Fact sheet 1.5 Bruner and scaffolding

Learning aim C3.2: Vygotsky's theory C3.2.3, C3.3

Scaffolding

Bruner's ideas were influenced by the work of Vygotsky, particularly around the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. Vygotsky put forward ideas that emphasised the importance of the role of the adult in supporting children's intellectual development; this was a view Bruner also agreed with.

The term 'scaffolding' refers to the gradual withdrawal of support of adult control as the child gains mastery over a task, or the adult providing 'as needed' assistance which reduces as the child starts to master the task with no help.

Bruner was interested in the support that took place between adult and child and felt that cognitive growth is achieved through interaction between others. Bruner illustrated four characteristics of effective instruction:

- Personalised instruction (an understanding of a child's personal preferences) or having knowledge of the child's likes, e.g. a favourite construction toy.
- Content structure – content should be developed in a way that meets the child's current cognitive ability; this is where it is important to know the child's current ability and where knowledge of milestones and next steps is essential for the professional.
- Sequencing – the importance of an adult presenting material in sequential fashion where tasks are completed in a logical sequence, e.g. building a construction toy using an instruction guide.
- Reinforcement – the use of rewards and methods of rehearsal that reinforce knowledge and mastery. Through reinforcement the child is more likely to remember the skill and be able to perform it next time with limited or no support.

You may come across alternative terms used to describe scaffolding including 'joint involvement episodes' (JIE), 'apprenticeship learning' and 'guided participation'. However, the intention remains the same, that is the degree of control a more able other (adult or child) provides to a child to support them in mastering a skill or ability.

A simple example would be of completing a puzzle. An adult may start by helping the child sort out the pieces of a puzzle into colours or features and hold significant pieces (corners, edges, primary features) asking the child to help them find the right location. They may ask open-ended questions and encourage the child to think and provide solutions, provide hints or demonstrate attempting to put pieces together.

© Pearson Education Ltd 2025. Copying permitted for purchasing institution only. This material is not copyright free.