Maintaining *high challenge* and *high support* for diverse learners

A combination of nurturing and rigor is essential to educating our student population, but targeted supports are also needed to help students meet achievement goals.

As teachers, schools and school leaders work to better prepare California's culturally and linguistically diverse students, methods for doing so vary widely. One approach prioritizes safe spaces, welcoming environments, well-structured routines – school and classroom culture features essential for students' well-being. A second key priority, often harder to achieve, is maintaining and supporting rigorous academic challenges needed for students' current and future success.

Academic rigor warrants particular attention, as unchallenging curricula often occur in high-need, lower-income settings with many diverse youth and many English language learners (Oakes, Rogers & Lipton, 2006). In reviewing relevant studies, Rivera-McCutchen (2012) notes: "A caring education provides students who have a history of poor academic outcomes with an environment that is both emotionally nurturing and academically rigorous." That combination of nurturing and rigor is es-

sential to education for California's diverse student population. However, targeted supports also are needed to help students meet rigorous goals.

Toward high challenge and high support

A balance of high challenge and high support provides the right context for learning and growth. In the chart on page 19, upper right quadrant, learning goals are high but attainable, and the teacher designs or collects effective supports to help students achieve the goals. Modifying curriculum is frequently viewed as the route to full participation of students who may lack academic preparation to engage content fully. Too often, however, such modification results in stripping classroom activity of the heart and soul of the content. A different approach is to hold the bar high and focus on creative, targeted supports to help students engage challenging curriculum as

By Steven Athanases

fully as possible. One key, then, is to discover where and when support is needed.

In one account of such practice, a teacher held a challenge of teaching Romeo and Juliet to 12- and 13-year-old second language learners in English Language Development (Hammond, 2006). She used drama to weave everyday language, the specialized language of Shakespeare, and reflexive language to interpret texts. One activity was "alter ego," where three students on chairs spoke characters' words, while three others stood behind, using everyday language to reflect on what characters were really thinking. This and other uses of drama and academic language support kept the challenges of Shakespeare's language and character studies high, with high support provided.

When challenge and support are out of balance

In contrast to this balance of challenge and support, high challenge and low support (upper left quadrant of chart) leads learners to shut down or retreat (Daloz, 1999). This pattern is exemplified by the teacher who demands much but provides little support to achieve learning goals. Many of us have witnessed this sort of teacher who charges ahead without monitoring what students have grasped, or who creates a learning climate that discourages students from revealing what they do not understand.

I recall how my high school Algebra II teacher created a climate of humiliation if we mustered the nerve to request clarification of anything. Most of us were lost and retreated, went through the motions, but gave up on any real engagement in the learning.

The answer, however, is not to lower the challenge. Below the horizontal axis of the chart are those sites of low challenge. Low challenge, high support (lower right quadrant) creates a comfortable setting that confirms what learners know and fails to stretch them, sending false messages of achievement.

I observed such a teacher in a summer Upward Bound program for middle school graduates in need of reading and writing support before high school. The teacher coddled students, telling them repeatedly, "You are all wonderful writers." Rather than stretch and challenge students beyond their comfort zones, this teacher led students to believe they were prepared for the academic challenges of high school. In the name of caring and comfort, students received false messages.

Worst of all is low challenge, low support (lower left quadrant). These are situations where tasks appear meaningless and students, unguided, disengage. In a university-schools partnership, I worked with a 10th-grade English teacher whose students completed little more than worksheets and multiple-choice questions, while he sat at his desk reading magazines. That he failed to provide meaningful instruction for a large percentage of 10th-graders at this underperforming high school was appalling.

I crafted a unit for students on character development in literature, linked with argumentative essays. The unit included activities to identify character traits in texts, to practice making claims about characters (with thesis warm-ups and brainstorms using characters from our own lives), and to structure well-supported paragraphs about short story characters.

To my dismay, the teacher left the room each of five periods on the first day I taught demonstration lessons for him. When I urged him to observe my guest teaching the next day, he was shocked at how his students engaged the content and what they could achieve. Creating and maintaining high challenge and high support in these ways requires a belief in what students can do and achieve and a commitment to learning what supports are needed to help students get there.

