The Rising Star Scaffolding Guide: Supporting Young Children's Early Spelling Skills

Stefanie B. Copp, Sonia Q. Cabell, Clariebelle Gabas, Debbie Slik, Jennifer Todd

This article describes the Rising Star Scaffolding Decision Guide, a step-by-step guide for scaffolding children's early spelling during one-on-one writing activities in the classroom.

After the morning read-aloud, Ms. Sandy works with a small group of her pre-kindergarten students while the other children respond to the read-aloud at their desks by writing about their favorite part of the story or working on writing projects from earlier in the week.

In the small group, Ms. Sandy begins by telling the children that they will make their own books and imitate Mo Willem's use of speech bubbles in *Do not Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* (Willems, 2003). She tells the children that they can choose any topic. She models by opening her booklet (4 blank pages folded and stapled) and drawing a quick picture of a girl with a speech bubble. She tells the children that she will write, "I had a good day." As she writes each word, she elongates the initial sound in each word. She asks the children to use their pointer fingers to "air write" the letter as she writes it in her book. Afterwards, the children begin writing their own stories. As Ms. Sandy is supporting children during the activity, one student, Deshawn, says he is writing about two characters—Sharkboy and Lavagirl. She notices that he has a picture with a speech bubble. Inside the speech bubble are some letters and characters that look like letters. "Look Ms. Sandy, it is Sharkboy. He is saying 'Lavagirl!'" Deshawn's letters do not seem to correspond to the conventional spelling of the word *Lavagirl*.

Ms. Sandy pauses to consider how to support Deshawn's writing along with the other children in her class. There are some children, like Deshawn, who are writing with seemingly random letters. There are also other children who are still scribbling, and others who are starting to represent the beginning sounds in the words they are writing. Ms. Sandy ponders how she will help Deshawn in this moment and how she might also help other children move forward in their writing.

Many prekindergarten (pre-k) teachers offer children the opportunity to engage in early writing by providing opportunities and materials that allow them to share their ideas (Gerde et al., 2015, 2019; Puranik et al., 2014). However, teachers like Ms. Sandy may wonder how they can support children in moving forward in their writing development. While the marks on the paper may look far from conventional, with teacher encouragement,

Stefanie B. Copp is an assistant professor of language and literacy, holding the Elizabeth M. Fosyth Professorship, in the College of Education, Leadership Studies, and Counseling at the University of Lynchburg, Lynchburg, VA 24501, USA; email copp_s@lynchburg.edu.

Sonia Q. Cabell is an associate professor in reading education in the School of Teacher Education and in the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32310 USA; email scabell@fsu.edu.

Clariebelle Gabas is a postdoctoral researcher with the Nebraska Center for Research on Children, Youth, Families and Schools at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 65855, USA; email mgabas2@unl.edu.

Debbie Slik is a Ph.D student in Reading Education and Language Arts, and an IES fellow with the Florida Center For Reading Research at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32310, USA; email dslik@fsu.edu.

Jennifer Todd is a Ph.D student in Reading Education and Language Arts, and an OSEP fellow with the Florida Center For Reading Research at Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32310, USA; email jtodd2@fsu.edu.

children can move toward written messages with words that more closely estimate conventional spellings. Indeed, scaffolding young children's writing has been shown to not only improve spelling abilities, but also phonological awareness and word-reading abilities (Ehri & Wilce, 1987; Ouellette et al., 2013; Uhry & Shepherd, 1993). The question is not *whether* teachers should support children's early writing, but *how*. How can teachers help scaffold children's writing in a way that not only improves writing development, but also helps reading development?

In this article, we discuss how teachers can make decisions about scaffolding early writing for children in pre-k classrooms to promote literacy development. We first discuss why supporting early writing matters, the importance of providing ample opportunities for young children to write, and what it means to scaffold children's writing. We then introduce the Rising Star Scaffolding Decision Guide to describe the sequence of instructional moves that teachers can use, drawing examples from a recent pilot study examining small-group writing instruction in pre-k classrooms. We conclude the article with a classroom example that illustrates a teacher's decision-making process for scaffolding children's writing.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- How do you provide opportunities for children to write daily?

