Imagining No Child Left Behind Freed from Neoliberal Hijackers

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ABSTRACT

As a sociocultural educator and scholar, I have always been ambivalent about No Child Left Behind's slogan. I like its democratic ideal of "education without failure," but I do not like the current educational policies guided by a neoliberal ideology. This article begins a discussion about what a No Student Left Behind educational practice might look like from a sociocultural democratic education perspective.

NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY OFTEN reduces the main purpose of education to promoting national economic efficiency, individual social upward mobility, and the winning of a perpetual international economic competition (Taubman, 2009). Educational institutions have to serve both society's economy and individuals' competition for privileged positions in the society (Labaree, 1997). The quality of the educational institution in serving these neoliberal goals is ensured through the mechanisms of accountability: those institutions (and their workers) that meet or exceed the high-level accountability standards will get more resources through market choices and administrative funding and, thus, these schools will be able to provide higher salaries for the teachers, receive more funds for the school, and offer students a more comprehensive set of class choices, richer learning activities, and more skilled teachers, and that will produce more "advanced" well-behaving students. Those schools that do not meet the accountability standards will obtain less of these social goodies or may even be reorganized, with certain loss of jobs.

The high-level educational standards are set up through normalization of the targeted population of the students: If too many of the total targeted students (e.g., all third graders in the United States) pass the standard, the standard might be considered too easy and too low and have to be moved up by making it more challenging, thus failing more students in the future. There is a catch-22 as the concerns for *equality* and *quality* in the high-stake assessments annihilate each other (Taubman, 2009). By contrast, when too many of the total targeted students fail the standard, the standard might be considered too high and insensitive (what some might term *developmentally inappropriate*) and it would be

adjusted to let more students to succeed in the future. Arguably, through this equality-quality catch 22, institutionalized education is connected to economical demands for labor.

When an economy is expanding and it urgently needs new educated workers, it pushes the educational discourse of equality (*caring*), deemphasizing testing. When that economy is contracting, it pushes the educational discourse of quality (*challenging*), emphasizing testing and preparedness. Thus, in California in the 1990s, I observed that when then governor Pete Wilson ordered small class size in elementary schools, which immediately led to a shortage of teachers, almost overnight the state's university-system administration issued a discourse of caring and sensitive guidance. When, however, the biotech industry in California experienced lay-offs, the universities started talking about more rigorous testing to prepare "better" its biotech students to "the harsh realities of the job market," as stated by the university administrators. Accountability is assured through high-stakes testing of students' skills and knowledge (and, indirectly, of the teachers' and school administrators' skills). The testing is de-contextualized and de-ontologized: It

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is not expected that the students have any pragmatic and inherent interests in the content presented in the tests (Sidorkin, 2009).

The term *neo-liberal* for these described educational practices can be confusing because it has a diverse political connotation. The educational term originates in the idea that well-organized market-like competition at the local and global levels can ensure the quality of educational institutions (Puiggrós, 1999). Political conservatives such as the Republican President George W. Bush, Republican Vice-President Richard Cheney, political centrists, and political liberals such as the former Democratic President William Clinton, Democratic Senator John Kerry, Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy, and the current Democratic President Barak Obama all subscribe to neoliberal educational policies (Taubman, 2009). Let me provide several quotes, emphasis added, from both conservative and liberal politicians to illustrate my point:

I think the most important thing we can do is have a first-class public school system . . . And the president, his first legislative priority was the No Child Left Behind Act. It was the first piece of legislation we introduced. We got it passed that first summer on a bipartisan basis. And it does several things. It establishes high standards. *It, at the same time, sets up a* system of testing *with respect to our school system, so we can establish* accountability *to parents and make certain that they understand how well their students are doing . . . . We've seen reports now of a reduction in the achievement gap between majority students and minority students. We're making significant progress. (Cheney, 2004; emphasis mine)*

