

“Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”

—Robert Browning



Using the ‘Zone’ to Help Reach Every Learner

by Debbie Silver

With the right motivation, students will reach beyond their comfort zones to achieve their personal goals.

“Kids today are unmotivated; what’s wrong with them?” This is a common cry I hear in my work with educators and parents throughout the country. The concept of the *unmotivated child*, however, is actually an anomaly. Kids start out as interactive discoverers of the world and are naturally curious explorers. Everyone has a basic desire for recognition and productivity. We are “hard-wired” to enjoy achievement and to overcome obstacles in our paths.

Think about the teenager yearning to drive a car. With all the talk about apathetic teens who supposedly cannot read well, communicate coherently, or even remember important homework assignments, isn’t it amazing how most of them are able to show up for and pass a challenging written and manual driver’s test? If they fail it the first time, they voluntarily continue to take the test until they finally demonstrate enough mastery to move on to and

pass the performance assessment. And who does not remember the thrill and the pride of receiving that first driver’s license?

Try This

Let’s be clear about my use of the term *self-motivation*. I want you to think of something significant you have accomplished in the last few years—something important to you, something you really wanted to do. It can be a goal, an accomplishment, something you wanted to win, or just something you wanted to finish. When you first thought about it, you may not have been sure about whether or not you would be successful, but it was something you had to try for yourself.

(Okay, I see you trying to continue reading here without doing this exercise. Don’t do that! Seriously, this will mean more to you if you stop and do this little mental exercise!)

Now picture the steps you had to take to attain your goal—the big ones and even the little ones. Maybe your friends and family were on your side saying things like,

- “I know you can do it.”
- “You’ve got what it takes!”
- “Don’t give up.”

Or maybe they weren’t so supportive. Maybe you heard things like,

- “You’ve got to be dreaming.”
- “Don’t you think that goal is a little ambitious for someone like you?”
- “You know you always have the great ideas, but you never follow through.” (*You get the idea*).

The point is, it really doesn’t matter what *they* said or did. What matters is what *you* did to achieve your objective. You probably had to do some things you had never done before—take some risks, stretch your abilities, and work harder than you ever had before. And just as important, you had to *give up* some things—a “safe zone,” maybe some sleep, maybe some creature comforts. But in the process, you committed your heart and soul to the thing you wanted. You did whatever it took.

Do you remember how you felt the moment you realized it finally happened—when you had that one brief shining moment of realization that you *did* it? *You* did it! I wasn’t there, but I’ll bet you felt like putting your fists on your hips, sticking out your chest, and bellowing a triumphant “Tuh-tuh-tuh-Dah” superhero call!

‘Tuh-tuh-tuh-Dah’ for Kids

And I’ll bet you also felt like you could do more of the same thing you just did, and you were willing to try. Is there anything more gratifying for a child than to accomplish something she heretofore was unable to attain? Think about the sheer joy for a child when she puts her entire heart and soul into a directed effort. At first, success evades her, but she continues to try new strategies, to patiently build a repertoire of skills until she finally makes it happen. Immediately, the child gleefully proclaims, “I did it! I did it!”

Then she often asks, “Did you see that?” Finally, she announces, “I did it all by myself!” And generally at that point, the child is ready and more than willing to proceed to the next level.

That moment holds one of the greatest feelings in the entire world. And I want that feeling for all our children today. I want kids to have more “Tuh-tuh-tuh-Dah” moments in their school days and at home. My belief is that those moments can provide a carryover effect that keeps students moving forward through the moments that aren’t so spectacular.

Unfortunately, in a world of enabled, entitled, “protected” offspring, we often rob children of the very essence of what builds resiliency, persistence, courage, patience, and joy. We rush in to make sure children “feel good” all the time. We don’t want to risk getting their egos bruised or their “comfort zones” violated. We sometimes behave in ways that imply the only way to get kids to do anything we desire is to *make* them do it.

I have watched children in skateboard areas try to master new techniques. They fall down. They get bumps and bruises, and keep trying. They do the same moves over and over and over. They do not get bored, whine, or complain. They keep trying until they master the desired skill. They are truly self-motivated. “Tuh-tuh-tuh-Dah!”

Adults in Tandem with Children’s Motivation

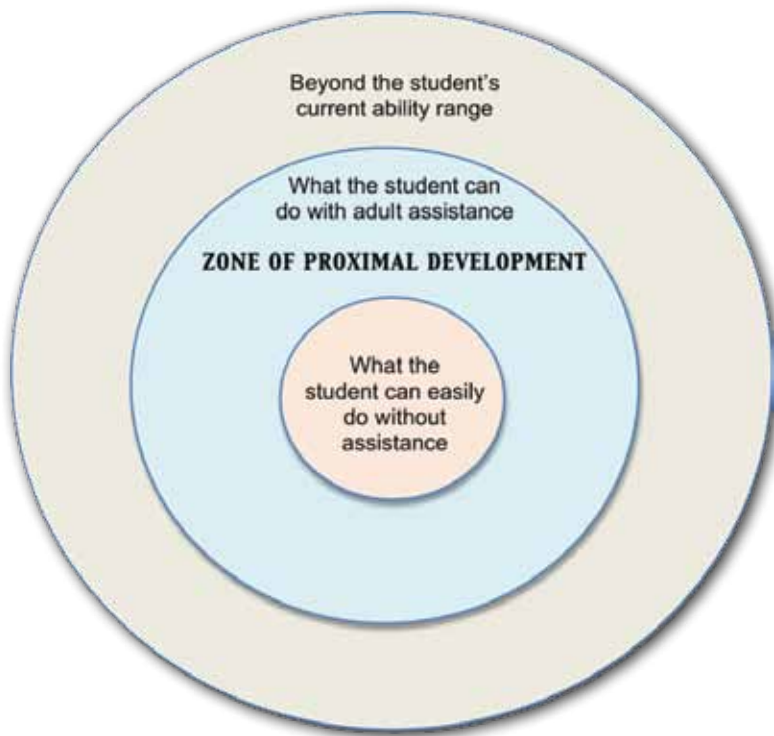
I am not saying that children should be allowed to pursue only what interests them at the moment. Often it is difficult for them to see the “big picture,” to know what kinds of things they will need to master in all areas, or to see that some steps are really building blocks for future pursuits. I think part of the adult’s job is to explain those things to children—to help them see relevance in their endeavors. I maintain that children are intrinsically motivated and, with the proper kind of feedback, they can learn all sorts of necessary skills and self-sustaining learning practices.

