

Vygotskian principles on the ZPD and scaffolding

The **zone of proximal development (ZPD)**, is best understood as the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. The concept was developed by Soviet psychologist and social constructivist Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934).

Vygotsky stated that a child follows an adult's example and gradually develops the ability to do certain tasks without help or assistance. Vygotsky's definition of ZPD presents it as the distance between the actual developmental 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 (*L.S. Vygotsky: Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*)

Vygotsky among other educational professionals believes the role of education to be to provide children with experiences which are in their ZPD, thereby encouraging and advancing their individual learning. (*Berk, L & Winsler, A. (1995). "Vygotsky: His life and works" and "Vygotsky's approach to development". In Scaffolding children's learning: Vygotsky and early childhood learning. Natl. Assoc for Educ. Of Young Children.*)

The concept of scaffolding is closely related to the ZPD and was developed by other theorists applying Vygotsky's ZPD to educational contexts. Scaffolding is a process through which a teacher or more competent peer gives aid to the student in her/his ZPD as necessary, and tapers off this aid as it becomes unnecessary, much as a scaffold is removed from a building during construction. "Scaffolding refers to the way the adult guides the child's learning via focused questions and positive interactions." (*Balaban, N. (1995). "Seeing the Child, Knowing the Person." In Ayers, W. To Become a Teacher. Teachers College Press. p. 52*)

How Vygotsky Impacts Learning:

Curriculum—Since children learn much through interaction, curricula should be designed to emphasize interaction between learners and learning tasks.

Instruction—With appropriate adult help, children can often perform tasks that they are incapable of completing on their own. With this in mind, scaffolding—where the adult continually adjusts the level of his or her help in response to the child's level of performance—is an effective form of teaching. Scaffolding not only produces immediate results, but also instills the skills necessary for independent problem solving in the future.

Assessment—Assessment methods must take into account the zone of proximal development. What children can do on their own is their level of actual development and what they can do with help is their level of potential development. Two children might have the same level of actual development, but given the appropriate help from an adult, one might be able to solve many more problems than the other. Assessment methods must target both the level of actual development and the level of potential development.

Reading

Lev Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (Original work published 1934)

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.