

The Learning Zone

(known more formally as the Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD)

Traditional educational testing, which is still largely in force today, tests children to find out what they can do alone, without assistance. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and educator (1896-1934), recognized the importance of such solitary skills—but he was even more interested in what children can do *with* assistance, because those skills show where the student's learning can proceed in the immediate future.

The Zone of Proximal Development is the difference between what a student can accomplish with help (from a teacher, an expert, fellow students, or from books or other aids—in short, from the human community) and what he or she can do alone without help. Vygotsky believed in learning through assisted performance, such as "look-do" teaching methods in which a child imitates something the teacher has done. Of course, assisted-performance learning will only work within the Learning Zone (a student working, with appropriate support, on skills and knowledge).

Vygotsky gave the example of a teacher who works an arithmetic problem in front of the child, repeating as necessary until the child masters the operation. But he noted that if instead the teacher had worked a problem in higher mathematics or simply handed the child a rote worksheet to be completed in isolation outside the child's appropriate zone, the student would never learn it no matter how often it was repeated.

The word "scaffolding" is sometimes used to describe the various levels of offered assistance—the help, in whatever form, that allows the student to successfully perform a task he or she could not have accomplished otherwise. At Prairie Creek, our instruction (in all sorts of subjects, from literacy to numeracy to physical education) incorporates the learning-zone principle that human interaction plays a fundamental role in learning, and is best accomplished through scaffolding that is tuned to a students' immediate social and academic needs.

Like Vygotsky, our teachers focus on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they interact and share experience. Many schools have traditionally held a "transmissionist" or "instructionist" model in which a teacher simply transfers information to students, and students try to absorb it. In contrast, the learning-zone approach promotes education in which students play an active, reciprocal role in learning—the kind of education we practice at Prairie Creek, with students and teachers collaborating in order to construct meaningful, durable knowledge.