

Review

Revisiting Vygotsky's Concept of Zone of Proximal Development: Towards a Stage of Proximity

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Without a doubt, the contribution of Mozart's psychology, Lev S. Vygotsky, is an undeniable fact to the field of developmental psychology. One of the most significant issues put forward by Vygotsky is the notion of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) which is the distance between one's actual and potential level of development. Due to the academic popularity and attribution of the ZPD concept to Vygotsky, recent discussions and contributions, either rival or complementary, seem to be marginalized. To this effect, the present paper starts with a description of the notion of ZPD and then moves to consider other contributions such as IDZ put forward by Mercer and ZFM and ZPA put forward by Valsiner. Finally, the current paper argues that the notion of ZPD is an ever-growing and developing concept thanks initially to the genius inspiration of Lev S. Vygotsky.

Keywords: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Zone of Free Movement (ZFM), Zone of Prompted Action (ZPA), Intermental Development Zone (IDZ)

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INTRODUCTION

To a certain extent, Vygotsky's (1978) psychology is inspired by Karl Marx. Vygotsky as a dialectical materialist holds that the mind is not in opposition to the material world, but embedded in social activities and mediated by the tools people employ in their activities (cited in Haught, 2006). Put differently, as Lantolf (2000) asserts, to Vygotsky, human beings do not act directly on the world but rely, instead, on tools which allow us to change the physical world.

Elsewhere, Vygotsky (1986) maintains that in order to devise successful methods of instructing, it is necessary

to understand the development of scientific concepts in the child's mind. In a sense, according to Vygotsky, to determine the same state of development, it is necessary to consider the actual level of development and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

ZPD is the most popular part of Vygotsky's theory which can be employed in education (Khatib, 2011). Parallel to the argument, elucidating the notion of ZPD, the current work is an attempt to revitalize new contributions, namely Mercer's (1996) Zone of Free Movement (ZFM), Valsiner's (1984) Zone of Prompted

Action (ZPA) and Intermental Development Zone (IDZ) in order to pave the way towards *A Stage of Proximity*.

Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978)

Vygotsky (1978) defines the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential problem solving as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more able peers" (p. 86).

What's more, Vygotsky (1978) also employed a gardening image to describe the ZPD. As to Vygotsky: The ZPD defines those functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturation; functions that will mature tomorrow, but are currently in embryonic state. These functions could be termed the buds or flowers of development rather than the fruits of development. (p. 86)

In his original work, Vygotsky proposes the ZPD as a dynamic alternative to the models of individual ability used in conventional psychological testing. Instead of assessing what an individual child can do unaided, Vygotsky proposed assessing what an individual was capable of doing with the help of an adult or teacher. More importantly, Vygotsky highlighted that children who might have reached similar levels of conceptual development are different in their potential or readiness to achieve higher levels of understanding, and such differences would be revealed by offering children structured help.

Moreover, ZPD is not a fixed notion. Rather it is an emergent, "open-ended, reciprocal" trait of a learner (Wells, 1999). The ZPD is the place where learning and development come together. According to Dunn and Lantolf (1998), It is a "dialectic unity of learning-leading development, a unity in which learning lays down the pathway for development to move along and which in turn prepares ground work for further learning, and so on" (p. 422).

Additionally, Daniels (2001) views the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) as the theoretical attempt to understand the operation of contradiction between internal possibilities and external needs that constitutes the driving force of development. According to Daniels, the concept of ZPD was created by Vygotsky as a metaphor to assist in explaining the way in which social and participatory learning takes place, highlighting the general genetic law of cultural development which asserts the primacy of the social in development. And more interestingly, Daniels (2001) suggests that Vygotsky was concerned to develop an account in which humans were seen as making themselves from the outside.

Having a close look on the notion of ZPD proposed by

Vygotsky, we can see that, although collaboration with peers is mentioned by Vygotsky, it is noticeable that he refers only to "more capable peers", implying that an intellectual unevenness must exist between participants in any joint activity.

Intermental Development Zone (Mercer, 1996, 2004, and 2008)

However, more recent developments of Vygotsky's ideas suggest that we learn from others, not necessarily because they are more competent, but because they think differently. Drawing on both the concepts of 'scaffolding' and the ZPD, in a series of articles, Mercer (1996, 2004, and 2008) has proposed a new concept which is useful for understanding how interpersonal communication can aid learning and conceptual development. He calls this concept the Intermental Development Zone (IDZ).

According to Mercer (1996), this concept is meant to capture the way in which the interactive process of teaching-and-learning rests on the maintenance of a dynamic contextual framework of shared knowledge, created through language and joint action. This contextual frame supports the mutual orientation of participants to a shared task; and in the case of a productive interaction between a teacher and learner, this frame will be finely attuned to the extent of the learner's changing understanding as the activity progresses.

What's more, according to Mercer (2004), the concept of the IDZ focuses on the nature of the communicative process whereby the "vicarious consciousness" of Bruner's conception of 'scaffolding' is actually realized; and unlike the original proposal of ZPD by Vygotsky, the IDZ is not a characteristic of individual ability but rather a dialogical phenomenon, created and maintained between people in interaction. Mercer underlines that the IDZ embodies the following claims which may be relevant to symmetrical as well as to asymmetrical teaching and learning:

- First, any joint, goal-directed task must involve the creation and maintenance of a dynamic, contextual basis of shared knowledge and understanding
- Second, language use during joint activity both generates and depends on the creation of this contextual framework
- Third, the success of any collaborative attempt will be related to the appropriateness of the communication strategies participants use to combine their intellectual resources.

