

Extract from **Cooperation in the
Multiethnic Classroom** by Helen Cowie et al.
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Most educators acknowledge the idea that much of children's learning takes place in a social context. Group work in the classroom, many educators would claim, is an established part of current practice; and they would point to the fact that children in primary schools regularly work round tables in small groups.

A commitment to cooperative methods assumes a readiness to view knowledge not as a commodity owned by the expert teacher but as something which can (at least in part) be constructed, developed and criticised by the group. In fact, committed users of cooperative learning strategies often claim that some topics can only be understood fully through the active interplay of different perspectives from members of an involved group. The justification for group work has a long history. The Plowden Report (1967), advocating progressive, child-centred ideals in education, argued that children benefit from frequent opportunities to experience interactions within a range of different groupings. They suggested that children learn to communicate effectively with one another; gain in self-confidence as they share ideas of mutual concern; and widen their network of friendships. Later, the Bullock Report (1975) stressed the relationship between language and learning right across the curriculum and throughout children's years at school. Each report recommended the greater use in schools of exploratory talk in small interactive groups as a means of enabling pupils to develop in their capacity to relate new knowledge to previous understanding.

Concern to foster meaningful dialogue in small cooperative groups was a distinguishing feature of many curriculum projects taken up by schools in the 1970s. For example, *Man: a Course of Study*, a project used in the U.K. and the U.S.A., was founded in a commitment to the view that group work brings cognitive benefits to children as they

challenge one another's beliefs and work together to solve problems collaboratively. Many educators openly acknowledge the value of this approach.

Here is how one teacher expresses his belief that cooperative learning strategies enable students to arrive at a deeper understanding of an issue:

There's the possibility of greater diversity and the ability to . . . develop ideas which are generated by children rather than generated by the teacher. Very often (in instructional teaching) you have to cut off and say, 'We've got to go on to the next point'. But if you've got group work then you've got the facility of developing and moving through and allowing the children to develop ideas rather more extensively. (Cowie and Rudduck, 1988a, p. 58)

This teacher comments on the positive effect which cooperative learning has on his students' academic achievement. In the Vygotskian tradition, it is this social context which is a key ingredient in learning. Although Piaget acknowledged the role of social experience in intellectual growth, Vygotsky is the developmental psychologist who has placed most emphasis on the essentially social nature of individual thinking processes. In his view, children develop as thinkers by internalising processes which were originally experienced in a social context.

Vygotsky (1978) and later Bruner (1986) claimed that there are clear benefits when a more knowledgeable peer or adult interacts with a less expert child. Learning is about 'the negotiation of meaning' rather than its transmission and, for it to be effective, it must be rooted in personally significant issues, human settings and social relationships. Cooperative learning, from this standpoint, creates opportunities for the active construction of meanings to take place through dialogue. The contexts of such dialogue should allow for a range of views and experiences to be taken into account and give the students some say in what is to be learned and how learning goals are to be achieved.

Vygotsky's view is that learning is a cooperative venture. Like Piaget, he argues that action is the way in which the child responds to the world. However, in his view, children also learn by turning round and reflecting on their thoughts using language and so come to see things in a new way. Furthermore, learning is achieved through cooperation with others in a whole variety of social settings – with peers, teachers, parents and other people who are significant to the child. In other words, the child's capacity to learn is embedded in his or her capacity to learn *with the help of others*.

