
WHOSE DEVELOPMENT?
SALVAGING THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT WITHIN A
SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. The concept of development is currently under revision in education and psychology. In this essay, Eugene Matusov, Renée DePalma, and Stephanie Drye examine a traditional notion of development and provide an alternative sociocultural view. As educators working within a sociocultural approach to learning, development, and education, the authors see psychological phenomena as rooted in participation in sociocultural activities, practices, and communities. They critique how the traditional notion of development essentializes this process, assuming development to be independent of the observer. Using a case where a child of color develops a “sitting disability” within the institutional context of schooling, they illustrate the need for introducing a sociocultural notion of development, arguing that development is a social construction emerging in communities of practice and that it is necessary to consider the role of the observer in both defining and guiding this process in a professional discourse of cases.

Theories of development have been proposed to predict, in stage-like fashion, how we develop not only intellectual abilities but also moral insight, social abilities, racial identity, and gender identity.¹ In order to be more specific and inclusive of particular (assumedly diverse) populations, developmental theory has in some cases been narrowed to focus on more specific groups such as African American women, African American men, whites, and Asian homosexuals.² Nevertheless, despite these attempts to account for smaller groups of people, development

1. See, for example, Jean Piaget and David Elkind, *Six Psychological Studies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968); Lawrence Kohlberg and Robert A. Ryncarz, “Beyond Justice Reasoning: Moral Development and Consideration of a Seventh Stage,” in *Higher Stages of Human Development*, ed. Charles Nathaniel Alexander and Ellen J. Langer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994); Beverly Daniel Tatum, “Talking About Race, Learning About Racism: The Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom,” *Harvard Education Review* 62, no. 1 (1992): 1–24; and James M. O’Neil, Jean Egan, Steven V. Owen, and Velma M. Murry, “The Gender Role Journey Measure: Scale Development and Psychometric Evaluation,” *Sex Roles* 28, no. 3/4 (1993): 167–185.

2. See, for example, Britta Davis Dinsmore and Brent Mallinckrodt, “Emotional Self-Awareness, Eating Disorders, and Racial Identity Attitudes in African American Women,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 24, no. 4 (1996): 267–277; Jill McLean Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy M. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995); Janet E. Helms, “Toward a Model of White Racial Identity Development,” in *Black and White Racial Identity*, ed. Janet E. Helms (New York: Greenwood Press, 1993); and Y. Barry Chung and Motoni Katayama, “Ethnic and Sexual Identity Development of Asian-American Gay and Lesbian Adolescents,” *Professional School Counseling* 1, no. 2 (1998): 21–24.

theories remain decidedly modernist in their assumption of an objective progression through preexisting stages that are “out there,” essentialized into being without acknowledging the influence of particular developers and observers in particular spaces and times.

The essentialist nature of development theory has come under revision and even attack in education and psychology.³ In this essay, we will examine and critique the traditional notion of development and provide an alternative sociocultural view. As educators working within a sociocultural approach to learning, development, and education, we see human psychological phenomena as rooted in people’s participation in sociocultural activities, practices, and communities.⁴ We will start our analysis here with a critique of traditional concepts of development; then we will shift to a discussion of how to redefine development to address this critique and to make this concept useful once again in the areas of psychology and education from a sociocultural perspective.

Our main critique of a traditional notion of development is that it assumes that development occurs independent of “an observer” (using the term from physics) — that is, a researcher or practitioner who uses the notion of development for research or practical purposes. We argue, in contrast, that development is a social construction emerging in and among communities of practice, and from this perspective it is impossible to consider development without considering the

3. Valerie Walkerdine, “Beyond Developmentalism?” *Theory and Psychology* 3, no. 4 (1993): 451–469; Jay L. Lemke, *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics (Critical Perspectives on Literacy and Education)* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1995); Eugene Matusov, “When Solo Activity Is Not Privileged: Participation and Internalization Models of Development,” *Human Development* 41, no. 5–6 (1998): 326–349; Jaan Valsiner, *Child Development Within Culturally Structured Environments, Volume 3: Comparative-Cultural and Constructivist Perspectives* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex, 1995); and Ben S. Bradley, “Introduction: The Future of Developmental Theory” *Theory and Psychology* 3, no. 4 (1993): 403–414.