Additionally, one of the important techniques we can use to develop talk and thinking is to use existing ideas to move on and shape new ones. Mercer has observed

consistencies in the way conversations are used as a tool to develop thinking. He observes that teachers often use the following techniques:

- 'Recap' - that is, reviewing what the other person has already experienced and then setting the scene for further development.
- 'Elicitation', questioning and prompting the other person to remember what they already know and perhaps to reflect on this.
- 'Reformulate' and 'repeat', often by paraphrasing something that has been said, as a way of clarifying and emphasizing the idea.

What is a matter of interest is that, through these techniques, ideas can be drawn out, rather than imposing one's own ideas on another person. They encourage ideas and allow people to think their thoughts aloud and develop conceptual understanding using a form of linguistic scaffolding through construction of an IDZ. Finally, Mercer (2008) proposes his own metaphor for the notion of IDZ as following.

My own metaphorical image of the IDZ is as a kind of bubble in which teacher and learner move through time. The IDZ thus represents the dynamic, reflexive maintenance of a purposeful, shared consciousness by a teacher and learner, focused on the task at hand and dedicated to the objective of learning. It is constructed in talk by explicit references to shared experience, but it can also be sustained by tacit invocations of common knowledge that may only be intelligible to the participants. Its existence is dependent on the contextualizing efforts of those involved. If their dialogue fails to keep participating minds mutually attuned and focused on the task, the IDZ bubble collapses, and the scaffolding of learning stops. (p. 38)

Zone of Prompted Action, Zone of Free Movement (Valsiner, 1984)

The next contribution with regard to the notion of ZPD is developed with the work of Jaan Valsiner, a man of 4 books, 30 chapters and 367 articles, who is a Ph.D. holder in cognitive psychology.

In a series of articles, Valsiner (1984), Valsiner and Van der Veer (1988), Van der Veer and Valsiner (1988, 1989), Holland and Valsiner (1988), Valsiner sounded a warning note in that he suggested that some uses of the ZPD concept have merely served the purpose of labeling complex phenomena with another equally complex concept. The attachment of the label in and of itself may not yield clarity or understanding.

Valsiner (1984) has reconstructed the notion of the ZPD, as part of a zone system, which extends beyond other notions of the ZPD. In a model which emphasizes

canalization and co-construction under the rubric of the Zone of Free Movement (ZFM) and the Zone of Promoted Action (ZPA).

According to Valsiner & Van der Veer (1988), the ZFM structures the child's access to different areas in the environment, to different objects within these-areas, and to different ways of acting on these objects. The boundaries of the ZFM are the sites where the ZFM is constantly either reinstated or redefined. The ZFM is a changing structure of adult-child environment relationships that canalizes (determines the limits but does not rigidly determine) the development of the child's actions in directions that are expected in the given culture. The ZFM is a socially constructed cognitive structure of child-environment relationships. It is socially constructed, because it is based on the system of meanings of the adult members of the culture and because it is the result of adult-child interaction. It is a cognitive structure, because it organizes child-environment relationships on the basis of beliefs and meanings used by members of the culture in their activities.

What's more, according to Van der Veer & Valsiner (1988), The ZFM is an inhibitory mechanism. Its function is to limit the child's actions in the particular structured environment. Within the ZFM, it is possible to specify subzones that organize the child-environment relationships further. These zones - zones of promoted actions (ZPA) - are subareas of the ZFM where the child's caregiver attempts to promote certain actions with particular objects. The child may, but need not, comply with this effort by the adult. If the child does not comply, no restriction or limiting action needs to follow by adults. This contrasts with the adult's behavior when the child crosses the boundaries of the ZFM and the adult acts to reinstate or redefine the boundary.

According to Van der Veer and Valsiner (1989), the ZFM and the ZPA are mechanisms through which the degrees of freedom for the child's actions within environmental settings are *selectively* regulated. Their particular organization canalizes the child's actions in particular directions.

Finally, Holland and Valsiner (1988) reasons eloquently in that they believe that Vygotsky's ZPD is closely related to the ZPA. They provide three different analogies.

First, parents can also promote action patterns at a time when the child is just becoming able to perform them in cooperation with an adult; in this case ZPA overlaps with ZPD. Second, parents can attempt to promote certain action patterns of the child at a time when the child's developmental history has not made him or her ready. In this case, the ZPA and the ZPD do not overlap. Third, parents may decide not to promote and not to allow a certain activity that the child would otherwise be able to accomplish with the help of others. In this case, the ZPD lies outside the ZFM. If the boundary of the ZFM

is not reset so as to include the set of actions in the ZPD, then the parental socialization strategy eliminates the possibility that the child will develop skills in these possible but unactualized actions.

CONCLUSION

Since both Mercer and Valsiner introduce their new contributions to the notion of ZPD as to be complementary to this concept, it can be concluded that, indeed, Vygotsky was right in his definition of the concept of ZPD, as to be the zone by which one can move from his actual level of development to his potential level of development, in that Vygotsky's original proposal of the notion of ZPD functioned as the actual level of development at the ideological level conceptualization for Mercer and Valsiner enabling them to move from their actual level of understanding to their potential level of understanding of the notion of ZPD which could be realized as IDZ, ZFM, and ZPA.

Finally, in answering how proximally developed the concept of ZPD would get, it all depends on how the new proposals such as IDZ, ZFM, and ZPA can serve both as the potential level for their contributors and at the same time as the actual levels for others by which some other potentials could be realized. As a result, the notion of ZPD is an ever-growing and developing notion thanks to the genius inspiration of Lev S. Vygotsky.

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