Vygotsky in the Classroom

A Teacher's Guide to Understanding the Zone of Proximal Development in 2nd and 3rd Grade Students

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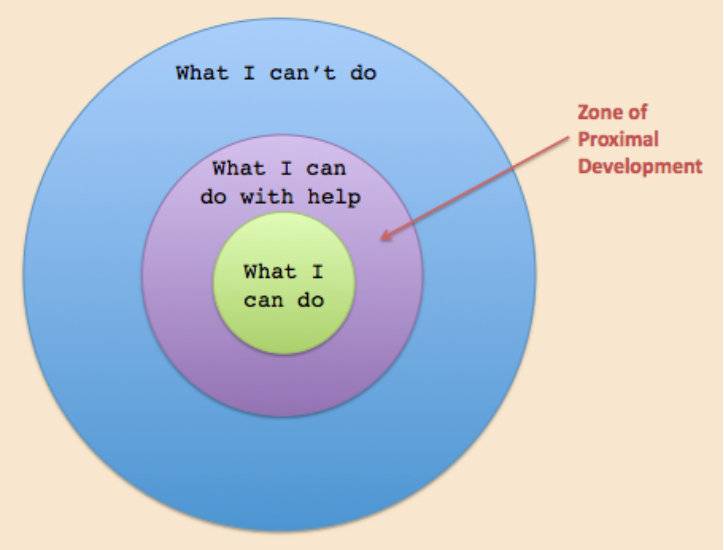
Introduction

As an educator, you are constantly faced with the task of engaging, challenging, and enhancing the learning of every student in your classroom. Inevitably, each child will come with a variety of experiences, learning styles, and learning capacities that are unique to each of them. Differentiating instruction to meet the needs of every student is difficult, yet we cannot ignore what students already know and what is still left to work on.

This informational guide will aid in your understanding of the ideas related to the zone of proximal development (ZPD), as well as, its impact on education. Developing and understanding your student's ZPD's can benefit your instruction in a way that positively enhances the educational development of your class individually and as a whole.

In this guide, you will also find beneficial checklists, tables, examples, and other information to better your understanding of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and the importance it has for your class.

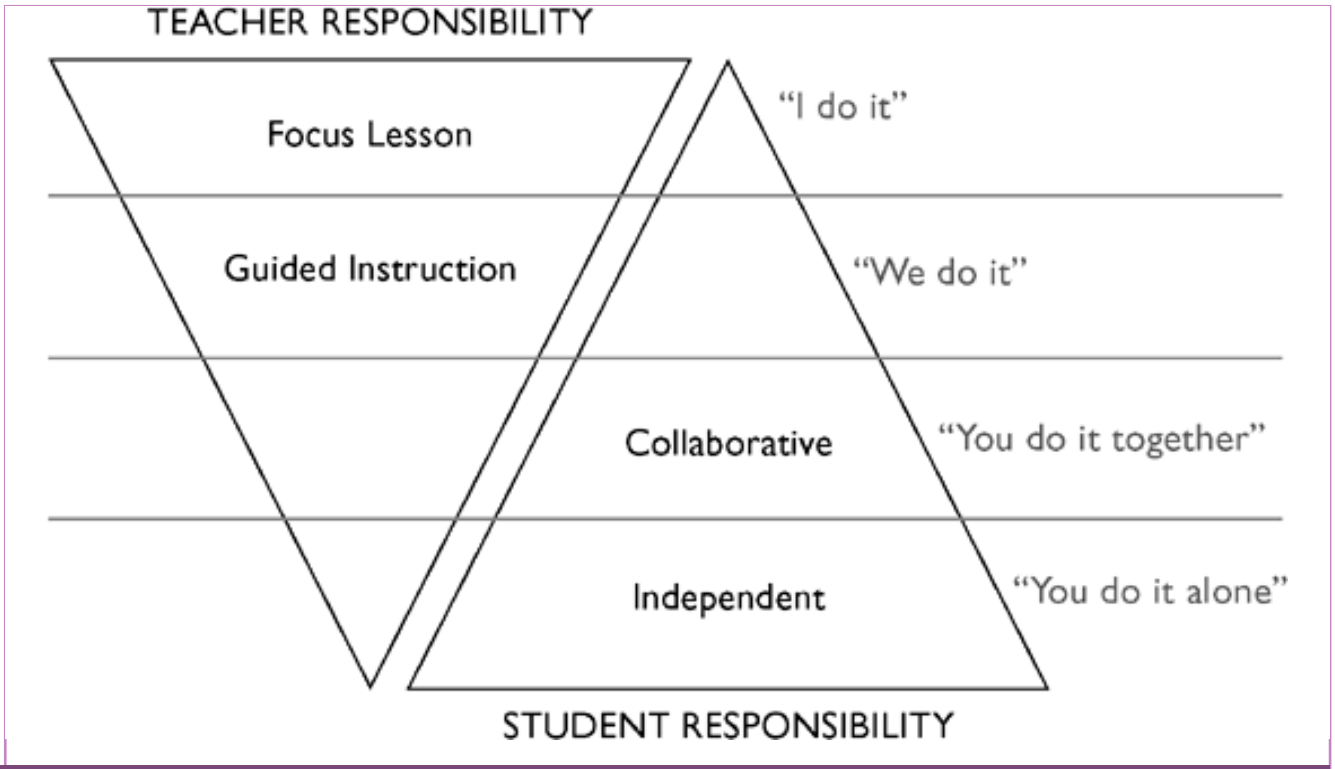
What is the Zone of Proximal Development?



