

In The Zone



A guide for identifying and teaching
intermediate (5th-6th grade) school students
in the **Zone of Proximal Development**

*By Abigail Whisnant
Drury University*



Introduction

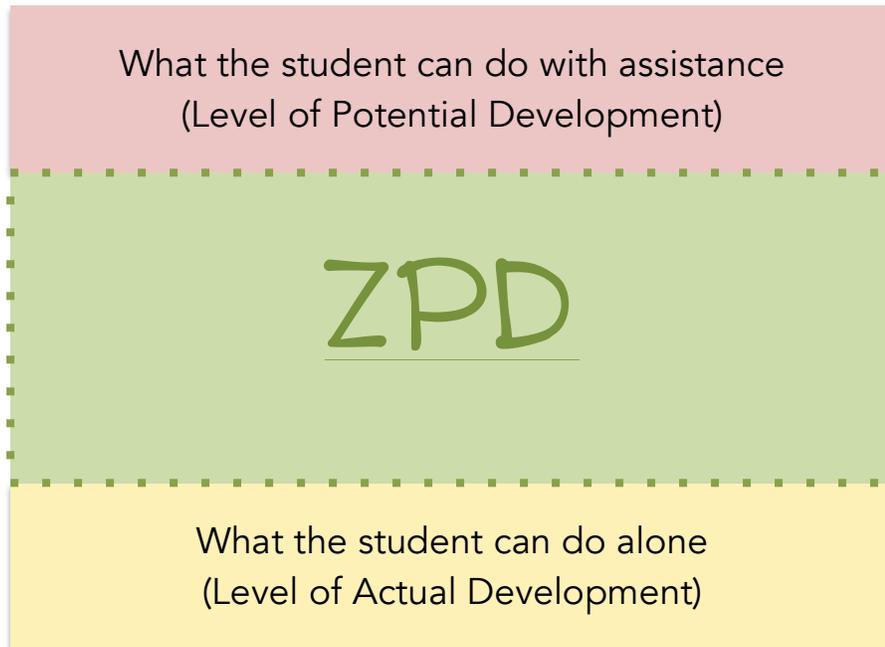
“What the child is able to do in collaboration today, he will be able to do independently tomorrow.” – *Lev Vygotsky*

As an intermediate school instructor, it can sometimes be challenging to keep your fifth or sixth grade students motivated to learn, especially during such a fragile time of mental and physical development. At the same time, it can be difficult to know just when and how you need to differentiate instruction to fit the many different learning styles of your ever-growing, ever-changing students.

Through the application of Lev Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development and the use of scaffolding, you can plan for better, more targeted instruction whether it is for the entire class, small groups, or certain individuals. This guide will introduce you to the concept of the ZPD and scaffolding, and provide specific examples, checklists, tips, and strategies that will help you apply these concepts in the classroom for more meaningful instruction.

What Is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)?

The **Zone of Proximal Development** (ZPD) is a concept introduced by Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the early 20th century. The ZPD is defined as the difference between what a learner can do on his own, and what he can do with assistive help from a teacher or peer, which is part of a process called scaffolding¹. The ZPD is the “zone” in which



instruction is optimal for each student – usually just above the current level of capability. Students tend to get bored when instruction is *too easy* for them. This sort of instruction results in classroom time that provides no further development for students. Similarly, they may get frustrated or angry if instruction is *too difficult* for them, because if they cannot comprehend what is being

taught, there will be no learning stimulation, and therefore no further development. Instruction that is focused with each student’s ZPD in mind will be instruction that is **not too easy, not too hard, but just challenging enough** to spark interest and excitement for learning.

Benefits of Teaching in the ZPD

Teaching in the ZPD benefits **students** immensely by providing them with *challenging but reasonable tasks* and *meaningful instruction* that will help them develop further. **Teachers** benefit from teaching in the ZPD by *better understanding their students, discovering unique thought processes, and identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses*. Even **administrators** benefit from teachers teaching in the ZPD by being able to *work with more motivated students and teachers* and *place a higher emphasis on teacher-student relationships*.