The key is instructional scaffolding

Common educational discourse includes scaffolding as a core idea for effective instruction. It is important to revisit original meanings of this idea and to learn criticisms of how the term has come to be understood. Building on the notion of a learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962), scaffolding typically targets the gap (or zone) between current performance and levels learners may reach without assistance (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Effective scaffolding builds toward intended learning outcomes, providing supports to help learners reach higher goals.
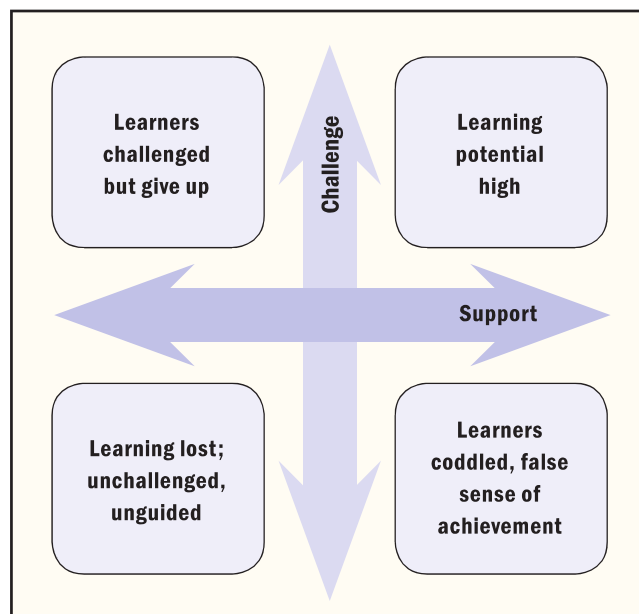
The construct of scaffolding began in research on one-to-one tutoring, drawing on earlier research on caregivers' guided attention to children's learning. The construct navigated into classroom-based research and practice, in which scaffolding generally indicates resources and processes a teacher uses to support the learning of a classroom of students. The movement from tutoring dyads to full-class instruction offers much possibility and many tensions and questions.

In English language arts, as in all subjects, many tools can support processing and production of text. These include note-taking, vocabulary games, dialectical journals that promote interpretation of text, sentence starters, and graphic organizers to generate and map ideas for writing. However, aligned with its origins, scaffolding calls on a teacher to target and differentiate support for learners. This is a demanding process, especially for high school teachers

who may have five classes of 25-30 students per class. Differentiation may be even more challenging as we consider varied learning preferences and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse youth.

Drawing on their review of a decade of scaffolding research internationally, van de Pol, Volman, and Beishuizen (2010) conclude, in fact, that scaffolding needs to be contingent upon a specific classroom of learners and their performances, language and needs. The authors note that diagnostic tools are needed in order to determine appropriate scaffolds and when they may be most effective and for whom. Although differentiating support for varied learners' needs remains a great challenge for teachers, there are ways teachers can learn about particular students' needs.

One approach some teachers take is gathering and analyzing baseline data to gauge where students are – who is performing at what level on a given instrument. Multiple data sources provide a fuller picture, and more than standardized tests are needed.

Charts and other visual displays of achievement help make patterns evident. Such work can pinpoint where scaffolding is needed and for whom. It also can identify what students already know and can do better.

Learning from diverse students

Too often scaffolding includes problematic assumptions that learners have no cul-

tural or linguistic resources to tap, that they are not individuals with agency (Dyson, 1999). My research team at UC Davis examined data of 80 ELA preservice teacher inquiries conducted over a six-year period in

a program with a record of preparing teachers to work with diverse learners (Athanases, Wahleithner & Bennett, 2012). Because inquiries occurred at the end of a supervised credential year, we were not surprised to find that 85 percent demonstrated high challenge activity in action plans and lessons, and 95 percent included scaffolds that facilitated engagement with high-level curriculum.

However, only 36 percent included evidence of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), tapping diverse students' out-of-school experiences or cultural resources. When they did so, they tapped students' knowledge and experiences in scaffolding. Several teachers in EL-only classes with recent immigrants, for example, found ways to use students' immigration stories as material for use in learning how to write autobiographical narratives for district assessments, how to use authentic dialogue and descriptive details, and how to write comparison/contrast papers about living in different nations.

Diversity of learners calls for varied

kinds and degrees of scaffolding, but learners' own knowledge and experiences are key scaffolding resources.

As teachers develop scaffolds, many realize how their students need guidance in actually using supports meaningfully. A challenge is bridging the scaffold to the academic goal. One preservice teacher I worked with bemoaned the quality of her students' essays. When I pressed her to pinpoint challenges students had, she said, half laughing, "It's like they need scaffolding to get from the scaffolding to the actual writing." In her spontaneous response, she identified a key issue: Scaffolds do not magically make learning happen, and we need to envision linkages.

