Scaffolding in teacher-student interaction: exploring, measuring, promoting and evaluating scaffolding

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Within a classroom, different students have different needs. This makes the teacher's job challenging. Teachers are expected nowadays to provide differentiated support, aimed at stimulating students' autonomy. Such support is metaphorically referred to as 'scaffolding' and is, just like a construction scaffold, adaptive and taken away when not needed anymore.

Scaffolding is hard to measure, due to its dynamic nature. Nevertheless, we developed a way to measure scaffolding by determining the degree to which the teacher adapts the level of regulation to students' understanding.

Scaffolding appears to be scarce in classroom practice because it is difficult to perform. In this dissertation, however, teachers appeared to be able to learn how to scaffold by using a model of scaffolding we developed. In this model, scaffolding is described in four concrete steps: (1) diagnosing students' understanding, (2) checking the diagnosis, (3) providing adaptive support, and (4) checking students' learning.

Although scaffolding is assumed to be effective, hardly any evidence exists. In our large-scaled classroom experiment, we found that: (1) students appeared to appreciate scaffolding, (2) scaffolding negatively affected students' on-task behaviour, and (3) if taking into account students' on-task behaviour, scaffolding can have a positive effect on students' achievement.

Scaffolding is a powerful concept that should receive continuing attention from researchers and practitioners. It represents a way of supporting students while fully acknowledging their potential. The student is empowered but never left to his or her own devices.