ZPD In a Social Context

Vygotsky, as well as many other psychologists, claimed that social interaction with others is a vital element in educational development¹. As a student works towards his current learning goals, the support of family, peers, and you as a teacher helps him achieve those goals and move on to the next, satisfying his constantly changing ZPD. *Scaffolding* is an

effective way in which you can provide support for your students as they learn and develop in the ZPD.



What is Scaffolding?

Scaffolding refers to the instructional strategy in which the teacher models the desired learning skill or strategy, provides guided assistance for the student, and then gradually shifts responsibility of the skill or strategy completely to the student². In

order to understand your students' current skills so you can continue to scaffold effectively, it is important to remember to constantly assess and provide feedback to your students. One way to do this is by using **formative assessment** (bell ringers, exit slips, class discussions, etc.) to immediately assess and provide feedback during instruction. If you know your students' current skill level by using formative assessment during instruction, it will be much easier for you to know how much guidance they will need and where they should be going next.

How Can I Locate the ZPD?

As mentioned before, **formative assessment** is a great tool to help you determine what a student does and does not know or what she can and cannot do on her own. Locating the ZPD of each student requires you to *establish learning goals* for your students and closely examine each student as an *individual learner*. On the next page, you will find a checklist that will guide you as you strive to identify and teach in the ZPD.



Am I Teaching “In The Zone”?

Ask Yourself:	Quick Tip	Ms. Whisnant’s Example
<p>○ Do I have a learning goal set so I know what students should be able to do by the end of this unit?</p>	<p>Create a student learning objective (SLO) and establish what level of knowledge/skill you want your students to obtain. Share this information with students so they are motivated to learn, they know what they are working for, and they can self or peer assess as time goes on.</p>	<p>Ms. Whisnant’s SLO: My fifth grade students should be able to read, analyze, and make connections to this text by the end of the unit. Our learning objective is on display for students to see each day so they are aware of what they are working for.</p>
<p>○ Do I know what skills and knowledge my students need to have in order to achieve this goal?</p>	<p>Work backwards from the end-of-unit goals you created and develop an ideal model of learning progression that you expect your students to follow.</p>	<p>Ms. Whisnant’s skills and knowledge list: Before my students can read, analyze, and reflect on these passages, they must be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognize words - Identify text/story elements - Organize their thoughts
<p>○ Did I create tasks and activities to help me see what my students do and do not understand?</p>	<p>Create tasks and activities that allow you to assess and provide feedback on student understanding <i>while they are learning</i>. Formative assessment is your best friend here!</p>	<p>Ms. Whisnant’s Approach: Students can read the text then discuss in small groups their analysis and reflection, giving and receiving feedback. This helps students review what they already know how to do and also introduces the new skill (analyzing and reflecting) through hands-on practice.</p>
<p>○ Am I observing, assessing, and listening to my students so I can understand their thought processes?</p>	<p>Frequently observing, assessing, and listening to student feedback will allow you to see patterns of strengths and weaknesses. Formative assessment is very useful here in helping you identify your students’ ZPDs!</p>	<p>Ms. Whisnant’s List for Observing and Assessing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - During class discussions, I will make mental notes of strong and weak points - I will observe and listen during small group discussion - Bell Ringers/Exit Slips allow me to assess student comprehension on a daily basis
<p>○ Am I adjusting my instruction based on student assessment (what they do and do not yet understand)?</p>	<p>When you observe during formative assessment where your students struggle and where they have strength, this will help you locate the ZPD and adjust your instruction to make learning more meaningful.</p>	<p>Ms. Whisnant’s Approach: Students seem to have trouble analyzing and reflecting upon texts on their own. I can add some guided practice where we analyze and reflect together a little as a class. Students can then analyze and reflect further in small groups.</p>
<p>○ Am I providing feedback that uses student strength to build on weakness?</p>	<p>Ask guiding questions individually or in small groups. Use scaffolding to model, guide, and help students begin to think critically on their own.</p>	<p>Ms. Whisnant’s Approach: I can do my own analysis and reflection, then ask guiding questions to get students to analyze and reflect on their own.</p>

Additional Information and Examples on Teaching *In The Zone*

- Don't forget about the wonderful science behind **interactive software** when trying to measure ZPD. You can work this software in to your tasks and activities plan in order to gather information and provide feedback.
- Here is a list of some **methods to use in your ZPD based classroom**¹:
 - Whole group instruction
 - Small group instruction
 - Small group play
 - Formal individual assessments
 - Computer-based assessments
 - Informal individual assessments (exit slips)
- Measuring skill level to determine if your students are at, above, or below grade level can be a challenge at times. The table below provides you with some questions to ask yourself when trying to determine skill level.