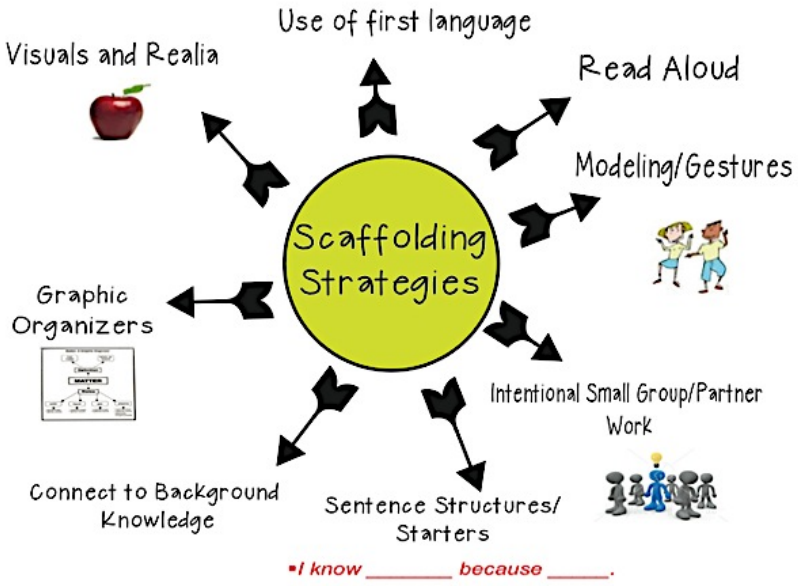
The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the difference between what a learner can do independently without help and what he or she can do with directed assistance (scaffolding). Lev Vygotsky, a psychologist and social constructivist of the late 1970s, developed this concept. He believed that the role of education was to provide children with experiences that are within their ZPD, fostering and encouraging their individual learning. Vygotsky suggested that teachers use cooperative learning exercises where less competent children develop with help from more skillful peers- within the zone of proximal development. He also believed when a student is in the ZPD for a particular task, providing the appropriate assistance will give the students enough of a" boost" to achieve the task. Instruction within each student's ZPD is not too hard or too easy, but challenging enough to develop new skills that build upon other pre-established ones. Students have a greater potential to learn during their ZPD because it characterizes the next step in their chronological and ongoing development.

Determining Each Student's ZPD

Locating the ZPD of your students is no easy task. Formative assessments may aid in determining what your students do and do not know, however, you must consider each student individually and closely examine his or her abilities and weaknesses. For example, let's say Johnnie struggles to pass his reading tests after ***listening*** to a story, however, passes the tests with an 'A' when he reads for himself. By making a small adjustment, Johnnie can make huge strides on his reading goals. Teaching in the ZPD means providing the **scaffolding** that is necessary for your learners. On the next pages, you will learn more about scaffolding and view a checklist that will assist you in teaching in and identifying the ZPD.



All About Scaffolding



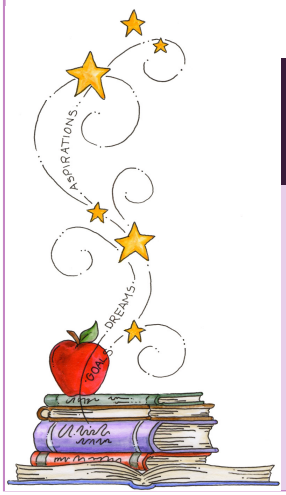
Scaffolding is a process in which you (the teacher) aid a student in his or her ZPD as necessary and then taper off as the student gains the skills necessary to complete the task individually. Instructional scaffolding may include modeling, gaining motivation and interest of the student, asking leading questions, or simplifying problems. As you can see in the diagram above, as students build skills, the transfer of responsibility should go from the teacher to the student. In order to measure your students' current skills to continue scaffolding effectively, you must constantly evaluate the students, both formally and informally. These assessments can be as simple as a class discussion, exit slip, or free writes.