- How do you structure your writing time to allow for time to individually support children as they are writing? How do these supports move children toward greater independence in their writing?

- Think back over the last week, how did you differentiate the support you provided for children during their early writing attempts?

- What do you consider when setting writing goals for individual children to support their writing development? How do you know if these goals are appropriate for each child?

of language (i.e., phonological awareness) (Kim, 2020). As children's knowledge of print and sound grows over time and becomes integrated, they grasp the *alphabetic principle*, which is the understanding that smaller sounds (e.g., phonemes) in spoken language can be represented with letters (Snow et al., 1998). After achieving this developmental milestone, children begin to estimate spellings of words (e.g., writing P for pig, N for *hen*, or CD for *closed*). Teachers can actively support children's early writing development by providing scaffolds that encourage them to consider both print and sound while writing.

In education, *scaffolding* describes how a teacher uses words, actions, or materials that reduce the cognitive demand of a given task to the point that a child can successfully complete it (Wood et al., 1976). The term scaffolding is often associated with the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978), which is the difference in what a child can do independently and what they can do with the assistance of an adult. While children are writing, teachers can provide scaffolding to help bridge what a child currently knows and is on the verge of learning to the next level of development (see Cabell et al., 2013). Teachers should also consider the ways in which the scaffolds provided will move a child toward independence, rather than encouraging dependence on an adult to complete the task.

These supportive teacher moves have the potential to accelerate not only writing, but also reading development (Ehri & Wilce, 1987; Ouellette et al., 2013). Not surprisingly, early writing ability predicts later reading ability (Kim et al., 2015; NELP, 2008). Importantly, reading and writing share similar component skills, which means that supporting one arguably supports the other (Bissex, 1980; Shanahan, 2016; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991). So, although one might argue that individually supporting young children's early writing may be time-consuming, research suggests that it can produce positive outcomes for not only writing, but also for reading.

The Importance of Scaffolding Early Writing

Early writing involves the ability to generate ideas to write (i.e., composing), to write letters fluently and efficiently (i.e., handwriting), and to represent spoken language using letters (i.e., spelling) (Berninger, 2009; Kaderavek et al., 2009). While all three dimensions of writing are essential, this article specifically focuses on how teachers can scaffold children's spelling development.

One might wonder, why are we concerned with spelling development in pre-k? Indeed, teachers of young children may not prioritize spelling development because children's early written marks usually look far from conventional. They might scribble, use letter-like shapes, or write with some letters. Yet, the beginnings of both writing and reading (i.e., spelling and decoding ability) start with early understandings of how print works (i.e., print concept knowledge, alphabet knowledge) and the sound structure

Providing Opportunities to Write

To scaffold writing, it is vital that children have writing opportunities across the day. Opportunities may include

writing during a designated writing time with a provided topic or journal writing where children can choose a topic. Children can engage in writing during a writing center (e.g., writing letters to a friend) or writing that is embedded in play centers (e.g., writing prescriptions in a doctor's center). Writing can also occur in response to a read-aloud or in response to content-area experiences (e.g., experiments). During these times, when independent writing time is offered, children can apply concepts that they have learned across the day in a meaningful way.

Providing authentic literacy opportunities and tools will help children write more, and writing more is certainly a first step in helping them progress. Yet, we emphasize that the teacher–child interactions that happen "in-the-moment" when children are writing are crucial for furthering their literacy development (Neuman & Roskos, 1990, 1991, 1993). During these times, a teacher can have powerful individualized interactions that are specific to each child's needs.

