

Expanding Teacher Comfort Zones: Developing Professionalism

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Abstract

The age we live in is characterized by a constant flow of information and an ever changing set of skills. Such change produces new challenges for teachers and places new obligations on them. Research also shows that teaching quality is paramount for student success. Teachers are thus required to update their knowledge and refine their teaching skills. The present paper argues for the relevance of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) to teacher education. More specifically, it makes the point that teachers in the new millennium are called upon more than ever before to extend their ZPDs in order to help their students learn effectively in an age pregnant with new challenges. Starting with a brief overview of the concept of ZPD, the paper moves to argue for its application to teacher education. It also unveils the different stages of developing the ZPTD (zone of proximal teacher development), and the characteristics of proximal teacher development that are bound to impact positively on student learning. It ends with practical suggestions that can improve the ZPTD, like participating in conferences, joining teacher associations, and being involved in action research.

Keywords: ZPD, scaffolding, teacher education, teacher professionalism

1. INTRODUCTION

New and important challenges face teachers in the postmodern globalized era. In education also, new trends emerge which require teachers to adapt to new instructional environments; for instance, ICT has invaded the educational environment, thereby placing new obligations on teachers. This places a high premium on the need to help teachers develop deeper understandings of their responsibilities as well as of the environments within which they happen to be teaching. Teachers, therefore, need new literacies today in order to cope with these challenges and better prepare their students for the 21st century skills and competencies.

Teachers are believed to be the pillar for any educational reforms. No doubt, the quality of student outcomes is dependent on the quality of teachers in addition to other factors. The objective of making a change in society is doomed to failure if teachers do not update their knowledge and methods of working with students. Teachers' continuing professional development is an important issue today. In Morocco, teacher professional development programs are almost nonexistent. After graduating from teacher education schools, teachers are left to cope with old knowledge that they acquired in their training.

Professional development may be defined as activities that aim at the development of teachers' skills knowledge and expertise that are applicable in the classroom. It is most effective when it has a direct application and relevance to the classroom and to student outcomes. It does not refer only to a formal process such as a conference, seminar, or workshop, or a course at University, but refers also to informal activities which engage teachers in self or collaborative learning. Discussions among work colleagues, independent reading, observations of a colleague's teaching, conducting action research can also promote teacher professional development.

Against this backdrop, this paper suggests drawing insights from Vygotsky's constructivist theory for teacher development. It argues that Vygotsky's theory is relevant not only to student learning but also to teacher development. A major theme that runs through the theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which, we argue, could provide the framework for teacher development. Warford (2011) linked the ZPD with teacher education in an attempt to help teacher candidates develop their teaching expertise. The present paper takes this line a step further by arguing that practicing teachers could also increase their effectiveness by extending their ZPDs and incorporating new zones that were alien to them. Such a concern for self-development is inspired by the philosophy that good teachers are first good learners. It is also motivated by the literature which states that teaching practices improve only when teachers believe in the need for change and improvement. Teacher involvement and ownership of the process is a must.

Starting with a brief overview of the notion of ZPD, the paper moves to link it with the concept of scaffolding. Then, it argues for its relevance to teacher education. It also sheds light on factors affecting teachers' ZPD like peers' influence and context constraints. Finally, it concludes with practical suggestions to improve the ZPTD (zone of proximal teacher development), like participating in conferences,

engaging in reflective teaching, promoting collegiality, and being involved in action research.

2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE NOTION OF ZPD

According to Vygotsky, any function in the child's cultural development appears on two planes: first on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. This means that cognitive development does not result merely from biological factors but also and mainly as a result of interactions with the environment. The zone of proximal development explains how this development occurs.