Benefits of Scaffolding in the Classroom

As you read above, scaffolding can play a huge role in the progress of your students' learning and provide several benefits. One of those benefits is that it provides students with motivation and a challenge that is obtainable. This idea gives meaning to their learning and allows them to take an active role in their education. In addition, scaffolding provides constant support that is needed for your students to reach their educational goals. Not only your support, but also support from their class as a whole, and their specific group members. Listed to the right, you will find a few more specific advantages of using scaffolding in the classroom.

- Challenges students through deep learning that is still obtainable.
- Engages students in meaningful and dynamic discussions in small and large classes.
- Motivates learners to become better students (learning how to learn).
- Increases the likelihood for students to meet instructional objectives.
- Provides individualized instruction (especially in smaller classrooms).
- Affords the opportunity for peer teaching and learning.
- Scaffolds can be "recycled" for other learning situations.
- Provides a welcoming and caring learning environment.

  – NIU 2008



Of course, scaffolding is most effective when it is paired and tailored to the individual skill level of each student.

As I mentioned before, measuring the knowledge of each student is no doubt difficult but absolutely essential to the success of scaffolding and teaching in the zone of proximal development. On the following page, you will find a chart to guide you in determining where your students are in terms of at grade level, above grade level, or below grade level.

	Things to Look for	Classroom Example
Above Grade Level	• Student's work is always exceptional, above and beyond what is expected. • Student seems bored.	These students are problem solving, reflecting, and evaluating without assitance. They are also capable of comprehension with no additional explanation.
At Grade Level	• Student's work shows understnading and knowledge of the skill. • Student is successfully completing grade level work.	These students are able to successfully complete detailed evaluations at grade level. They consistently show the ability to complete work with little assistance.
Below Grade Level	• Student's work shows little comprehension of the skill. • Student become angry or annoyed with grade level work.	Thses students struggle to understand the grade level concepts. They require your assistance for taks like making predictions, connections, or evaluations.

"What a child is able to in collaboration today, he will be able to do independently tomorrow. " - Lev Vygotsky

Checklist: Am I Teaching in the Zone?

* Adjusted From: White Paper Teaching in the Zone of Proximal Development

Questions to Ask Yourself	ZPD Tip	Classroom Example
What do I want my students to know by the end of this unit?	Determine the target level of knowledge you want your students to have by the end of a specific time period. (End of the week, end of the unit, end of the year, etc.)	I want my students to be able to make inferences and predictions about the text.
What prerequiste skills or knowledge do they need before they can complete this level of understnading?	Work backwards from the end-of-unit goals. Ask: "What do my students need to understand before they can reach this goal?" Create a model of learning progressions that you expect students to follow in order to reach the targeted learing goal.	Before my students can do this with understanding, they need to be able to: • Comprehend the reading • Have an undestanding of what an inference and prediction is • Be able to use writing to express thought
Do the lessons and activities I have planned enable me to see what my students grasp for understanding and what they still need to work on?	Create activites, assignments, and problems that enable you to gather information about students' understnading of the topic while they are learning.	Whole class instruction will help students review previous skills and introduce new skills. Small groups or partner work will help students with hands-on practice (activites or worksheets.) Interactive computer software can also be used to gather information about students independent levels and ZPDs.
Am I taking the time to observe, assess, and listen to what each student has to say, so that I can better understand how hey are arriving at their answers?	Observe, assess, and listen to student behaviors and inquires in response to the assigned tasks. Frequent assessment, either formal or informal, will allow you to determine a pattern of strengths and weaknesses of the class and as individuals. This will help you identify students' ZPDs.	During whole class instruction, I keep a mental note of the skills students display. During small group work I walk around, informally assessing what they are unable to do. Individual conferences, classwork, and homework allow me to see how students are performing independently.
Am I making adjustments to my lessons based upon the result of understanding I see in my students? What do they still need to work on?	Make changes in instruction, actiivities, and groups based upon the informaiotn you gather about what your students can do independently, what they can do with peers, and what they are struggling with overall.	Bill, Jane, and Jack were able to follow along when we solved a problem as a class using objects but not when they worked in small groups using number lines. They will be regrouped so that their strength in objects can guide them in their number line skills.
Am I giving feedback to students that will build their weaknesses through their strengths?	Work with small groups and individual students. Push their thinking by asking leading questoins, modeling and providing demonstrations as necessary.	To Bill, Jane, and Jack: "How many beads are on the table? How many are in my hand? When you add this to the ones you have, how many are there all together? Let's try to show this on a number line."

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