Low- and High-Support Scaffolding Strategies

Individualized interactions offer the opportunity for teachers to use targeted scaffolds, which can fall into two categories: high support and low support. In each category, there is an inverse relationship between the effort of the teacher and the child (Figure 1). In other words, if a teacher is providing a *high-support scaffold*, then the teacher is taking on much of

Figure 1
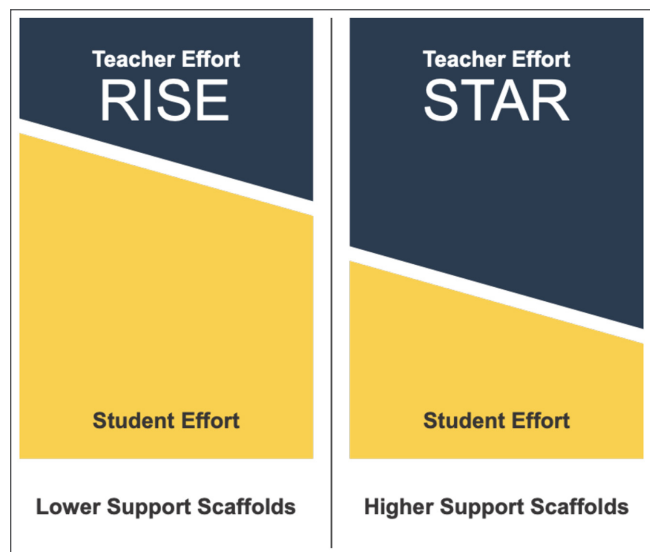**A Description of STAR and RISE Scaffolding Strategies**

the cognitive effort and the child is exerting minimal effort. For example, a teacher models how to write a letter for the child and the child copies it. While the copying may require much fine motor coordination, the child is not encouraged to wrestle with how the writing system works. In contrast, when the teacher provides a *low-support scaffold*, the child is exerting a great deal of effort and the teacher is exerting minimal effort. For example, the teacher may simply provide a reminder of where to start in the task such as, "Write the first sound you hear in the word." The child then has to think through how to segment the first sound, consider the corresponding grapheme that connects to that sound, and then form that letter on the paper.

When scaffolding in the classroom, research has shown that teachers do use scaffolds and sometimes differentiate those scaffolds for learners. However, their use of scaffolds is often limited (Clements, 2010; Copp et al., 2019; Pentimonti & Justice, 2010). For writing specifically, teachers tend to use and reuse a small repertoire of scaffolds, with an emphasis on using high-support scaffolds (Bingham et al., 2017; Copp et al., 2019; Gabas et al., 2021). But children do not always need a high level of support, and thus the overuse of high-support scaffolds may create an overdependence on the teacher. For example, when a child becomes accustomed to a teacher providing the spelling for any unknown word, the child may then look to the teacher each time she is faced with a challenge.

Therefore, we recommend that teachers start with offering low-support scaffolds, so children have the opportunity to engage in thinking and talk around literacy learning as they write. Generally speaking, the use of low-support literacy scaffolds is not only associated with highly effective teachers, but has been found to relate to growth in young children's academic skills (Cabell et al., 2015; Pentimonti et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2002).

It is important to keep in mind that there is not a single type of scaffold that works for every child or even the same child in all circumstances. Thus, teachers need access to a wide repertoire of low- and high-support scaffolding strategies. A complex relationship exists between the child's level of development, the learning, and the teacher so that as one changes, so do the others (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). As teachers, we must consider many factors when choosing how to respond to children and how to modify our responses to best benefit our children's learning.

Rising Star Scaffolding Decision Guide

The Rising Star Scaffolding Decision Guide provides step-by-step a guide for teachers as they make instructional moves to scaffold children's writing (Figure 2). This guide uses a writing scaffolding framework (Copp et al., 2019)

Figure 2
Rising Star Scaffolding Decision Guide

adapted from a scaffolding framework developed for shared book reading and general literacy instruction (Notari-Syverson et al., 2007). Teachers' low- and high-support scaffolds serve as responses to children's writing and are in the form of questions or statements. We refer to these as RISE-STAR scaffolding strategies. There are four steps in the decision guide. As a child is writing, the teacher identifies the child's level of writing development (Step 1), offers a low-support scaffold (Step 2), evaluates the child's response (Step 3), and follows up with either a low- or high-support scaffold (Step 4).