The zone of proximal development refers to the difference between what a child can do unaided and what s/he can do with the aid of an adult or a more capable peer. Teachers and more capable peers cooperate with learners to help them move from their current level of learning to the target level using their zone of proximal development (Shepard, 2005). ZPD helps determine a child's mental functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturing; they constitute "buds of development" which are to open up yet. Vygotsky suggests:

[T]he Zone of Proximal Development is the space between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Learning is associated with the concept of ZPD, in the sense that it causes a variety of internal developmental functions to develop. This process is mediated by the learner's interaction with the people in his/her environment as well as his/her more capable peers. Such an interaction causes the development of higher mental activities like voluntary attention, intentional memory, logical thought, planning and problem solving (McLeod, 2007). These potential abilities are eventually internalized and become part of the learner's independent developmental functions.

A study that supports the decisive role of the ZPD in creating appropriate environments for learning was conducted by Thompson (2013). Using action research method, the study investigated the social mediation of collaborative activity in meaning making and negotiation in the skill of writing. The findings suggested that active intervention by a teacher within a constructed zone of development gave an impetus to students' writing abilities. The study also showed that the ZPD created a social environment which was primordial in the construction of the learner's own agency. The researcher, therefore, concluded that teachers and researchers should play close attention to students' ZPDs because human mental functioning is inherently social.

However, Vygotsky acknowledges that the ZPD is not the responsibility of instruction alone as developmental biological factors are not ruled out altogether. In point of fact, learning in the ZPD "depends upon outside social forces as much as inner resources" (Palmer, 2001, cited in Blake & Pope, 2008, p. 61).

While biological factors take care of lower mental functions, culture and instruction assume the role of developing higher mental structures. Therefore, both the learner's stage of development and the form of instruction delivered cooperate in a complex interrelationship to determine the ZPD. But instruction should go ahead of development in such a way as to awaken the functions in the ZPD which have not yet matured. In this context, Shayer (2002) advocates that good instruction should target not so much the developed but the developing functions.

Finally, the ZPD is not static, but rather dynamic. As the learner internalizes more and more mental functions, the boundaries change to incorporate the areas which become familiar. The range of the learner's ZPD is in a constant flux because what the learner can do with help today, s/he can do alone at a later time. So long as the learner is provided with help, particularly quality social interaction from a more capable individual, any problem can be solved and any skill can be internalized, and therefore a new ZPD is created.

3. SCAFFOLDING AND ZPD

The concept of scaffolding was introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to account for mediation within ZPD. It originally referred to social assistance given to the child in learning the mother tongue. Using Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, Lantolf (2007) extended the notion to collaborative interaction between learners suggesting that they scaffold each other (Fahim & Haghani, 2012, p. 696). In so doing, the learners construct linguistic knowledge together; they "scaffold one another as they take part in collaborative activity and such collaboration would lead to the co-construction of linguistic knowledge" (Fahim & Haghani, 2012, p. 696).

Scaffolding suggests that the more knowledgeable person provides help to the less knowledgeable one in accomplishing a task that s/he would not otherwise accomplish. It also stands for any help that the less knowledgeable learner resorts to; it may therefore, by extension, take the form of feedback, a dictionary, a grammar book, or a computer. But scaffolding has also been connected with Vygotsky's ZPD (the difference between what a learner can do unaided and what s/he can do with the aid of a more capable peer). In order to play a facilitating role in the learning of language, scaffolding needs to be within the range of the ZPD. In this context, Vygotsky holds that education should march ahead of and lead development which accrues through internalizing the society's culture and social relationships.

Crucially, the more knowledgeable other, a teacher or a more capable peer, helps the learners acquire what is not yet within their reach through interacting with them within the limits of their ZPDs. Such assistance offered by more capable others bridges the gap between the learners' developmental level and functions not yet internalized. Social interaction is, therefore, the scaffold that leads to the internalization of knowledge beyond the learners' grasp. The following figure illustrates how scaffolding works within the ZPD:

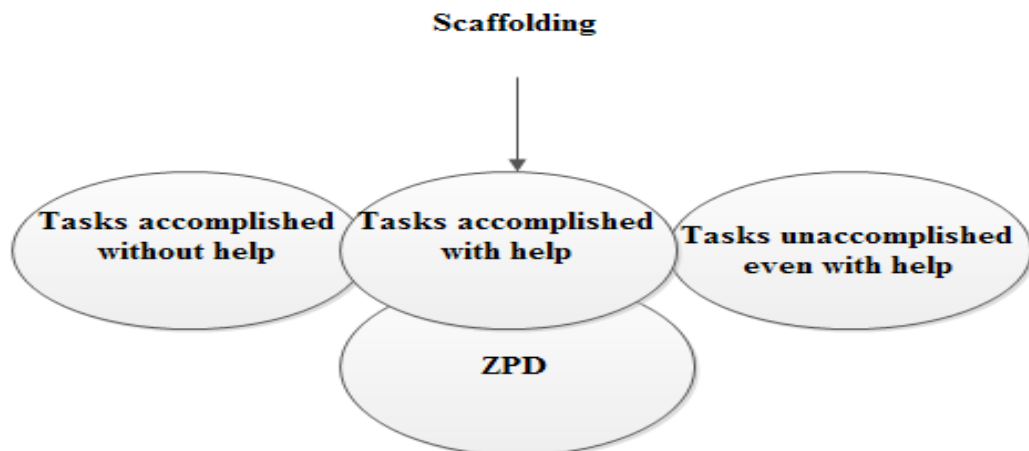


Figure 1: Scaffolding and ZPD

(Adapted from Campbell, 2008; cited in Shabani et al, 2010)

The teacher's role in a constructivist classroom consists in providing scaffolding in the form of collaborative interaction with the learners to assist them on tasks within the ZPD (Hamilton and Ghatala, 1994). The first step in this direction according to Hamilton and Ghatala (1994) is interest building and task engagement. Then, the teacher helps the learners stay on task by preventing boredom and frustration. The teacher also models possible ways of completing tasks, a process which the learners can eventually internalize. The ultimate goal is to achieve autonomy.

In this context, Awbi and Philipott (2015) analysed data obtained using the technique of think-aloud retrospective interviews of two learners working on tasks and scaffolded within their zone of proximal development. Assistance was provided whenever the learners were unable to solve a problem independently. They were considered to be outside their comfort zones in such situations. The findings indicated that appropriate scaffolding enabled the learners to extend their ZPDs and comfort zones. Such findings show that Vygotsky's ZPD theory can inform teaching practice in constructive ways by influencing progression in learning and creating sound formative assessment designs that can help fill up gaps in learning.

However, scaffolding does not come only from a more knowledgeable person. In an extension of Vygotsky's ZPD, Lier (2004; cited in Walqui, 2006) draws a model of four different opportunities for scaffolding. All forms of scaffolding help the learner attain high level competencies and eventually achieve self-regulation/independence:



Figure 2: Lier's model of scaffolding (2004; cited in Walqui, 2006)

The figure shows that scaffolding goes four ways, with equal, less capable, more capable learners, and own resources. The learner learns by working with more capable others who scaffold him/her, but also from working with equals as interaction helps both grow cognitively. Interacting with a less capable person also helps the learner as one learns by teaching others. The fourth scaffolding strategy is drawing on own inner resources. According to Lier (2004), the benefit is guaranteed in all participation contexts.

A further type of scaffolding that has been identified in the literature is collective scaffolding (Donato, 1990; Gibbons, 2002; Mercer, 1995; Rogoff, 1995; cited in Walqi, 2006, p. 167). This means that learners working in groups scaffold each other and as a result create ZPDs that help them produce work that none of them would accomplish in isolation. The ultimate goal of all these types of scaffolding is the development of an autonomous self-regulated learner. This is attainable by gradually removing the help and moving the responsibility for learning to the learner, thereby enabling him/her to regulate his/her behavior.