Today, all 50 states have standards, assessments and accountability procedures *that enable us to track the achievement of every group of students. Every school measures performance, based not on overall student population but on progress in closing achievement gaps and getting all students to* meet high standards. *Schools across the country are using* assessments *under the No Child [Left Behind] law to identify weaknesses in instruction and areas of need for their students." (Kennedy, 2007; emphasis mine)*

I think the single most important thing we've done is to launch an initiative called Race to the Top.[1] *We said to states, if you are committed to outstanding teaching, to successful schools, to* higher standards*, to* better assessments—*if you're committed to excellence for all children—you will be eligible for a grant to help you attain that goal.*

And so far, the results have been promising and they have been powerful. In an effort to compete for this extra money*, 32 states reformed their education laws before we even spent a dime. The* competition *leveraged change at the state level. And* because the standards we set were high, only a couple of states actually won the grant *in the first round, which meant that the states that didn't get the money, they've now strengthened their applications, made additional reforms. Now 36 have applied in the second round, and 18 states plus the District of Columbia are in the running to get a second grant . . .*

Now, so far, about 30 states have come together to embrace and develop common standards, high standards. *More states are expected to do so in the coming weeks. And by the way, this is different from No*

Child Left Behind, because what that did was it gave the states the wrong incentives. A bunch of states watered down their standards *so that school districts wouldn't be* penalized *when their students fell short. And what's happened now is, at least two states—Illinois and Oklahoma—that* lowered standards *in response to No Child Behind—No Child Left Behind—are now* raising those standards back up, partly in response to Race to the Top . . . .

What Race to the Top says is, there's nothing wrong with testing—*we just need* better tests *applied in a way that helps teachers and students, instead of stifling what teachers and students do in the classroom. Tests that don't dictate what's taught, but* tell us what has been learned. *Tests that measure* how well our children are mastering essential skills and answering complex questions. *And tests that* track how well our students are growing academically, *so we can catch when they're falling behind and help them before they just get passed along. (Obama, 2010; emphasis mine)*

Similarly, conservative educators such as Hirsch (Hirsch, 1996; Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 2002) Bennett (Bennett, Finn, & Cribb, 1999) and centrist educators such as Ogbu (2003) subscribe to neoliberal educational policies. For example, Ogbu defined the main purpose of schooling in economic terms, emphasizing students' competition for academic credentials this way: "The public school system . . . prepares young people for the job market by teaching knowledge, skills, and attributes required in the workplace and by credentialing them to enter the workforce" (Ogbu, 2003, p. 145).

Arguably, "no child left behind" as a policy slogan is not a sincere neoliberal goal in the sense that neoliberals say one thing while wanting another, contradicting thing. Let's consider an example of educational inequality that is commonly presented as an achievement gap to reveal that the neoliberal ideal of equality contradicts the motto's reflection of a comprehensive absence of educational failure. For example, according to Delaware Department of Education statistics, the state where my university is located, the high-stakes reading testing of Delaware fifth graders in fall 2006 revealed that only 7% of White middle-class students are below the state standard in reading compared with 30% of Black lower-income students (State of Delaware, 2007). Evidence of a serious achievement gap is defined by many politicians and educators as a significant discrepancy between any two social groups in their academic achievement as usually defined by test scores. If, however, the percentage of students failing (or passing) the tests was approximately the same between compared social groups, arguably there is no evidence for educational inequality. For the sake of this discussion, I leave aside the important issues of the nature of the compared social groups, the ecological and construct validity of the testing, whether learning can be measured at all, and what difference in the achievement percentages is significant enough to define educational inequality between two social groups. Rather, I turn to the question of what the concept of educational equality would look like from the NCLB neoliberal approach.

