- For teachers of every phase, early years to secondary

THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Teach At The Edge Of What They Can Do

A foundational idea from 1930s child psychology, translated into English in 1978, applied here for today's classroom.

Are you teaching to what your class can already do alone, or to what they could do next, with your help?

Vygotsky illustrated his "zone of proximal development" idea with two children who tested at the same level working alone. With the same small amount of adult help, one reached problems pitched at twelve-year-olds, the other only nine-year-olds. It is his own worked example from a 1978 psychology text, not a controlled study, so it shows what he argued teaching should target, not what a trial proved.

Evidence: Early signal

Controlled comparisons of ZPD-targeted teaching against alternatives, with stated methods, sample sizes and quantified outcomes.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner & Souberman, Eds.). Harvard University Press, ch.6, pp.79-91. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9vz4.11.

WHAT HE PROPOSED

Two children scored the same alone. With help, they didn't.

Vygotsky's starting complaint: testing only measures what a learner can already do by themselves, which he called the "actual" level. He argued this misses something. To show why, he described two children who tested at the same level working alone. He then gave each of them harder problems, with just a little help: a leading question, or the first step shown. Their two "actual" scores had looked identical. Their results with help did not.

CHILD A

Same score as Child B, working alone

Reached age-12 level

With a little adult help

CHILD B

Same score as Child A, working alone

Reached age-9 level

With a little adult help

Vygotsky's own worked example, not a described study: he does not report the children's starting score, how many children this was tried with, or how the problems were scored. He asked the obvious question himself: are these two children mentally the same?

What this distinction means for teaching

1

Test with help, not just alone

A solo score is only half the picture. What a learner does with a nudge shows what is close to ready, not just what is finished.

2

Watch for what's "almost there"

Vygotsky pointed to another researcher's pattern: what young children could only do with guidance, they could often do alone a couple of years later.

3

Pitch just beyond solo reach

His own formula, in his words: the only "good learning" is learning that runs ahead of what's already mastered, not behind it.

4

Know help has a ceiling too

His own example: a child shown one arithmetic step grasps it at once; shown a step in far harder maths, repeating it changes nothing.

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MAKE IT YOURS

Across your subjects and your classes

This chapter is Vygotsky's own theoretical argument, illustrated with two children and no described method. It was not a trial of one way of teaching against another. What follows are sensible ways the same distinction, aim just beyond solo reach, could apply in your setting: worth trying, not proven.

Subject	How the distinction could apply
Maths	Before reteaching a whole topic, give one leading question on a slightly harder problem. If they get there with that nudge, the topic is in reach; teach the next step, not the whole thing again.
Reading & writing	A learner who can answer a comprehension question only after a rephrased prompt is closer than a blank test score suggests. Use that prompt as your next teaching point.
Practical & PE	Show the first move of a skill, then step back and watch. Where they pick it up from one demonstration marks the edge worth coaching next.
New language / EAL	A learner who can complete a sentence once you supply the first word is showing you the next vocabulary or structure to teach directly, not one still out of reach.

Adapting to your classes

Lower-attaining groups
Vygotsky's own example: help only works within reach. A prompt on next week's target, not next term's, is what shows their real edge.

Higher-attaining groups
A learner who solves a much harder problem unaided has already moved past that edge; the useful prompt is one level higher again.

Whole-class questioning
A question nobody can answer even with a hint is pitched too far ahead for the class today; save it, don't drop it.

Any subject, no extra resources
This only needs one changed habit: giving a small prompt before assuming "they can't do this" and moving on.

Start with one: pick a task a learner currently gets stuck on. Next time, give one small prompt, a leading question or the first step, before you step in fully. Note how far that one prompt takes them.

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HOW SOLID IS THIS?

A hugely influential idea, on a very small worked example

Early signal

This rates the evidence's firmness, not our endorsement of the idea. The distinction Vygotsky draws has shaped education for decades, but his own worked example is a two-child illustration, not a designed study.

- There is no control group and no described method: Vygotsky doesn't say how the two children were chosen, what the problems were, or who scored the outcome. It is presented as a single illustration.
- The source is 1930s Russian psychology, translated and compiled into English in 1978, describing children in an unspecified setting, not a UK classroom or a modern trial.
- The text argues WHY teaching should aim just beyond solo reach; it does not report a test of that approach against any other, so it can't show how much difference it actually makes.

What that means for you: treat "test what they can do with a little help, then teach just beyond that" as a well-reasoned, influential principle worth trying and watching, not as a technique a trial has proven speeds up learning.

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TRY IT THIS WEEK

Your first small step

THIS WEEK

Pick a task a learner currently gets stuck on. Next time, give one small prompt, a leading question or the first step, before you step in fully.

Try it and watch: notice how far that one small prompt actually takes them. That gap between "stuck alone" and "fine with a nudge" is your own evidence of where to teach next, not the study's.

Go deeper

Vygotsky's Theory of Cognitive Development · structural-learning.com/post/vygotskys-theory-of-cognitive-development

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Structural Learning · evidence without the hype.

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