

Two Architects, One Building

Vygotsky supplied the theory of how support becomes thought; Bruner engineered it for classrooms. Four contrasts that matter in practice.

The zone vs the scaffold

Vygotsky: development happens in the gap between solo and supported performance. Bruner: here are the moves adults make inside that gap.

In class: ZPD tells you WHERE to teach; scaffolding tells you HOW to behave while teaching there.

Language as tool vs language as system

Vygotsky: speech becomes inner thought, so talk IS the curriculum. Bruner: ideas are represented in action, image and symbol, so translate between modes.

In class: Vygotsky says discuss it; Bruner says act it, draw it, then write it.

Culture leads vs structure spirals

Vygotsky: learning leads development through cultural tools. Bruner: any subject can be taught honestly at any age, then revisited deeper: the spiral curriculum.

In class: Fractions at five with cake, at nine with notation, at thirteen with algebra: same idea, rising register.

Where they simply agree

Learning is social, support is temporary, and the adult's job is handover. Their shared legacy outweighs their differences.

In class: Both would recognise reciprocal teaching, dialogic talk and faded scaffolds as their own.

Bruner's Scaffolding Functions

The six tutoring functions from the original 1976 paper, as planning prompts. Scaffolding is these behaviours, not just any help.

Recruit and focus

Win attention to the task and keep it pointed at the productive part.

Say: "What makes this task worth starting, and what will pull focus from it?"

Reduce degrees of freedom

Shrink the choices until the learner can act. Constraint enables.

Say: "Which decisions am I removing for now, and when do they come back?"

Mark critical features

Point at exactly what matters: the difference between their attempt and the goal.

Say: "What is THE feature a novice misses here, and how do I make it loud?"

Control frustration, demonstrate

Keep failure cheap, and model the step when needed, then hand straight back.

Say: "What is my recovery line when it goes wrong, and my shortest possible demonstration?"

Three Modes, One Idea

Bruner's representations as a teaching sequence: enactive, iconic, symbolic. Most failures to understand are jumps straight to symbols.

Enactive: do it

The idea as action with real things. Not babyish: foundational at any age.

In class: Equivalent fractions with folded paper strips before any notation.

Iconic: picture it

The idea as image or diagram, holding the structure visibly.

In class: The folded strips become drawn bars; the bars become the fraction wall.

Symbolic: write it

The idea in notation, now anchored to action and image it can fall back on.

In class: Three-quarters equals six-eighths, and a learner who wobbles can redraw the bar.

Planning With Both Lenses

A unit-planning check that uses each theorist for what he is best at.

Vygotsky checks

- The lesson targets what learners can do WITH help today.
- Structured talk converts support into thinking: pairs before pens.
- Academic language is lent through stems, then reclaimed.

Bruner checks

- New ideas travel enactive to iconic to symbolic, not symbols first.
- Scaffolds reduce choices early and return them on a schedule.
- The topic's next spiral visit is named: when does this idea return, deeper?

Shared checks

- Every support has a fade date.
- Handover is visible: learners do unaided this week what needed help last week.

Vygotsky and Bruner: A 5-Minute Evidence Briefing

What each contributed, how the evidence carries them, and where theory outruns data.

■ Complementary, not competing

Vygotsky theorised development through social support; Bruner operationalised the support itself, naming scaffolding's functions and the modes ideas travel through. Classrooms need both: the where and the how.

■ Their descendants carry the evidence

Dialogic teaching, with both theorists in its DNA, advanced trial classes two months in 20 weeks; reciprocal teaching and faded scaffolds carry randomised support. The tradition tests well even where the originals could not be tested.

■ The spiral is design wisdom, not a finding

Spaced revisiting of ideas at rising depth is consistent with spacing and retrieval evidence, but the spiral curriculum as a whole has rarely been trialled against alternatives.

■ The honest caveat

Both theories predate modern methods: the ZPD resists measurement, scaffolding research is mostly small-scale, and neither produces effect sizes. Use them as design grammar, validated where their specific descendants have been tested.

Evidence base

Margolis, A.A. (2020). Zone of proximal development, scaffolding and teaching practice. *Cultural-Historical Psychology*.
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Alexander, R. (2018). Developing dialogic teaching: genesis, process, trial. *Research Papers in Education*.
Bruner, J.S. (1960). *The Process of Education*. Harvard University Press.