According to the logic presented by educational neoliberals and promoters of high-stakes testing accountability, a near equal percentage of students failing or succeeding on educational standards demonstrates educational equality. This logic says, we

know that there are no vestiges of educational problems with previously oppressed immigrant minorities in the United States (such as descendants of Irish, Polish, and Italian immigrants), since their high-stakes test results are not much different from those of other White students (Ogbu, 2003). So, all social groups should have nearly the same rate of success (and failure) with the high-stakes achievement tests for a system to be "fair" and "working well." Such an educational system could be said to realize the spirit of equal opportunities, prevent social stagnation, and promote social mobility in each social group.

I argue that this is a rather honest, although unachievable, neoliberal account of educational equality. I call this neoliberal account honest because it is driven by sincere concerns about social stagnation and fragmentation within the society (Labaree, 1997). I call it unachievable because it has many internal and external problems and contradictions. It contradicts the NCLB slogan because it leaves some students behind in each social group. Even more, it leads to a new social inequality. Many of my undergraduate students, education majors, immediately reveal this in our class discussions. These future teachers correctly argue that if the social groups with equal proportional presence are reshuffled, the achievement gap emerges again. Indeed, if social groups A, B, and C (e.g., middle-class Whites, Blacks, and Latinos) have the same rates of success on a high-stakes test, all at 80%, then it is possible to develop new social groups X and Y by placing all students from the A, B, and C groups who passed the test into group X (i.e., the group of absolute success with 100% success) and those who failed in the group Y (i.e., the group of absolute failure with 0% success). Critics might protest this reshuffling, arguing that these new groups are not like known social groups (those based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, and so on) that have their own cultural values and practices but are instead purely mechanical aggregates that do not represent any social reality and culture. However, students who experience institutional success and students who experience institutional failure on a systematic basis tend to flock together into stable social groups and cultures (Eckert, 1989; Ogbu, 2003). It seems that group equality can be achieved only through individual equality with the total absence of educational failure. Thus, the "no child left behind" slogan (not G. W. Bush's policy!) requires the total absence of educational failure rather than closes the achievement gaps among existing diverse social groups.

The No Child Left Behind policies represented that attempt to make all students pass high-stakes tests based on high educational standards. All students in all social groups had to have 100% success on all the tests. Although this image of educational equality is less contradictory internally, it is also less sincere for neoliberal authors than would be the account of equal proportional success/failure among all social groups. One-hundred percent educational success contradicts the neoliberal definition of the quality of people's performance, which is based on competition and meritocracy, and only the strongest, smartest, and most efficient have to succeed. It contradicts the neoliberal spirit of responsibility, in which students have to be accountable for their own success (that is probably why the policy is No *Child* Left Behind and not No

Student Left Behind, evoking an image of an inherently innocent child who cannot be responsible for personal educational failures). And it contradicts the neoliberal notion of *high* quality and excellence (i.e., the high standards) that can be ensured only by a high rate of failure (e.g., as President Obama said in the quote above, "Because the standards we set were high, only a couple of states actually won the grant in the first round").

By now, there is a large body of scholarship analyzing, critiquing, and evaluating neoliberal NCLB educational policies (Ashby, 2007; Camacho & Cook, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007, May 2; Fiene & McMahon, 2007; Mahoney & Zigler, 2006; Olson & Hoff, 2006; Taubman, 2009), and it's still growing. Although it can be debated that the NCLB policies improve the educational system in general or in specific cases, it is clear that the NCLB policies contradict the goal of failure-free education for all students. Unless *behind* (i.e., the educational failure and success) is defined by testing, standards, benchmarks, and accountability, the failure-free education cannot be achieved. Students have diverse educational needs, interests, learning paths, and learning paces. There is no one existing psychological or pedagogical theory that predicts that children with the same chronological age and exposed to one good instruction can all learn the same preset curriculum at the same time.