Step 1: Teacher Identifies Child's Level of Writing Development

When individually supporting a child's writing, we recommend that the teacher first identify where the child is performing within the Early Writing Framework (Cabell et al., 2013). This information can guide the teacher to determine the focus or goal for the interaction. In a typical pre-k classroom, there will likely be a range of goals.

There are four levels in the Early Writing Framework: (1) drawing and scribbling, (2) letters and letter-like forms, (3) salient and beginning sounds, and (4) beginning and ending sounds (Table 1). In a typical pre-k classroom, teachers may have students performing in every level. Such is the case with Ms. Sandy. When students are at the drawing and scribbling level, they first represent their ideas with drawings, then directionless scribbles, then scribbles that move from left-to-right and top-to-bottom on a page (Tessa). At the letters and letter-like forms level, children begin to use letters or characters that look like letters and sometimes

numbers in their writing. Children choose letters that are familiar to them (e.g., repetition of letters in their name) but do not yet correspond to the sounds in the words they are trying to write (Deshawn). As children grasp the alphabetic principle, they transition into the salient and beginning sounds level. This level is evident when a child is accurately representing the first sound in a word or the sound that is most prominent to them (Archer). The last level in the early writing framework is beginning and ending sounds. At this level, children are representing more sounds in words, often the beginning and ending sounds in a simple consonant–vowel–consonant word or syllable (Lena).
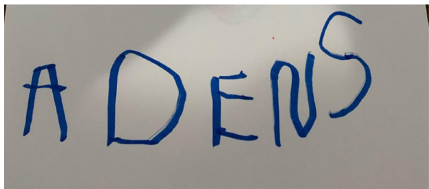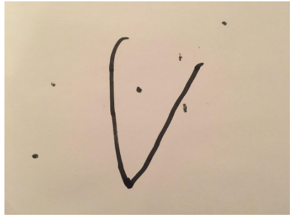
Identifying a child's current level of writing development requires the teacher to consider how the child is performing consistently. It is important to consider sources of writing that children complete independently beyond name writing, which is often at a higher level than their writing of other words. Details about children's writing performance in across contexts (e.g., centers, whole group) may be recorded as a part of anecdotal notes and used to approximate the level.

The purpose of determining the level of writing development is so the teacher can identify the goals for that child. These goals are focused on the skills needed to move the child from the current level of performance to the next (see Table 2 for goals).

Step 2: Teacher Offers a Low-support Scaffold (RISE)

After identifying a child's level of development, teachers can start with a low-support scaffold. We offer the

Table 1
Examples of Children's Writing within the Early Writing Framework

Level of Development	Example of Writing
Drawing and Scribbling	
Letters and Letter-Like Forms	Letters from Deshawn's name
Salient and Beginning Sounds	"lava"
Beginning and Ending Sounds	"hop"

acronym RISE to help teachers remember a set of low-support scaffolding strategies that can be used first. Examples of low-support scaffolds are shown in Table 2.

Reasoning is a scaffolding strategy that is useful to allow the child to verbalize and gain awareness of how they are applying their spelling knowledge. The teacher simply asks the child to explain their decisions about what they are writing. This scaffold provides a window into the child's thought process that allows the teacher to better understand the child's level of development and know what the next steps should be. For example, the teacher might discover that the child intended to write a *b* for *ball*, even though just by looking it appears to be a

d. In Ms. Sandy's class, Tessa is working toward including some writing with her drawing. Ms. Sandy looks at Tessa's paper and notices that she has drawn and colored a picture and has also written with a few scribbles that are a bit away from the picture. Ms. Sandy says, "Tessa, you have a beautiful picture. Can you tell me what you wrote here?" Ms. Sandy draws attention to Tessa's work and allows her to verbalize if those marks are different from her picture and carry meaning (Table 2, Drawing and Scribbling).

