

## What is the “Zone of Proximal Development?”

A central concept in Lev Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory is that determining the optimal match between the learner’s background knowledge and the introduction of new ideas and skills is an effective way to maximize academic growth.

For additional information, read *An Overview of Zone of Proximal Development Theory*.

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### An Overview of Zone of Proximal Development Theory

#### **Purpose**

Examines social constructs and cognitive placement related to optimal learning in the child. Supports appropriate beginning points for students as well as interactive developmental opportunities as a bridge to learning new ideas.

#### **Definition**

The Zone of Proximal Development bridges the gap between what is known and what can be known. Vygotsky claimed that optimal learning occurred in this zone.

#### **Implications for Instruction**

Traditionally, schools have not promoted environments in which students play an active role in their own education as well as their peers’. Vygotsky’s theory requires the teacher and students to play untraditional roles as they collaborate with each other. Instead of a teacher dictating meaning to students for future recitation, a teacher should collaborate with students to make their own meaning (Hausfather, 1996). Learning becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and teacher.

1. The physical classroom, based on Vygotsky’s theory, would provide clustered desks or tables and work space for peer instruction, collaboration, and small-group instruction. Like the environment, the instructional design of learning material would promote student interaction and collaboration. Thus the classroom becomes a community of learning.
2. Because Vygotsky asserts that cognitive change occurs within the zone of proximal development, instruction would be designed to reach a developmental level just above the student’s current developmental level.
3. Individuals participating in peer collaboration or guided teacher instruction must share the same focus to access the zone of proximal development. “Joint attention and shared problem solving is needed to create a process of cognitive, social, and emotional interchange” (Driscoll, 1994). “If one partner dominates, the interaction is less successful” (Hausfather, 1996).

Scaffolding and reciprocal teaching are effective strategies to access the zone of proximal development. Scaffolding requires the teacher to provide students the opportunity to extend their current skills and knowledge. The teacher must engage students’ interest, simplify tasks so they are manageable, and motivate students to pursue the instructional goal. In addition, the teacher must look for discrepancies between students’ efforts and the solution, control for frustration and risk, and model an idealized version of the act (Hausfather, 1996).

## An Overview of Zone of Proximal Development Theory (continued)

### Entry Points

The zone of proximal development theory focuses on the concept of readiness to learn, emphasizing upper levels of competence and achieving the proper “reach” for all students as they enter a lesson. These upper boundaries are not immutable, however, but constantly changing with the learner’s increasing independent competence. What a child can perform today with assistance, she will be able to perform tomorrow independently, thus preparing her entry into a new and more demanding collaboration.

It also emphasizes structures for learning which have significant implications for classroom instruction. Vygotsky’s research compels us to recognize the importance of social exchange in accelerating cognitive development and to build classrooms around structures and procedures which support this kind of interactive, responsive instruction. It also suggests that learners collaborate with others of like readiness so that balanced, true collaboration occurs.

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### References

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