4. APPLICATION TO TEACHER EDUCATION (ZPTD)

Vygotsky lived a short life. His life was so short that he did not fully develop his theory. Had he lived longer, we would have received a more developed theory, particularly in relation to teacher education. That is so because teaching, as well as assessment, was a prime issue in Vygotsky's concerns. Such being the case, the room was left open for other researchers, later on, to extend and build on Vygotsky's

concepts. In this regard, Warford (2011) has related ZPD to teacher education, creating the term ZPTD. The latter term stands for the zone of proximal teacher development. Warford, however, talks about teacher candidates, not practicing teachers. Hence, he describes ZPTD as “the distance between what teaching candidates can do on their own without assistance and a proximal level they might attain through strategically mediated assistance from more capable others (i.e. methods instructor or supervisor)” (p.253). I argue in this paper that ZPD can also be applied to practicing teachers for a number of reasons.

The age we live in is characterized by a constant flow of information. It is also fraught with challenges that appear day in day out. In turn, being digital natives, our students are becoming more and more familiar with new technologies and skills. Hence, we are called upon to cope or perish. In point of fact, the teacher is called upon more than ever before to extend his/her zone of proximal development in order to fit in an increasingly changing world. Traditional classrooms and traditional methods of teaching no longer appeal to learners, and therefore do not have any positive impact on them. Gone with the wind are teacher-centered approaches to teaching/learning. Therefore, teachers today are required to adopt more learner-centered approaches. One step in that direction is that the teacher, him/herself, extends his/her ZPD, that is, his/her comfort zone in such a way as to incorporate new skills that s/he can use to empower his/her students.

The complexity of teaching is also so great that it requires constant updating. Even experienced teachers face challenges particularly with respect to advances in technology, changing teaching and assessment methods, changing textbooks, and changing student learning needs. Therefore, practitioners who do not undergo effective professional development do not sharpen their skills and do not strengthen their practice, and this reflects negatively on student learning. In sum, teachers need to develop their skills in order to meet the requirements of their profession.

A direct application and extension of the ZPD could help in the direction of professional development. Following Lier’s model (2004), an extension of the ZPD occurs in four ways, with equal, less capable, more capable others, and own resources. First, the teacher updates/increases his/her teaching skills by working with more capable/expert teachers/supervisor who scaffold[s] him/her. This type of scaffolding is the one originally meant by Vygotsky’s ZPD as it comes from more knowledgeable others. The teacher should be open to these expert practitioners, tell them about his/her “problems” in the classroom, and ask for/negotiate practical suggestions.

Second, the teacher can also extend his/her comfort zone from working with equals/colleagues sharing and enriching experiences. Teams of teachers will be working on student needs and scaffolding each other in order to ensure all students do well. This way, a sense of collegiality (cooperative relationship of colleagues) would be created which is conducive to promotion of teacher professionalism which has a direct impact on student outcomes. Teachers will be weaving together personal, professional and theoretical narratives for the benefit of their students in particular and society in general. Team meetings are effective for planning lessons,

solving problems, and improving performance. Above all, teachers will create communities of practice engaged in a process of collective learning.

Third, interacting with a less capable other/novice teacher also helps the teacher grow professionally. Teaching/coaching others who are novice is likely to promote reflection on own experiences and strengthen practices and skills. Interaction with less experienced teachers is also bound to reveal gaps in one's practices. The questions and comments from the novice teachers help experienced teachers in reflecting on their practices and possibly improving them as a result. Awareness is the first step towards bridging these probable gaps.

The fourth and last strategy of scaffolding is drawing on own inner resources. As the teacher is required to engage in life-long learning, s/he should put into practice that which s/he learns. S/he needs to update his/her knowledge and skills through extensive ongoing reading and training the aim of which should be to help his/her students develop their cognitive abilities and skills. According to Lempert-Shepell (1995), "the teacher is not only expected to be a cultural mediator but also a teacher-researcher" (p. 438). Promoting reflection on one's experiences and beliefs about teaching and learning is yet a type of self-scaffolding strategy that can widen the teacher's ZPTD. Conducting research in and on the classroom is also bound to reflect positively on one's classroom practices. In this context, action research, a process of systematic inquiry into classroom problems with the aim of finding effective solutions, provides the means by which practitioners become professional and effective (Mills, 2011)

5. FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHERS' ZPD

Teachers' ZPDs is subject to a number of factors which exert either a positive or a negative influence. These include colleagues, contextual constraints, mediatory artifacts and technology (Shabani, et.al, 2010).