Information is a scaffolding strategy that serves as a reminder for children. It is a support that comes in the form of the teacher summarizing events and actions and offering important information to help the child complete a task or grasp a specific concept. The teacher can focus on reminding a child of previously used strategies or experiences such as "stretch out the word." For example, as part of their phonological awareness instruction, Ms. Sandy uses hand-motions to correspond to blending and segmenting words. Even though Archer is representing the initial phoneme in words, he needs to apply his phonological awareness skills of segmentation to the words he is trying to spell (Table 2, Salient and Beginning Sounds). Ms. Sandy reminds him of their hand motions by saying, "Tap out each sound with a finger, just like we do in small group."

Sequencing is the most supportive of the low-support scaffolding strategies in which the teacher provides direct guidance on how to execute the task. The teacher helps the child find a starting point or continue an action in the correct sequence. So, the teacher may support the child by saying, "What word are you writing next?," or at the word level, "What is the first sound that you hear?" Ms. Sandy uses sequencing as the first step for another young writer in her classroom. Lena (Beginning and Ending) points to the letters d and g on her paper and tells Ms. Sandy she is writing about her dog, Bon Bon. Ms. Sandy acknowledges that Lena did an excellent job of writing some of the sounds in *dog* and uses the sequencing scaffold by saying, "Lena, remember to stretch out the whole word. Remember, after you write a word, go back and look at it, stretch it out again, and make sure you didn't forget a sound. What sound do you hear in the middle of the word?" Lena stretches out the sounds /d/ /o/ /g/ and adds the letter *o*.

Encouragement is a scaffolding strategy in which the teacher offers verbal encouragement and praise to boost the child's confidence and sense of self-competence. The encouragement includes a positive affirmation. This strategy is often a great go-to because children are often looking to teachers to boost their confidence. They have the knowledge but are not yet certain that they can apply

Table 2
Example RISE Scaffolds by Level of Writing Development

	Reasoning	Information	Sequencing	Encouragement
Drawing and Scribbling Goal: To consistently differentiate writing from drawing and use individual units or letters while writing	Point to your word. Tell me what you wrote.	Remember the illustrator draws pictures. You did a great job adding an illustration! The author writes the words. Try to add some words.	You drew a picture of a monster truck. Next, let us add some words to go with it?	Way to go! You wrote letters for monster. Keep going!
Letters and Letter-Like Forms Goal: To write letters with variety and consistency and represent the salient sound in a word	I see you wrote the letter s. Why did you write the letter s?	Remember, words are made up of letters. Can you use some letters to make your words?	You want to write solar system. What is the first word you need to sound out?	You have the first letter for each planet in your solar system. Pat yourself on the back!
Salient and Beginning Sounds Goal: To write with beginning and ending sounds in a simple word and represent salient sounds in a longer word	How did you know to write a c for the first sound in caterpillar?	Remember to think about the sounds that you hear and the letters that make those sounds. You can use the sound wall if you get stuck.	Let us clap out the sounds in caterpillar. (Teacher claps out each sound with the students cat-er-pil-lar.) What sounds do you hear in cat?	You heard the /c/ and the /t/ sound in caterpillar and wrote a c and a t. Way to go!
Beginning and Ending Sounds Goal: To solidify beginning and ending sounds of words and syllables and to include the medial vowel sound in a word	Tell me why you wrote these letters for hat?	Stretch out the sounds in the word. Say it very slowly like a sloth.	What sound do you hear in the middle of the word?	You wrote three letters for hat. Way to sound out the word and match the sounds with letters!

it. For example, as Ms. Sandy makes her way around the classroom, she notices that Lena wrote the BON for Bon Bon. She says "Great job writing three letters for *Bon*!" (Table 2, Beginning and Ending Sounds).

RISE strategies can be combined in various ways to scaffold a child within their ZPD and maximize their learning potential. For example, a teacher may provide an *encouraging* comment, like "Good job writing all the sounds," followed by a *sequencing* scaffold such as, "What's the next word that you are writing?"