The problems of neoliberal NCLB policies with regard to failure-free education are especially revealed if we apply the same idea to health care. Imagine the quality of the health care system is governed by No Patient Left Behind (NPLB) policies, where all patients have to pass medical tests on a certain day to demonstrate the quality of care of the health care providers. These neoliberal N*P*LB policies would be absurd in part because the patient outcomes on medical tests would reveal the patient's need for the physician's care (Taubman, 2009). The same absurdity of the NCLB policy exists in education. However, I believe that No Child Left Behind is a laudable goal that I, as a sociocultural theorist and proponent of democratic education, would like to rescue from neoliberal hijackers. To ensure genuine failure-free education, we have to move beyond ideas of testing, standards, accountability, and competition.

Sociocultural Democratic Approach to Failure-Free Education for All

To design an institutionalized failure-free practice, it makes sense, from a sociocultural perspective, to consider existing, everyday, less institutionalized practices that are already somewhat failure free to learn how these practices can be institutionalized in formal schooling (Lave, 1988; McDermott, 1993; Scribner & Tobach, 1997). Analysis of these partially failure-free practices can help us understand how these practices incorporate their participants, especially those who are marginal to the practices—and through what means. Also, it is useful to explore what social forces pushed these practices to become as successful as they are. This analysis can guide us in how to design failure-free educational institutions.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND PRACTICES IN EVERYDAY LIFE
Below I develop a not exhaustive list of everyday practices that are more or less failure-free for their participants (Table 1). I used

Table 1. Who Is Left Behind in Semi-No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Everyday Practices

NCLB Practices	Possibly Left Behind
Talking	Mute (i.e., not being able to talk)
Thinking	Mentally challenged (i.e., not being able to think clearly)
Walking	Paraplegic (i.e., not being able to walk)
Having friends	Autistic (i.e., not being able to relate)
Watching TV	Blind (i.e., not being able to watch TV

socially available labels for those groups that might be challenged in accessing these practices.

As the table above shows, despite the apparent failure-free nature of these everyday practices, on a closer look, almost all of them leave some people behind. So, how does our society try to help the marginalized population access these everyday practices?

In my view, progress in the field of disabilities studies can provide important guidance for us in how to approach failure-free education. I believe that this exciting field in theory and practice has made tremendous, but at times painful, progress in assuring basic human rights for people with disabilities. These attempts are not always successful but they are going in the right direction: demanding access to socially valuable practices through diverse means, insisting that this is an issue of human rights rather than one of education alone, and explaining how this is more than just an accommodation to an existing social norm. In the field of disabilities studies, it is clear that education is not the self-contained and only end but rather is one of several possible means for individuals' access to socially valuable practices; it is the means to access these practices that is an end in itself. I talk about this in more detail next.

Upon further examination, it appears that modern society has tried to ensure access to these socially valuable everyday practices by marginalized groups rather than simply to teach people having disabilities how to adapt to the existing norms and practices that are not designed with them in mind. Historically, however, modern industrialized societies have developed better means for physically and perceptually different people than for those with mental, emotional, and social differences. Some of these efforts to ensure access to socially valuable everyday practices include the designing of special new tools such as wheelchairs and bus ramps for those without working legs, the Braille reading system for those who are blind, sign language for those who are deaf, medication for some people with mental, emotional, and social differences, and specially outfitted computers and new toys, and so on.

Supportive infrastructures—handicapped toilet access, elevator access in public buildings, talking automated teller machines (ATMs)—have been developed. There have been changes in social policies and practices including school main-streaming, equal opportunity employment, and reasonable accommodation for workplaces. Distinctive human networks have been developed and are provided—these include human readers for those individuals who are dyslectic, human transcribers for people who cannot hear, social workers, therapies, and so on. Learning usually accompanies one of the means of access listed above. Usually one has to learn how to use a talking ATM or a Braille reading system or how to take medication. It is interesting to notice that education is not necessarily the only or even the main means of ensuring access to partially failure-free, semi-NCLB—everyday practices. Education can be useful but is a very limited and often insufficient way of providing universal access to a socially valuable practice.