Peers: A novice teacher turns to his/her older colleagues for advice and guidance. These older colleagues are of two categories: the first category will dissuade him/her from investing any effort in his/her work saying, for instance, that students do not deserve any effort on the part of the teacher, and therefore one should not break one's neck with them. A second category of teachers, however, also exists. This latter category holds positive beliefs and attitudes about teaching and students. Hence, a novice teacher as well as an old practitioner should only associate with positive colleagues. Associating with negative colleagues and people, in general, contaminates one and imprisons one in a negative attitude. A piece of advice, therefore, is for one to associate only with positive optimistic people. That is, we should make sure that we align with teachers who are likely to drive our professional development forward.

Contextual constraints: Not only are there people who affect us negatively in our work, but constraints related to the circumstances in which we find ourselves also restrict our freedom to act and our will to be creative and extend our ZPDs. An example of these constraints is over-crowdedness. Another example may be classroom management and trouble making which follow from the previous constraint. Hence, we are called upon to be creative and find ways of dealing with

these constraints. Engaging trouble makers in the lesson, building their interest in the lesson and helping them see the link between what is presented to them and the expectations outside the classroom are ways of incorporating them into the classroom. Using technology and topics of interest are yet another way of winning these students into the group.

Mediatory artifacts and technology: While we as teachers mostly belong to the category of digital immigrants, our students are digital natives. Not using technology in our teaching as a teaching tool is tantamount to speaking a language that our students do not understand. In Vygotsky's theory, technology is a mediatory artifact that can support students in their learning. It, therefore, serves as a catalyst in teacher professional development. According to Lantolf (2004), technology mediates not only student learning, but also teacher learning.

6. SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE ZPTD

To begin with, "professional development" is usually used to refer to a formal process such as formal training, a conference, seminar, or workshop; it can also refer to a course at a college or university. However, professional development can also occur at informal levels. Discussing with colleagues, independent reading and research, observations of a colleague's work are also worthwhile professional development activities. Hence, I make recommendations that all these activities have to be pursued for professional growth.

In the same vein, teacher professional development is not an event that occurs only once, but "a long-term process that includes regular opportunities and experiences planned systematically to promote growth and development in the profession" (Villegas-Reimers, 2003: p. 12). Additionally, it is most effective when it bears directly on student achievement. As Harwell argues, "[p]rofessional development in which participants are given the opportunity to learn new classroom practices in the contexts within which those practices will be used is far more effective than more traditional methods of professional development" (2003, p. 7). Thus, professional development should be geared to developing student learning outcomes. This is attained by analyzing student achievement data with a view to identifying learning problems, developing solutions, and applying those solutions to address students' needs. Following are some professional development activities that are conducive to extending a teacher's ZPTD:

Self-scaffolding: A teacher can self-scaffold instead of waiting for others to scaffold him/her. Vygotsky's original definition of ZPD does not include help that different sources can provide us with. Among the widely used sources that can scaffold teachers, we find textbooks. Particularly for lazy teachers, textbooks must be of high quality. This raises the question about the quality of our textbooks. Do we have good textbooks? I leave the question open for reflection by practitioners. I, on the other hand, call for teachers to scaffold themselves through designing their own material. This can be done through sifting different material and choosing what works best in the circumstances of the classroom. Self-scaffolding comes also from self-training and life-long learning. Obviously, the teacher is required to update his/her knowledge and sharpen his/her skills. In this context, Ohta (2005) suggests

that by interacting with people and with L2 sources, adults are empowered to manage the ZPD for themselves. This way, teachers will be engaged in self-scaffolding, professional development activities.