	What to Look For	Ms. Whisnant's Example
Above Grade Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student is bored with current grade level work - Student work goes above and beyond expectations of mastery 	<p>There are a few students in my class able to successfully complete higher-grade level work. These students are analyzing, making predictions, and reflecting without a prompt and can comprehend the text with no additional explanation.</p>
At Grade Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student is consistently motivated and progressing through grade level work - Work shows understanding and mastery of skill 	<p>The students who can successfully complete a detailed written analysis and reflection with a prompt and comprehend the text with little or no additional explanation are considered at grade level⁶.</p>
Below Grade Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Student is frustrated and angry with grade level work - Work shows lack of understanding for the skill 	<p>Students considered below grade level cannot comprehend the text enough on their own to make inferences, predictions, connections, or analysis of the text.</p>

Why Scaffold?

Scaffolding is very useful for helping students progress in their learning, but just how and why is it so beneficial? Well, as mentioned earlier, students **need support** in order to meet their goals and scaffolding provides that support. By the teacher acting as a facilitator of knowledge rather than a dominant expert, students can “take a more active role in their own learning,” and “take ownership of the learning event”⁵. By this scaffolding model:

Teacher Models → **Class Does It** → **Group Does It** → **Individual Does It**⁵

students get support from the teacher, from their entire class, from their specific group members, and then finally are able to do it on their own without any help.

Working in the ZPD and using scaffolding to progress students will **motivate and challenge** them, provide the opportunity for **peer teaching**, and create a welcoming, **safe learning environment**, which is always important for meaningful learning.



Ms. Whisnant's Tips for Scaffolding

List adapted from Edutopia's Scaffolding Strategies⁴

1. Seeing is Believing

Have you ever heard someone say they learn best by seeing? **Teacher modeling** is the heart of scaffolding. Every time you are teaching something new, take every chance to show/demonstrate what you are expecting from students³. In my fifth grade English classroom, I use **think alouds** to model my thought process and my students' thought processes as we read, analyze, and reflect on the text, strengthening their critical thinking skills.



Providing **visual aids**, such as graphic organizers, pictures, charts, and lists can help you with scaffolding. Graphic organizers are great for my students while they organize their thoughts about the text. Like training wheels, eventually the graphic organizers will go away and my students will be able to write and discuss their thoughts about challenging text completely on their own.

2. Experience is Everything

Ask students all about their **experiences, ideas, thoughts, and feelings** about the current subject at hand. It is normal to provide some guiding questions and hints to help students reach connections to their own lives.

3. Talking is Good!

When students can discuss new ideas and information with their peers, they can give and receive feedback, hear ideas from others, and share their own ideas and thoughts about the concept. Small groups for discussing text are an important part of guided learning in my classroom, as I can use this time to **observe and listen** to student feedback.

4. Comprehension is Necessary

Teaching students vocabulary words before a lesson, sometimes called **frontloading vocabulary**⁴, is often necessary for their comprehension, especially in a fifth grade English classroom. When I know a text contains challenging vocabulary, I create a list of words that I will introduce and talk about with my students before we read the text.

5. Incorporate Wait Time

Wait time for you doubles as **thinking time** for students. When I ask a guiding question about the text, I provide some wait time so my students can think for a moment before providing an answer. I always make sure my questions are open ended in order to guide my students' thinking.

Conclusion

The information provided in this guide about the Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding is meant to help you create a ZPD centered classroom by locating it and teaching in it. By using the [In The Zone](#) checklist, tips, and examples of fifth grade English students provided by Ms. Whisnant, you should be able to find and incorporate your students' ZPDs into their learning in no time. Once teacher instruction and student learning is centered around the ZPD, you, your students, and your administrators will enjoy the many benefits that teaching in the ZPD has to offer!



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