Step 3: Teacher Evaluates Child's Response

Once the teacher provides an appropriate low-support scaffold, time should be provided for the child to respond, verbally or with another writing attempt. If the child does respond verbally or with a mark on the paper, the teacher should keep in mind the goal for that child, as indicated by the Early Writing Framework (Cabell et al., 2013). Remember, Ms. Sandy's goal for Lena is to represent the beginning, middle, and ending sounds in a word. She is

successful, so Ms. Sandy could follow up with other low-support scaffolds (e.g., encouragement, sequencing), taking into account what she knows about Lena's literacy development more generally (e.g., known letter sounds).

Ms. Sandy's goal for Tessa is to differentiate between drawing and writing and begin to use individual units or letters while writing. So, Ms. Sandy might ask herself, "Is Tessa meeting her goal?" She then asks Tessa a question about her picture and accompanying scribbles, "Can you tell me what you wrote here?" Tessa replies, "Those are birds." Ms. Sandy, realizing that Tessa is not yet differentiating writing from drawing, can follow up with a high-support scaffold.

Step 4: Teacher Offers a Low- or High-support Scaffold

When evaluating the child's response, the teacher can ask, "Did this scaffold allow the child to meet their goal?" If the answer is yes, the teacher can offer another low-support scaffold to help the child continue to write. If the

Table 3
Example STAR Scaffolds by Level of Writing Development

	Showing	Tools	Asking	Reducing
Drawing and Scribbling Goal: To consistently differentiate writing from drawing and use individual units or letters while writing	I am going to write *girl* underneath my picture. First, I need to write the letter g. Here is how I write a g.	Let us look at the alphabet card to help us with the letter. Here is a g. Now let us write a g in the air.	What sound do you hear at the beginning of *girl*?	Does g look like this or like this? (Pointing to alphabet chart).
Letters and Letter-Like Forms Goal: To write letters with variety and consistency and represent the salient sound in a word	I am writing the word *top*. I need a letter that makes the /t/ sound. The letter t makes the /t/ sound.	Look at the alphabet card. Put your finger on the letter t.	What sound do you hear at the beginning of *top*? What letter makes the /t/ sound?	What letter makes the /t/ sound? *P* or *T*?
Salient and Beginning Sounds Goal: To write with beginning and ending sounds in a simple word and represent salient sounds in a longer word	I am going to write the word *rainbow*. /r/ rainbow. The first sound I hear is /r/. R makes the /r/ sound, so I will write an r.	Rainbow is a long word. Let us clap out how many parts we hear in the word. Rain−bow. Let us focus on the first part —*rain*.	What sound do you hear at the beginning of *rain* in rainbow? I hear an /r/ at the beginning of rainbow. What letter makes the /r/ sound?	What letter makes the /r/ sound? *R* or *S*?
Beginning and Ending Sounds Goal: To solidify beginning and ending sounds of words and syllables and to include the medial vowel sound in a word	When I write the word *tiger*, I listen for how many sounds are in the word. /t/ /i/ /g/ /r/. (Teacher models writing the letters paired with the sounds.)	Your word is *tiger*. Let us count how many sounds are in your word. (Teacher holds up fingers to count each sound in the word.) There are four sounds in the word, so you should write at least four letters.	What sound do you hear at the end of *tiger*? What letter makes that sound?	What sound do you hear at the end of *tiger*? Is it /g/ or /r/?

answer is no, then the teacher can follow up with a high-support scaffold. That means that the teacher is providing a greater amount of support. We use the acronym STAR to help remember these scaffolds. Examples of high-support scaffolds are shown in Table 3.

Show is a scaffolding strategy in which the teacher provides the child with a model to help complete the task. Note that this model is specifically aligned to the skills needed to achieve the goal. For example, while Deshawn and Lena are writing in their booklets, Ms. Sandy looks over and sees that Tessa has drawn another picture in her booklet. When Ms. Sandy asks her about her drawing, Tessa says, "I saw birds at Nana's pool."

Ms. Sandy knows that Tessa has not yet grasped the alphabetic principle and is usually drawing and scribbling. She also recognizes that Tessa still needs help distinguishing her marks for drawing from her marks for print. As such, Ms. Sandy says, "That's a great picture you drew. We can also write words to describe your picture. Let me show you. You said, 'I saw birds at Nana's pool.'" Ms. Sandy holds up a finger for each word as she repeats Tessa's sentence.