Peer scaffolding/Coaching: This is useful for both inexperienced and experienced teachers. It implies educators working together to discuss and share good teaching practices and providing mutual support. It helps teachers refine their classroom practices and enhance their teaching skills. It is particularly effective when each novice teacher is paired with an experienced teacher. The end goal is not to critique but to encourage and support teachers and enable them to enrich student learning. Peer coaching can also work between equals where the goal is to learn together. No teacher is the expert. Both teachers choose a particular aspect of teaching, read about it in the literature and come together for a discussion of it. This type of professional development increases the sense of collegiality and increases teacher effectiveness.

Action research: Action research is becoming increasingly recommended as an approach that encourages practitioners to be in control of their own contexts. Action research is research conducted on oneself. It is a systematic investigation into one's own behaviour, and the reasons for that behaviour. Ado (2013, p. 133) states that action research "rests on the beliefs that educators better serve their students when they examine and reflect upon their practice and when they specifically consider ways to address challenges that exist in their practice." It has many benefits. First, it helps the teacher become aware of what actually takes place in his/her classroom and redress the problems, if any. Second, it empowers teachers in the sense that it enables them to effectively act on the data that they collect and make decisions accordingly. This, of course, enhances teacher effectiveness and consequently student achievements.

Observation: Observing other teachers teach is yet a method of extending one's ZPTD. Classroom observation is one component that can support systematic improvement of teacher effectiveness, particularly if it needs-based. For instance, a teacher struggling with classroom management can learn good classroom management techniques from observing a colleague in a safe classroom environment. Similarly, the same colleague can do the observation and provide constructive feedback as to how to handle classroom behavior problems. Observation does yield constructive feedback from the observer. It is worth noting that those giving feedback should not focus only on areas of weakness, but also on areas of strength. While the former need to be rectified, the latter need to be reinforced. Such observation is also bound to establish a culture of collaboration which nurtures a collegial exchange of ideas.

Participation in conferences: Attending and participating in conferences is another method whereby a teacher can extend his/her ZPTD. Conferences provide professional learning as teachers meet together and discuss issues of interest, thereby forming communities of practice. Conferences allow for the sharing of ideas, innovative practices and problem solving techniques. As such, they promote innovation, facilitate and spread knowledge and skills among teachers.

Joining teacher associations: This is one of the techniques that allow one to connect with colleagues and collaboratively pursue goals for professional development. It is closely linked with the previous technique as both create environments for teachers to come together and discuss issues of common interest. Associations have the additional advantage of providing support networks for teachers as the environment is more intimate.

Reflective teaching: Reflective teaching involves looking back at what one does in classrooms with a view to analyzing, evaluating and improving own practices. No doubt, the ability to reflect on what, how, and why teachers teach in a particular way with a view to adapting practices to meet student needs is one of the most effective methods of teacher development. Fostering the practice of reflective teaching is vital to growth as a practitioner because it helps monitor one's development. Receiving feedback from students can also help in this direction as students can provide the teacher with valuable information as to whether teaching is effective or not.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper explored the importance of professional development and the relevance of Vygotsky's ZPD to this development. While the ZPD has been applied almost exclusively to student learning in studies conducted so far, the present study takes it a bit further by arguing that teachers can also benefit from professional social environments that reinforce, extend and update their teaching knowledge in ways that help them stay experts in their areas of specialty. Henceforth, we borrowed the term "ZPTD" (zone of proximal teacher development) from Warford (2011) which he applied to teacher trainees and we extended it to incorporate educational practitioners in classrooms.

More precisely, we argued that teaching is a complex and challenging career, and as such it needs a constant extension of one's ZPTD or one's comfort zones. Such an extension enables practitioners to develop the knowledge and skills they need to address students' learning challenges. It also enables the teacher to address gaps in teaching/learning and fill them.

We also argued that unless this extension of comfort zones causes teachers to improve their instruction and meet their students' needs, it is ineffective. Lastly, the conditions that promote and encourage self-development are the will, the motivation and the active involvement in programmes that aim at professional development. Without such requisites, no development is possible. In the absence of extrinsic motivation, one needs to foster intrinsic motivation and actively be engaged in self-development. One needs to have the will to change and develop at least because if we cannot help living as teachers, we need to live quality, professional life teachers.

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