Finally, marginalized social groups have achieved much of their inclusion to these valuable everyday practices through the rhetoric of civil and human rights and the struggle for access over, in some cases, years of social and political activism. The access to semi-NCLB practices was achieved not through standards, tests, competition, accountability, and market economy but through laws, regulations, and well-organized advocates and activists who pressed policymakers to act. Now, I turn to how learning is organized in semi-NCLB everyday practices and compare those steps with educational practices in the mainstream schools.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN
SEMI-NCLB EVERYDAY PRACTICES

As I already pointed out, in semi-NCLB everyday practices, learning is only one of many means for access to these practices. For example, to access text, a person who is blind might rely on a person who can see to read aloud or retell the text, or on a computer sounding out the written text, or on learning the Braille system (publishing and distribution of Braille texts). The most important issue is not so much how a task is achieved but on the access itself: its availability for the person, its cost to the society, and so on. Since the central focus in semi-NCLB everyday practice is on the participation in the practices themselves that have use-value for the participants and/or other people, learning is often peripheral and participatory in contrast to mainstream schools in which learning is central and viewed as self-contained and skill- and knowledge-based (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In mainstream, conventional schools, learning is the central and only goal (Taubman, 2009). Activities and their outcomes in conventional schools usually do not have use-value for anybody (Nilsson & Wihlborg, 2011, in press; Sidorkin, 2002). Non-learning means of solving a school assignment (e.g., using a social network or the Internet to get an answer) are discouraged. In mainstream educa-tion, learning, rather than gaining access to and participating in socially and personally valuable practices, is the highest goal. However, in the world, education is not both the means and the end but is instead just one of the means. Although very important, learning (and education in general) is only one of many pathways

to access socially valuable sociocultural practices. It is important for educators to realize the limitations of education in providing access to these practices.

Access to important everyday practices for marginalized social groups is often accepted as a communal endeavor rather than a purely individual one, whereas the individual is emphasized in mainstream schools. If a person can access a socially valuable practice on his or her own, that is fine; if not, that is fine as well. For example, people who cannot themselves change the oil in their cars but who can successfully use auto shops are not considered by many societies to be handicapped (although they might be in parts of the world where car mechanics are not readily found or are prohibitively expensive). In everyday semi-NCLB practices, there is no insistence, like in mainstream schools, that everyone has to know how to do or to be able to do everything.

In what I have been considering semi-NCLB everyday practices (e.g., getting from one place in a city to another), people's participation is often multipurposed and open to the participants' goal-defining processes and their ownership of the activities. Conversely, in mainstream schools participation is often mono-purposed, where the goal is defined by the teacher and not the students (Matusov, 2009). For example, people using wheelchairs define their own goals (e.g., use public transportation) and, thus, their learning (how to take public transportation) is embedded in their achieving of their own goals. In contrast, in mainstream schools, the students' activities are fully controlled by the teacher, which dis-embeds learning from the students' goal-defining processes, and, thus, makes learning more difficult (Lave, 1988).

A substantial mixture of levels of expertise usually coexists in semi-NCLB everyday practices, which is in contrast to mainstream schools in which efforts are made to segregate students by their skill and knowledge levels (tracking by age and competence). It is well known that when infants and toddlers are institutionally separated by speaking level, they learn more slowly (if they learn to speak at all!) than when they are in a diverse speaking environment (Rogoff, 2003). Exposure to multiple levels of expertise promotes multiple layers of support, responsibility, and success in practice and in learning—children do not rely only on a teacher's scaffolding, as they do in mainstream schools.

In semi-NCLB everyday practices, assessment is primarily a formative character open for negotiation of values by all of the involved parties, while in mainstream schools, assessment is primarily summative and nonnegotiable and has preset values (that are often external to the participants). For example, when a young child speaks unclearly for parents or peers outside of conventional schools, efforts are usually made to help the child get through and to understand the message. In this case, the conventional form of the child's message emerges as a mere by-product of the parent's or peer's pragmatic understanding efforts (even when they use direct correction) (Rogoff, 2003). In contrast, in conventional schools the teacher's focus is on making the child arrive at the conventional correctness of the form of the message rather than on the message itself. Thus, in conventional education, conventional correctness of the form is a self-contained goal. In contrast, in semi-NCLB

practices, the success of communication is negotiable and defined by the participants themselves.