One new teacher noted that the most puzzling thing for her was how students filled out graphic organizers but did not use the information later. Students told her repeatedly in interviews and other forms of feedback that organizers helped them, but she noted no real use of information students generated and mapped on these organizers in the essay writing the organizers were meant to support.

She recalled: "I needed to teach my students to take the ideas that they put down on the graphic organizer and then transfer them to their writing. This is not something that the students will know how to innately do." This explicit instruction in use of scaffolds is vital.

Maintaining a focus on goals

Standardized testing has at times limited pedagogical decision-making and practice. Teachers increasingly devote class time to skill work and test preparation, to the detriment at times of larger literacy activity and language production. Scaffolding discrete tasks without attention to larger purposes signals a lack of intentionality (Langer & Applebee, 1986).

There is a danger in instruction with diverse youth and particularly ELs of focusing on just discrete tasks and basics, including (in ELA) vocabulary, mechanics and language errors, minimizing attention to content knowledge development. Such work can yield intellectually impoverished curricula. One criticism offered is that teachers and students rely on scaffolds that create cookie-cutter products, stripped of individual thinking and voice. Here is where teachers need to monitor ways in which scaffolds do and do not serve larger purposes. Revisions and rethinking of scaffolds can be necessary.

An issue teachers report is gauging how much scaffolding is needed and for how long. Teachers in a research project on which I have worked reported that they were handholding, that students were so reliant on scaffolds that there was little evidence students could achieve tasks without them. This theme speaks to other essential elements of effective scaffolding: fading, or gradual withdrawal of scaffolding, and transfer of responsibility, so a student takes

Questions to foster high challenge and high support in teaching

Target	Questions to guide and focus teachers' work
High challenge	• Are you holding the bar high? In what ways? • What academically challenging activity do you have planned for students this week?
Diagnostic tools	• What forms of baseline data can you collect from students to gauge their strengths and needs at the beginning of the school year? • What diagnostic tools might you develop or use to determine, at various times, the levels and kinds of support students need? • Can you identify individuals and groups of students who may be ready for different levels of challenge or who may need different kinds of support?
High support	• How are you helping students reach high challenges you have for them? • What scaffolds are you using and how are they working?
Teaching use of scaffolds	• How are you teaching students to use scaffolds meaningfully? • Have you tried modeling for students how to use scaffolds to meet academic goals?
Academic language	• Have you found ways to "decode" academic language for students, beyond mere definitions? • Can you weave everyday, specialized, and reflexive language together to link high challenge with high support?
Fading scaffolds and transfer of responsibility	• How are you weaning students off of the scaffolds or supports you have had in place? • Which scaffolds have students outgrown? Do you see any evidence that they helped?

and oral instruction. This unlocked for her the need to rethink ways to scaffold her use of academic language through more use of visual cues, graphic illustrations, modeling and repeated practice.

Teachers in one project reported how their scaffolding practices were guided and supported by school leaders and school-site professional development. Scaffolding became part of the school discourse and was central to several professional development sessions and department meetings, as teachers co-constructed and at times swapped scaffolding practices. In addition, school leaders asked teachers in both formal conferences and informal chats about current scaffolding practices to help meet students' needs. One school leader offered to brainstorm scaffolds with new teachers and offered guidance on fading scaffolds as students moved through the grades.

Using questions to advance achievement

Drawing from research, teaching examples and issues discussed above, the table at left shows questions that school leaders and professional developers might use to foster high challenge and high support in teaching. Such questions could shape activities, group work and discussions in professional development sessions and faculty meetings, and also can be used by school leaders in both formal conferences with teachers and informal chats. In these ways, such questions can help foreground high challenge and high support as central to a school's culture and key to advancing academic learning and achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse California students. ■

References

Athanases, S.Z., Wahleithner, J.M. & Bennett, L.H. (2012). *Learning to attend to culturally and linguistically diverse learners through teacher inquiry in teacher education.* Teachers College Record, 114(7).

Daloz, L. (1999). *Mentor: Guiding the journey of adult learners.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dyson, A.H. (1999). "Transforming transfer: Unruly children, contrary texts, and the persistence of the pedagogical order."

increasing responsibility and learner control in a task (van de Pol *et al.*, 2010).