One might ask, “If children are so naturally inquisitive, what happens to their drive and



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Figure 1. Zone of Proximal Development



enthusiasm as they grow older?" "What about all of those times when children complain, avoid, deflect, and downright refuse to even try?" "How do we help them be self-motivated when they stubbornly rebuff all efforts to get them to participate in tasks designed to help them learn?" "How do we compensate for their firmly held beliefs that they are dumb, untalented, or so behind they can never catch up?"

A common denominator I find among most motivational authors and researchers is their emphasis on the importance of learners stretching toward consistently higher goals. They describe the necessity of pushing oneself just beyond one's current state. Many describe the energized feeling people have when they are totally focused on an objective just beyond their present reach, but within their perceived realm of possibility. The writers hold a common belief that the most powerful motivational reinforcer is for students to experience *earned success*—success they have had to work for. That is what I previously referred to as a "Duh-tuh-tuh-Tah" moment. Nothing is so motivating as hard-earned success.

Vygotsky and the 'Zone'

It occurred to me that basically everything associated with maximizing student engagement, achievement, optimal learning environment, learning zone, and the like can be attributed to the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978). A Russian psychologist and social constructivist, Vygotsky (1896–1934) proposed a concept so fundamental to the theory of motivation that it undergirds nearly every aspect of its nature. Vygotsky called the rarefied area between a learner's present performance level and just beyond the learner's grasp the "zone of proximal development." In his research, he observed optimal motivation in his study participants when they were asked to reach just beyond their present state.

A student's Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD, is defined as the student's range of ability with assistance from an instructor or a more capable peer. On the opposite ends of the range are the student's present level of comfortable mastery and the area totally beyond the student's level at the current time (see Figure 1).

Vygotsky, among other educational professionals, believed that the role of education should be to provide children with experiences within their ZPD, thereby encouraging and advancing their individual learning. The experiences roughly flow like this:

1. Adult models the behavior for the student.
2. Student imitates the adult's behavior.
3. Adult phases out direct instruction.
4. Adult offers feedback on student's performance.

Scaffolding

Educators may be thinking, "Oh, that is where we must have gotten the idea of *scaffolding* that I hear so much about." Actually, Vygotsky never used that term himself, but others have since associated the act of providing incremental "stepping stones" to help learners move forward with his work. Similar to erecting temporary platforms to facilitate movement

Scaffolding Instruction Guidelines

Teachers can use many proven effective teaching strategies including:

1. Assessing accurately where the learner is in terms of knowledge and experience.
2. Relating content to what the learner already knows or can do.
3. Providing examples of the desired outcome and showing the learner what the task *is* as opposed to what it *is not*.
4. Breaking the larger outcome into smaller, achievable tasks with opportunities for feedback along the way.
5. Giving students a chance to orally elaborate (“think out loud”) using problem-solving techniques.
6. Incorporating appropriate verbal clues and prompts to assist students in accessing stored knowledge.
7. Emphasizing specific vocabulary that emerges from the exploration of the unit or context of the lesson.
8. Regularly asking students to hypothesize or predict what is going to happen next.
9. Allowing students time and opportunity to explore deeper meanings and to relate the newly acquired knowledge to their own lives.
10. Setting aside time for students to “de-brief” about their learning journey and review what worked best for them and what did not work well.

higher and higher up a building, *scaffolding* in educational terms means figuratively to use helpful interventions to help students progress.


When differentiated instruction expert Carol Ann Tomlinson (2001) refers to “raising the level of support,” she is basically talking about adults providing challenging, but suitable steps for students to acquire requisite skills. Contrary to the concept of *remediation*, which generally means “going back and doing something over,” both *scaffolding* and “raising the level of support” suggest that instruction moves the learner forward rather than backward.

Teachers should be able to break desired skills into logical parts and to be attentive to things they can do to facilitate students “getting a foothold” on the problem. Often what is asked of students is not so much insurmountable as it is just too wide a gap

for them to span without the assistance of a skilled teacher.

Closing Thoughts

Simply put, adults can maximize the use of Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development as a strategic tool in helping students stay motivated toward a given task. The idea is to keep raising the bar just beyond the student’s reach while giving only the minimal support he or she needs to make the leap to the next level. Adults need to be supportive, but honest with students; we can give learners effective feedback that avoids labels (both positive and negative).

Educators and parents need to instruct students about purposeful practice and help them internalize the necessary mechanisms to reach just beyond their current grasps. Every learner deserves a reasonable chance at success, and working within a student’s ZPD is a proven way to help every learner become self-motivated. 

References

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