4. Michael Cole, *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996); Shirley B. Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Learning in Doing)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Barbara Rogoff, *Apprenticeship in Thinking: Cognitive Development in Social Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Barbara Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jaan Valsiner, *Culture and the Development of Children’s Action: A Theory of Human Development*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997); Hervé Varenne and Ray P. McDermott, *Successful Failure: The School America Builds* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998); Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity (Learning in Doing)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and James V. Wertsch, *Mind as Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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role of the observer in both defining and guiding (and even at times limiting) this process.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
HOW THE OBSERVER CAME TO BE EXCLUDED

The notion of development has a very long historical and broad cultural tradition. In the nineteenth century, there was a growing philosophical tradition, represented by such famous figures as Johann von Goethe, G.W.F. Hegel, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and John Dewey, grounded in the notion that any phenomenon has to be understood as development. To take just two examples, Enrico Coen offers an account of how Goethe's early notion of plant metamorphosis paved the way for modern plant development studies, and Frank Elwell provides an analysis of Marx's view that the capitalist state evolved from a feudal society.⁵ Following this lead, many scientific fields that had focused on describing a very static picture of the unchangeable world (such as astronomy, biology, economics, geography, mathematics, psychology, physics, and the like) have become increasingly developmental. Astronomy, for instance, has changed from focusing narrowly on clustering, cataloging, locating, and describing the eternal movements of stars and planets in the night sky to exploring origins and changes over time of sky bodies and their movements.⁶

The discipline of child psychology as it emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century almost immediately embraced this developmental orientation with the "developing child" as its unit of analysis.⁷ Early proponents for Child Study and Child Development (such as James Sully, Mosiah Hall, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and James Mark Baldwin) argued in favor of using the concepts of evolution and development, and they heavily borrowed from Darwin's and, more specifically, Ernst Haeckel's evolutionary theories claiming that ontogeny (child development) recapitulates phylogeny (development of the society in which child lives).⁸ Just consider the title of a book written by Vygotsky and Alexander Luria — *Studies on the History of Behavior: Ape, Primitive, and Child* — to appreciate both developmental and evolutionary approaches used by early researchers of Child Study.⁹

In contrast with these scientific fields, Western educational institutions were experiencing at the same time an opposing, antidevelopmental tendency, exemplified by a range of metaphors for learners such as "tabula rasa for writing important lessons," "clay for molding," "an empty vessel to fill with knowledge and skills," "a sinful soul to be saved from its evils," or "a pedagogical object to be repaired of

5. See Enrico Coen, "Goethe and the ABC Model of Flower Development," *Life Sciences* 324 (2001); and Frank Elwell, "The Sociology of Karl Marx," <http://www.faculty.rsu.edu/~felwell/Theorists/Marx/index.htm>.

6. Rudolf Kippenhahn and Alfred Weigert, *Stellar Structure and Evolution* (Berlin, Germany, and New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990).

7. Walkerdine, "Beyond Developmentalism?"

8. Bradley, "Introduction: The Future of Developmental Theory."

9. Lev S. Vygotsky, Alexander R. Luria, Victor I. Golod, and Jane Elizabeth Knox, *Studies on the History of Behavior: Ape, Primitive, and Child* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1993).

its deficiencies and misconceptions." These notions had different philosophical roots in various influential Western philosophers (such as John Locke and Friedrich Froebel) and religious beliefs (Puritan, Quaker, Lutheran, and the like). Contemporary educational practices, policies, and theories can be characterized alternatively as a struggle between and a "peaceful" intertwining of both developmental and antidevelopmental tendencies. For example, the famous U.S. policy "No Child Left Behind" (2002) assumes that with proper instruction, all children of a certain biological age can demonstrate the same mastery of certain skills and knowledge.¹⁰ Critics have compared NCLB to an assembly-line approach to education that assumes a uniformity of materials (that is, children), but in fact the former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige rejoined this criticism by arguing that education should emulate the efficiency and product-orientation of the successful Ford Motor Company.¹¹ This policy both acknowledges a developmental progression of skills and knowledge that can be successfully taught to children of the same biological age through the schools and, at the same time, denies any developmental variability among children of the same biological age. By contrast, behavioristically driven classroom management practices (for example, the "token economy") are openly antidevelopmental by their nature.¹² Constructivist educational theories often involve the intertwining of developmental and nondevelopmental aspects.¹³

When the concept of development is acknowledged in education, it is often represented as a set of temporary constraints for pedagogical actions. For example, such an educational construct as "developmentally appropriate instruction/activity" cautions educators to consider carefully their students' developmental stages when designing their curricula and instruction.¹⁴ Piaget's child development theory represents a good example of such a cautionary approach.¹⁵ According to Piaget, education can enrich and provide opportunities for development, but it still has to be constrained by developmental considerations. Piaget cautioned, for example, that it may be useless to teach young children scientific notions such as density if they are non-conservers of mass and volume (that is, if they do not agree that changing the shape of an object preserves its mass and volume).