These brief comparisons of learning environments in semi-NCLB everyday practices and in mainstream educational institutions allow me to conclude that a learning environment in mainstream schools heavily violates the learning environment in semi-NCLB practices. That is probably why mainstream schools are not failure-free. There, many students are left behind on a systematic basis through the institutional design of its practice.

PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

I argue here that failure-free education and democratic education mutually constitute each other. Abraham Lincoln famously defined *democracy* in his Gettysburg Address as "the government of the people, by the people, for the people." In my view, it reflects the unity among the goals of governance (i.e., "for the people"), the agency of governance (i.e., "by the people"), and the subject of governance (i.e., "of the people"). For education to be democratic, this three-fold unity has to be achieved as well:

1. *The unity of the goals and the subject of education*. In democratic education, what is educationally good for the students has to be rooted in the students—in their interests, strengths, and needs—and embedded in the socially desired practices (Dewey, 1956). It cannot be embedded exclusively in the state bureaucrats' defining the curriculum standards, as it is in mainstream schools, or in the teachers' consideration of "big ideas," as it is done in many innovative schools (Smith, 2010). As I discussed in the section above, this principle of the unity of the goals and the subject of education is affirmed when we consider that participant goals in everyday activities are usually not alienated from the participants as, unfortunately, they are in majority schools (Hart, 2006; Yazzie-Mintz, 2006). A famous advocate of home-schooling and unschooling, Llewellyn wrote, "People who have never gone to school have never developed negative attitudes toward exploring their world" (Llewellyn, 1998, p. 127).

2. *The unity of the subject and the agency of education*. In mainstream and even many innovative schools, the subject and the agency of education do not overlap. When students (i.e., the subject of education) are asked why they do school activities, they often reply that they do it because the teacher asks them to do it—they do it for the teacher. Many teachers ask their students to do learning activities for them: "Please solve this problem *for me*." Thus, in these schools, the subject of education (i.e., students) does not overlap with the agency of education (i.e., the teacher). In truly democratic education, education of the students should only be done by the students. Education has to be self-assigned rather than entirely assigned by the teachers, as it is in mainstream schools (Greenberg, 1992; Neill, 1960). Student agency is not welcomed and is instead distrusted in many schools (Llewellyn, 1998), unless it is limited to do exactly what the teacher asks to do (Matusov, 2011, in press). In contrast, in semi-NCLB everyday practices, the agency and the subject are not separated and are instead heavily overlapped.

3. *The unity of the goals and the agency of education*. Education not only has to prepare students for participation in a democratic

society but also has to promote democracy as the main organizing principle of education itself (Greenberg, 1992). As a famous phrase attributed to John Dewey goes, "Education is not preparation for life but life itself." In democratic education, what is educationally good for the students has to be defined by the students, rather than exclusively by the teachers and the state, as it is in most mainstream and even many innovative schools. In conventional schools, students often are not invited and allowed to participate in defining what, why, when, and how to learn. In contrast, in semi-NCLB everyday practices, participants of these practices set their own goals.

A counterargument that students are not ready to define the goals of their own education because they are not equipped with the right skills and knowledge is similar to arguments against democracy as a whole: that common citizens cannot govern themselves because of their ignorance and incompetence, and only a well-informed and skillful elite is competent for governance (Plato & Waterfield, 1993). A response to this counterargument is that the democratic process of governance is also an educational process—in order for it to be viable, it demands from people decision making and guidance (Dewey, 1966; Greenberg, 1992).

Democracy can be and often is messy, wasteful, and inefficient and, probably, so is democratic education. But in the vein of the famous saying by Winston Churchill—"It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried"—I wonder whether there are no good alternatives to democracy as a form of education. Psychologist Kurt Lewin's famous research on the three educational social climates—authoritarian, common to the mainstream schools; democratic; and laissez-faire—seem to support this claim (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939, 1953).