Monitoring the degree of continued need for scaffolds is key. Teachers with whom I have worked design rubrics to assess use of scaffolds (Venn diagrams, dialogue journals, thesis-and-support sheets), charting patterns to see how scaffolds function through repeated use. With preservice teachers at UC Davis, I guide the use of short surveys and questionnaires that ask K-12 students to report which scaffolds are serving their learning and in what ways and which are not and why. Responses to these items prove invaluable for teachers to rethink and reshape practice.

In some cases, what surfaces through inquiry into students' understanding is that academic language of larger goals and scaffolds are out of many students' reach. One teacher, who interviewed four focal students about literary analysis tasks they were doing, found that the students (two ELs, two native English speakers) did not understand the academic language the teacher had been using repeatedly in print

Most, if not all, of these alternatives to suspension can currently be employed pursuant to the discretion afforded school officials by the Education Code. However, by specifically listing them in statute, lawmakers aim to eliminate doubt as to the legality of such measures and encourage their use when appropriate.

Looking forward

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to student discipline. At times, removing a student from campus by suspension or expulsion is a necessary and appropriate response to dangerous or habitual misconduct. However, there are other times when the more effective response may be to allow the student to remain on campus while using other methods to correct his or her behavior. The best way to ensure that school officials utilize the ideal disciplinary response in any particular situation is to have a thorough understanding of all of the tools the Education Code provides to address student misconduct.

Garfield High School is an example of what can be accomplished when school officials take advantage of the full range of disciplinary tools and discretion afforded to them by the Education Code. Perhaps not every school can reduce its suspension rate so dramatically, but it stands to reason that if schools start employing these tools to their full advantage, instead of 2.2 million suspensions, in the next three years California could see a figure significantly lower, to the benefit of both its schools and its students. ∎

References

Hoag, C. (April 7, 2012). "'Defiance' seen as cause of Calif. Suspensions." *Los Angeles Daily News.* Retrieved from http://www.dailynews.com.

Garfield High in the News. (n.d.). On Garfield High School website. Retrieved from http://garfieldhs.org/apps/news.

California Department of Education Expulsion, Suspension, and Truancy Information. (n.d.). On California Department of Education website. Retrieved from http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest.

Sen. Floor, analysis of Sen. Bill 1714 (1993-1994 Reg. Sess.) passed as amended July 12, 1993.

Assem. Com. on Education, analysis of Assem. Bill 2242 (2011-2012 Reg. Sess.)

David Robinett is a senior associate in the Riverside office of Atkinson, Andelson, Loya, Ruud & Romo. He represents school and community college districts, specializing in personnel and employment law, board governance, and student discipline issues. He can be contacted at Drobinett@aalrr.com or www.aalrr.com.

Maintaining high challenge and high support

Continued from page 22

In A. Iran-Nejad & P.D. Pearson (Eds.), *Review of research in education: Vol. 24* (pp. 141-171). Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.

Hammond, J. (2006). "High challenge, high support: Integrating language and content instruction for diverse learners in an English literature classroom." *Journal of English for Academic Purposes,* 5, 269-283.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). "Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal,* 32(3), 465-491.

Langer, J.A. & Applebee, A.N. (1986). "Reading and writing instruction: Toward a theory of teaching and learning." *Review of Research in Education,* 13, 171-194.

Oakes, J., Rogers, J. & Lipton, M. (2006). *Learning power: Organizing for education and justice.* NY: Teachers College Press.

Rivera-McCutchen, R.L. (2012). "Caring in a small urban high school: A complicated success." *Urban Education,* 47(3), 653-680.

van de Pol, J., Volman, M. & Beishuizen, J. (2010). "Scaffolding in teacher-student interaction: A decade of research." *Educational Psychologist Review,* 22, 271-296.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). Thought and language. Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press.

Wood, D., Bruner, J.S. & Ross, G. (1976). "The role of tutoring in problem-solving." *Journal of Psychology and Psychiatry,* 17, 89-100.

Steven Athanases is a professor, School of Education, UC Davis. A former high school English teacher, he researches diversity and equity in teaching and learning English and teacher education, receiving distinguished research awards from the Association of Teacher Educators and the National Council of Teachers of English. His current projects focus on preservice teacher inquiry and academically challenging and supportive instruction for urban Latina/o youth. He is co-editor of "Mentors in the Making: Developing New Leaders for New Teachers" (Teachers College Press).