LEVEL OF POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

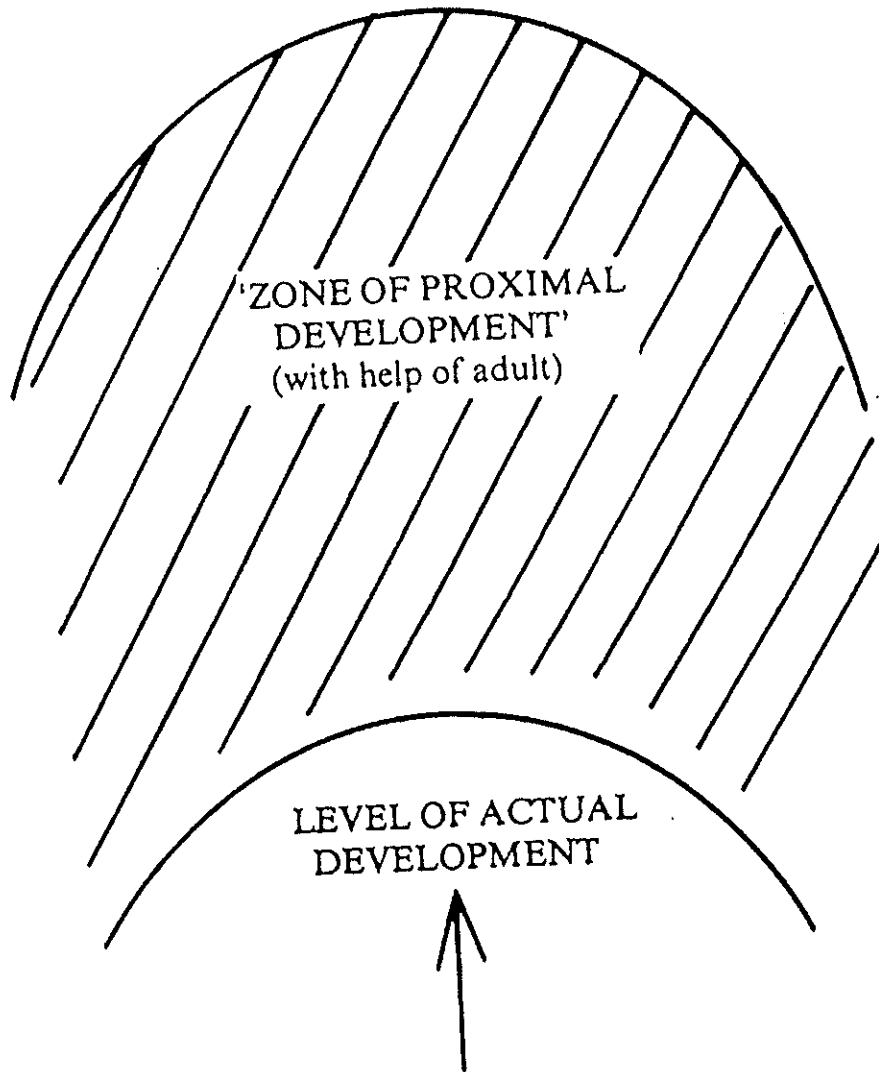


Figure 3.1 Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Z.P.D.)

A central concept is the zone of proximal development (Z.P.D.) -- the distance between the child's actual developmental level and his or her potential level of development under the guidance of more expert adults or in collaboration with more competent peers. The child learns by jointly constructing his or her understanding of issues and events in the world.

Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky did not wait for the child to be 'ready'. Instead, he argued, children learn from other people who are more knowledgeable than themselves. It is the 'loan of consciousness' (to use Bruner's phrase) that gets the child through the Z.P.D. The process of collaborating with other people not only gives the child more information about a topic but also confirms those aspects of the topic which the child does understand. The process of cooperation enables the child

to move on. The intervention is most effective when it is contingent upon the child's existing repertoire of skills and knowledge, that is when it is within the child's Z.P.D. So, when the child is challenged – but not too much – then he or she is more likely to learn new things without experiencing failure.

Others highlight the part which cooperative learning methods play in children's social and personal development. Cooperative group work provides a setting where children can explore relationships with one another and can share issues in a trusting setting. When they are experiencing difficulties, this kind of group work can be helpful and supportive. It is a context where children can learn to be confident in themselves. They can also explore conflicts and learn to resolve them. The classroom is seen as a microcosm of society where children can come to learn about roles and relationships and learn about interactions which will stand them in good stead in their future lives as adults (Brandes and Phillips, 1979; Hopson and Scally, 1981; Pike and Selby, 1988).

Educators in this tradition do not downplay the importance of academic attainment but their underlying philosophy is that personal and interpersonal experience forms the basis for both personal and intellectual growth. If the basic needs of the person are neglected then academic work will suffer. A priority would be to establish trust and cooperation in the classroom. Such practitioners claim that cooperative learning methods contribute to a climate of acceptance and tolerance in the classroom. Students who have experience of working cooperatively with one another are likely to have higher self-esteem and to view their peers more positively (Kutnick, 1988).

Here is one head teacher's view on the role of cooperative learning in the innercity junior school where she works:

I am absolutely committed to the encouragement of cooperation in this school because of our aim of enabling the children to respect themselves, respect others, respect the school and the environment in which they live. At one time we would have respected others first, but you can't do that until you respect yourself. It is about values – values in relation to other people. It is hard in a school like this because before you can get children to work cooperatively together they've got to be able to have a certain amount of self-esteem and a lot of children have not got that. But that doesn't mean you haven't got to keep working at it.