Ms. Sandy explains, "You said six words. I can write your words under your picture." The teacher wrote the child's dictated sentence and then afterwards, reread the sentence out loud while pointing to each word. In this example, the teacher uses the show strategy to support the child's knowledge of early print concepts and demonstrate how words said in oral language can be represented in writing (Table 3, Drawing and Scribbling).

Tools is another scaffolding strategy in which the teacher makes the task more concrete by decreasing the memory demands through the use of visual or other non-linguistic cues (e.g., lines for words in a sentence or counters to represent each phoneme). In the grocery store center during free play, Ms. Sandy pretends to buy candy

and helps Lena to write a receipt. Ms. Sandy reminds Lena to "listen for the sounds in the word *candy*."

Ms. Sandy knows that Lena is writing with beginning and ending sounds in simple words, but still working on adding in vowels, as well as representing beginning and ending sounds within each syllable of a multisyllabic word. This interaction is a great time to support Lena in moving toward her goal. Lena initially writes KD but then erases it in frustration. Multisyllabic words can be difficult for students, and Ms. Sandy knows that making the task more concrete will reduce the strain on Lena's working memory.

Ms. Sandy guides Lena to first pound her fist for each syllable: *can-dy*. Next, she reminds Lena to focus on writing one syllable at a time. Ms. Sandy says, "Let's count how many sounds there are in the first part of the word. Say it with me. Can, */k/ /a/ /n/.*" The teacher segments each individual sound and encourages the child to follow her lead. When Lena states that she hears three sounds, Ms. Sandy draws three boxes on the paper and asks Lena for the first sound she hears in *can*. Lena writes K in the first box and the teacher acknowledges this as a logically correct response since the letter K or C can represent the */k/* and differentiating between when to use one or the other will be taught later.

Ms. Sandy then prompts Lena for the next sound and Lena says, "*/n/*." To support Lena, Ms. Sandy points to the third box and explains that */n/* is the last sound in *can*. The teacher says the first syllable again while emphasizing the middle sound.

When the child hesitates, the teacher says, "What letter says */a/* like in apple?" Lena excitedly identifies the letter A and writes it in the second box. Ms. Sandy then follows a similar routine to help Lena write the letters for the second syllable (*dy).* In the end, Lena has written KANDE on the receipt. When the task is broken down into smaller pieces, Lena can not only represent the vowel, but also represent each vowel in a multisyllabic word.

Asking can be used to direct the child to a specific action or response by asking a direct, closed question. For example, "Let's think, what sound do you hear first in *hippo*? I hear */h/.* What letter makes the */h/* sound?" As Ms. Sandy is walking through the classroom, she notices that Archer is working on adding a page to his book. Archer is consistently representing the beginning sounds in words. Ms. Sandy knows the goal for Archer is to represent more sounds in words. She asks, "Archer, what are you writing on this page?" Archer replies, "Elephant!"

Ms. Sandy connects the writing to their circle time lesson by asking "Do you remember when you helped me find the short and long words in the book? Is elephant a short word or a long word?" Archer claps the syllables

in *elephant* and responds "LONG!" Ms. Sandy follows up with another closed question, "Do long words have many letters or a few letters?" Archer shouts, "A lot of letters!"

Ms. Sandy replies, "Yes, there are a lot of letters because there are a lot of sounds. You have the L. What other sounds do you hear?" Archer begins to say each syllable of elephant and produces LFT. Ms. Sandy is pleased that Archer is representing more sounds in words. He is meeting his goal, so she moves on to work with another writer in her classroom.

Reducing choices provides a high level of support that involves giving an option of two or more choices to help the child complete the task. After providing a low-support scaffold for Deshawn to accurately represent the */f/* sound in fish, Ms. Sandy decides to reduce the choices. Ms. Sandy walks with Deshawn to the alphabet chart. As she points to the pictures that accompany the letters f and s on the alphabet chart, Ms. Sandy asks "Deshawn, does the sound that starts fish sound like fox or sun?"

