the largest children at the base.

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**Children scaffolding and teachers acquiescing**

When adults engage in creative, open-ended play experiences, they gain insight into how children learn from play. They become more knowledgeable about the purposeful use of materials and intentional teaching strategies and can better help children develop essential concepts and skills in all content areas. *From Play to Practice* describes the use of play experiences for educators to promote play-based learning as part of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs. Participants’ reflections of play experiences, and photos of play workshops, help illustrate the power of play to change professional and personal lives.

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After two attempts, the children succeeded in getting the bag. Upon opening it, the leader of the piñata liberation force began passing out the candy and toys. Then the children discovered that a teacher had witnessed their exploits. In an effort to save face, the quick-thinking leader asked the teacher for permission to distribute the looted bounty, saying, “Teacher, we found this bag on the treetop. Can we please have it? I think Santa forgot his bag here, and we need to eat the candy before it gets spoiled.” The teacher, resigned to the fact that the party plan was compromised, decided it was appropriate to allow the boy to serve as the school’s Santa.

The case of the hijacked red toy bag is an example of children cooperating to reach a goal. Although this example may not exactly constitute scaffolding in the sense of younger children gaining a new level of comprehension through interaction with more mature peers, “the emotional tone of interaction” among those involved is also an important element in scaffolding (Berk & Winsler 1995, 29). Warm, caring, and understanding interactions between children and between teachers and children create an emotionally safe environment for learning, and the teacher at this Japanese school provided such a context.

Conclusion
Some of these incidents may be cultural in nature, but knowing different cultural practices broadens teachers’ perspectives. When teachers understand others’ viewpoints, they can rethink and adjust their own practices to better serve children (Gonzalez-Mena 2008). Because many Japanese teachers use scaffolding to intentionally promote children’s development and learning, “letting children regulate themselves takes precedence over enforcing the rules” (Izumi-Taylor 2009, 86). Since younger and older children have plenty of time and opportunities to interact in a group-oriented environment, child-to-child scaffolding occurs naturally in many Japanese preschools.

When scaffolding a child’s learning, it is important to vary the degree of assistance, according to the learner’s needs. Effective scaffolding depends on teachers’ ability to engage children’s interest and on their asking open-ended questions that support children’s thinking and reflection. Questions should acknowledge children’s existing knowledge and experiences, and guide their thinking to a higher level in their zone of proximal development. In scaffolding, children’s active participation is important. Additionally, it is important for teachers to support children’s scaffolding of other children’s learning by offering them opportunities to do so and by encouraging younger and older children’s interactions.

References


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