



Two Important Ideas about Thinking from Vygotsky

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Scaffolding

If you are familiar with building construction, then chances are, you are familiar with scaffolding. Scaffolding is the structure built alongside a building when a brand new building is being built or when a building is being repaired. After the building is completed or the repairs are made, the scaffolding is removed. In Vygotsky's view of cognitive development, the adults or other partners in a child's world provide scaffolding to help children learn new information and develop more complex thinking abilities.

Zone of Proximal Development

What do you do about the child who, after what seems like 1000 tries or scaffolding, can't get the puzzle piece into the right space? What then? It's time to put the puzzle away. The child has gone beyond his ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). The ZPD is the space between a child being able to do it all by himself and doing it with some scaffolding or help from the outside. In the case of the child who just can't fit the puzzle piece into the puzzle, even with support from the teacher, it's clear that the demands of putting this puzzle together go way beyond the mental and perhaps physical abilities of the child. This particular puzzle is outside the child's ZPD. It's up to the adult in this situation to put the puzzle away and get another one that will be challenging for the child, but not impossible.

On the other hand, consider the child who comes to the puzzle table, selects the Winnie the Pooh puzzle with 8 pieces and puts it together in less than 30 seconds. This activity falls outside this child's ZPD. It's time to set out additional puzzles or encourage the child to try a new puzzle; one that is more challenging. Maybe it will have more pieces or a more complicated design.

In both these cases you would need to make adjustments so that each child is putting together puzzles that fall within his or her ZPD in order to assist in their cognitive development.