Deshawn proudly shouts "Fish-fox."

Ms. Sandy asks, Which one do we use to represent /f/ in fish? Deshawn chooses the F ([Table 3](), Letters and Letter-like Forms).

Putting it All Together

Ms. Sandy, like many classroom teachers, balances the needs of many children. Teachers can create many writing opportunities and be equipped with a sequence of steps for responding to children's writing focused on their writing goals, in a way that can help them grow in their literacy skills.

Ms. Sandy maximizes her read-alouds by explicitly drawing children's attention to print (Justice & Sofka, [2010]()) and builds on these print-related skills while providing writing scaffolds. Ms. Sandy recognizes that the needs of her students vary, so she makes note of the level at which each is regularly performing and the accompanying writing goal. As children are writing, she engages in individual conversations. She always starts with a low-support scaffold and evaluates the child's response before deciding on her next instructional move.

Let us return to Ms. Sandy at the small group table. Deshawn was thrilled to show his drawing of Sharkboy calling for Lavagirl. Ms. Sandy recognizes this opportunity to support Deshawn's growth. She stops to consider Deshawn's progress on the Early Writing Framework. She knows that the letters and letter-like forms written beside the picture are reflective of how Deshawn typically writes. She knows the goal for children at this level is to begin to consistently use letters in writing and connect their knowledge of sound with the symbol by representing the salient or beginning sound in a word.

While it may be tempting to immediately tell Deshawn how to spell the names of the characters, Ms. Sandy knows there is value in giving children an opportunity to apply their phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge with minimal support. So, she gives Deshawn that opportunity through the use of the reasoning (low support) scaffold. Ms. Sandy begins, "That's a cool movie. I like that one. Can you show me where you wrote Lava?" Deshawn starts searching his paper and points to the letter T.

Ms. Sandy evaluates Deshawn's reply and realizes that he needs more support to be successful with this task. She elongates the l in lava girl and says "I hear /l/. L makes /l/." and points to the alphabet chart in front of Deshawn and applies the reducing choices scaffold.

> "Is this the letter L (pointing to the letter L), or is this the letter L (pointing to the letter T)?"
>
> "It's this one! This is the letter L!" declares Deshawn as he points to the correct letter.
>
> "Great!" Now write the letter L for /l/ lava in your booklet.

Conclusion

In this article, we provided guidance for teachers to make decisions around how to choose the appropriate scaffolds to help the children in their classroom move forward in their writing development. The first step is for teachers to observe children's writing development and determine their current level of development and writing goal based on the Early Writing Framework (Cabell et al., 2013). Next, the teacher uses a low-support scaffold (RISE) that provides the most opportunity for the child to advance in their writing development. Based on the child's response, the teacher then chooses either another low-support scaffold (RISE) or provides additional scaffolding through a high-support scaffolding strategy (STAR) to help the child meet their writing goal. Throughout, teachers can track individual children's progress by collecting or examining children's writing samples and taking observational notes on children's levels of writing development.

When teachers can provide appropriate levels of support in the ZPD for the children in their classrooms, the children are able to actively apply the knowledge they are learning across the day and move forward in their development. While a teacher may not have time to individually interact about their writing with every child, every day, it is critical that the interactions that do happen are intentional and impactful. Using the scaffolding decision-making process along with the RISE-STAR scaffolds can support children's literacy skills now and in the future.

TAKE ACTION

1. Plan a writing activity that will allow you to have time to talk with individual children.

2. Select two or three children to talk with during the activity.

3. Consider the writing development of the selected children. Determine where each child would be on the Early Writing Framework. What are your goals for each child?

4. Once the child is writing, start with a low-support RISE scaffolding strategy.

5. Evaluate the child's response. Ask yourself, did this scaffolding strategy help the child move toward the goal?

6. If yes, use another low-support RISE scaffolding strategy. If not, try a high-support STAR scaffolding strategy.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

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