Democracy as governance fails in the following senses: when governance of subjects is not based on their interests (number 1 above), when subjects of governance are alienated from the governance (2), and when subjects of governance are disenfranchised from governance (3). This is similar to democratic education. Democratic education fails: when education of students is not based on their interests (1), when students are alienated from their own education and its goals (2), and when students are not involved in defining the goals of their education (3). All these conditions fail to be met in mainstream schools but are successfully met in the semi-NCLB everyday practices discussed above.

Lessons for a Genuine No Student Left Behind (NSLB) Policy for Formal Education: How Might NSLB Look from a Sociocultural Democratic Perspective?

The major lesson from my analysis of semi-NCLB everyday practices is that there is a limitation of education as such (including exciting innovative education). Education is only one means of many possible for providing people (and especially those in marginal social groups) with access to socially and personally valuable practices. By itself, without support of other means, education cannot be failure free. For example, society does not try to teach all people in wheelchairs to jump on public buses but rather demands that all public buses are equipped with special ramps that allow wheelchair access (and if they are not, alternative service must be provided).

In semi-NCLB everyday practices, the goal is not all participants have the same skills and knowledge for participation, but rather the goal is access to the practice itself with whatever means might be involved. I call for a shift from current *standard-based education* to *agency-based education* (Matusov, 2011, in press). The realization of this principle is dramatic and somewhat paradoxical for formal institutionalized education. To make education failure free means the realization that there will be always students who might not learn, for example, how to read or do certain calculations or understand algebra (Greenberg, 1992). For these students, not to be behind is to develop other ways of access to socially and personally valuable practices and activities.

This brings a new question: What are these socially and personally valuable practices and activities with which school should be concerned? In the case of reading, the answer is rather simple—it is access to printed and written texts. Our society is currently very print-text based. Most economic, bureaucratic, personal, political, educational, legal, and professional transactions are mediated by printed text. If we want our institutionalized education to be failure free, we should focus on how to provide access to printed texts to all students—all students should be able to comprehend and connect the texts to themselves and to diverse aspects of their own lives in a broader sense. Literacy has to be an inherent part of a school's rich learning environment and has to have great use-value for the students themselves. Students need to read and write not only, or even primarily, for school activities assigned by teachers but mostly for assignments given by themselves for their own personal and social ends. They can do this through self-governance, participation in games, participation in search for information, leisure, social activism, participation in art, and many other activities requiring literacy (Dewey, 1981; Greenberg, 1992). Reading as sounding and decoding texts, although powerful, is but only one of many possible ways to access printed texts. Students who can't or who have difficulties decoding or writing/typing can access print texts and produce their own texts through listening or dictating. Computers, electronic devices, other people, and tapes can also mediate students' access to printed texts. It is true that providing reliable and easily accessible alternative means for individual reading is a task that exceeds schooling. This task requires efforts from the entire society: its legal, economic, technological, and social realms. The very same efforts that have been required for ensuring access for people using wheelchairs on public transportation or to toilets in public places should be in place for everyone's access to printed texts. The quality of education will be achieved not through accountability but through legal struggle for civil and human rights that provide access to socially and personally valuable practices to all people.

