

Zone of Proximal Development

November 2024 by Teresa Thayer Snyder

First, they built a cozy fort—for reading! My, that makes this old educator a happy grandma! Then, James, who is in second grade, and Liliana who is in kindergarten, cuddled up to read a book. James is a strong second-grade reader and Liliana is a strong kindergarten reader. He obviously is more skilled than she at this point. I was so interested in their conversation about the book as James explained to his little cousin what a consonant blend is and how “it mutates the sounds of both letters into a different one.” He encouraged her to try out different words and he answered her questions about the text they were reading. It was such a lovely moment.



This is a classic example of what child developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, called the “Zone of Proximal Development.” He described this as the gap between what a learner can do on their own and what they can do with help from a more experienced peer or with a caring ‘expert’.

Many times, the best learning that occurs in a person’s life is not learned sitting at a desk, but is learned in the company of others—because, as Vygotsky pointed out, learning is a social experience. It benefits from interaction, it benefits from conversation, it produces errors and it benefits from solving problems and inconsistencies—in the company of more experienced folks. Everything from learning to drive, to fielding a ground ball, to learning to read, to building a rocket ship requires a social component. Once the novice learner attains skills, they become the foundation for expanded learning.

Sometimes we have expectations for our learners that exceed the Zone of Proximal Development. In those cases, what the novice actually learns is that they are not very good at whatever we seek to teach them. They may develop resistance strategies or avoidance behaviors. That is

counterproductive. What we want a novice to learn is that they may not have learned it *yet*, but with interaction from a more experienced person and time and space, they will get there.

When we construct environments that are outside the Zone of Proximal Development, we risk building castles in the air that will crumble and collapse. Constructing social environments that are within the Zone nurtures learning that is retained and internalized and upon which deeper learning can be built.

One of the reasons I love multi-aged groupings is based on this very concept—a setting with supportive, more experienced peers invites new learners to stretch and to assimilate. It reinforces the learning for the more experienced peers, allowing them to reach even further. But that is a story for another day.

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