We can ask a legitimate question: How can a school decide which students to teach to read and which not? Could some schools or individual teachers use the diversity of students' needs as an excuse for not providing quality education? In my view, the school's focus has to be on providing access to printed texts by diverse means, including reading ability and opportunity, for all

students. This is should be the primary goal of the NSLB school with regard to socially and personally valuable practices and activities. However, for some students, certain means of access (like, for example, decoding and sounding out printed texts) might not work well. In this case, the school's focus has to be shifted to other means of access (which also involve comprehension, connection to the text, and so on). For some students, such as blind students, this is rather evident from the beginning, but for some students it may take time to understand that they are unable to read or read fluently printed texts. Although not all people might be able to learn to read, all people must have access to printed texts. School should be one of many institutions that ensure this fundamental right of all people. Thus, education has to be become practice based rather than subject based or discipline based (although some disciplines, like history and science, are special practices themselves). As many sociocultural scholars argue, institutionalized education has to accomplish a practice turn, with its primary focus on student access to participation in socially valuable practices rather than on credentialism based on their acquiring decontextualized skills and knowledge (Dewey, 1981; Parker, 2001; Sfard, 1988).

Further, student's learning has to be seen as authorial rather than as merely technological (Matusov, 2011, in press). A technological, standard-based approach to learning, common to mainstream and even innovative schools, defines learning as achieving the curricular endpoints preset by the teacher and the state through students' acquisition, transmission, or even construction of well-defined, self-contained, decontextualized skills and knowledge. An authorial, agency-based approach to learning defines learning as growing mastery in the student's unique goal-defining process in socially desired practices and his or her unique trajectory of achieving these goals. In an authorial approach, curriculum is emergent and cannot be defined in advance (Lave, 1992, April; Lobok, 2001; Matusov, 2009). The nature and definition of the socially desired practices has to be negotiable between the society and each student mediated by the teacher.

One of the big challenges I see to our realization of failure-free education is modern society's economic, technological, and social organization. Modern economy and government institutions still heavily rely on standardized participation labor. Modern technology still cannot robotize and computerize all routine work. Failure avoidance still remains one of the major motivators for people to work. However, together with some other scholars, I argue that there is a growing trend in modern society to shift from reliance on standards-based participation to agency-based participation: initiative, entrepreneurship, out-of-the-box creativity, and collaboration in the emerging post-skill and post-knowledge globalized economy (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Pink, 2009; Zhao, 2009). Agency-based economy is moving away from Learning 1.0 ecology, where learning is viewed as closing a gap between the well-defined standards preset in advance and the student's current performance (aka thermostat-like learning; Argyris & Schön, 1978). In contrast to standards-based economy, agency-based economy promotes Learning 2.0 that prioritizes and supports students' agency, goal and problem defining, self-initiated learning, learning journeys, and responsibility for their own learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Hopefully, this shift from skill- and knowledge-based economies to agency-based economy will promote an eventual shift from mass Education 1.0 to mass Education 2.0 (Goldin, 2010) that is currently available in very few private innovative schools, like Summerhill (Neill, 1960), Sudbury Valley School (Greenberg, 1992), and in some innovative homeschooling (Llewellyn, 1998). I see making Education 2.0 public on a mass scale for diverse students, families, and communities as the primary challenge of failure-free education.

From my analysis, it is clear that both mainstream school practices and neoliberal NCLB policies contradict genuine failure-free education. My goal here was only to start a discussion about an alternative, genuine, sociocultural vision of failure-free education. I hope that the critique and further development of the presented ideas can stimulate work on failure-free education. Design of the learning environment in an NSLB school should model learning environments in semi-NCLB everyday practices (e.g., see analysis of learning in videogames; for example, Gee, 2003). It should focus on a participatory notion of learning in which individual skills and knowledge are by-products rather than precursors of participation in socially valuable practices. Learning has to be multipurposed, collaborative, and distributed, with many layers of support.

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Notes

1. It is interesting that the name of the educational policy initiative Race to the Top, by Democratic President Barack Obama, is a complete neoliberal emphasis on competition to get to the top rather than on equality, as it was with the name No Child Left Behind, by the Republican president George W. Bush. However, the rhetoric of equity is preserved in Obama's discourse. I wonder if this policy-naming phenomenon involves *political triangulation*: By referring to equity in the title of the educational policy, Bush tried to appeal to a politically liberal camp, while Obama's reference to neoliberal ideas of competition and exclusive excellence tries to appeal to a politically conservative camp.