An exception to this tradition of treating development as a constraint for education is Vygotsky's sociohistorical theory, according to which education can lead development. In Vygotsky's famous concept of the zone of proximal development

10. *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, Public Law 107-110 (HR1), 107th Congress (January 8, 2002), <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>.

11. For this exchange, see Malcolm Gladwell, "Making the Grade," *New Yorker*, September 15, 2003; and Rod Paige, "Left Behind," *New Yorker*, October 6, 2003.

12. William Huitt and John Hummel, "An Introduction to Operant (Instrumental) Conditioning," Valdosta State University, <http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/behsys/operant.html>.

13. D.C. Phillips, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Many Faces of Constructivism," *Educational Researcher* 24, no. 7 (1995): 5-12.

14. International Reading Association and National Association for the Education of Young Children, *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children* (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1998).

15. Piaget and Elkind, *Six Psychological Studies*.

(ZPD), more capable peers, adults, or a sociocultural activity (such as play) engage a child in more advanced actions than he or she could have performed on his or her own and thus define the child's potential development.¹⁶ The notion of ZPD opens the possibility for new interpretations of development as a social construction and undermines a traditional assumption that development is independent from observers, researchers, and educators who can recognize or not recognize (value or discount) certain aspects of the activity as "developmental." The ZPD of a child depends not only on who are the "more capable others" but also on the level of the child's engagement with them, on the type of cultural practice in which he or she participates with (or even without) the more capable others, and on how a researcher interprets which actions are more advanced. However, despite the potential that Vygotsky's theory has had for reinterpreting the concept of development, it is unclear (if not doubtful) how aware Vygotsky himself was of such interpretations.¹⁷ Some educational researchers and educators call for the design of ZPD tests that can objectively determine the child's ZPD,¹⁸ thus placing the notion of the ZPD among universal stage-like developmental notions rather than among socially constructivist ones.¹⁹ They suggest that for each student, at each moment, and for each subject, the student's ZPD has to be first diagnosed and then "hit" by the teacher's sensitive instruction.²⁰ One computer-based assessment program, for example, promises to assess children's reading levels based on their ZPD, which in this sense completely loses its social component and morphs into what is explicitly referred to as a criterion-referenced score: "A student's ZPD represents the range of book readability levels that is neither too hard nor too easy, and is the level at which optimal learning takes place."²¹ The ZPD is seen as "a place" located inside of the student rather than a space between the teacher and the student that they both create.²²

CONTEMPORARY TRADITIONAL MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT

There are a variety of traditional models of development that are based on the premise that development is independent from its observer. In this section we very briefly describe the ones most commonly used in education.

16. Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978).

17. Rogoff, *Apprenticeship in Thinking*; and Renée van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner, *Understanding Vygotsky: A Quest for Synthesis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

18. See, for example, Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*; and Donald P. Kauchak and Paul D. Eggen, *Learning and Teaching: Research-Based Methods*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003).

19. For an alternative approach to Vygotsky's work, see Eugene Matusov, "Vygotsky's Theory of Human Development and New Approaches to Education," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2001).

20. For a discussion of these processes, see Kauchak and Eggen, *Learning and Teaching*; and Gary D. Borich, *Effective Teaching Methods*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Merrill, 2000).

21. Renaissance Learning, "Using Star Early Literacy Scores to Match Books to Early Readers," <http://www.renlearn.com/support/SELtoMatchBooksToEarlyReaders101.pdf>.

22. Roland G. Tharp and Ronald Gallimore, *Rousing Minds to Life: Teaching, Learning, and Schooling in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

DEVELOPMENT AS THE UNFOLDING OF A PREPROGRAMMED ALGORITHM
WITHIN THE STUDENT

This is one of the most common models, although it is rarely used in its purest form in education (except in Special Education) but is rather applied in combination with other models. According to this model of development, there is a hidden algorithm (preprogrammed sequence of actions) that controls changes in the student who is considered as an object. The source of the development is entirely inside the object of development. In education, this model is fully realized in some very popular versions of “developmentally appropriate” activities (as well as curriculum and instruction). Some companies, for example, market norm-referenced assessment tools that can evaluate where a child is in relation to the expected developmental levels for a particular age group; these assessment tools are meant to be used to plan teaching.²³ According to this notion, it is useless to teach students curricula if they are not mature enough for it. If, for example, a child fails the diagnostic tests of conservation or phonics awareness, it is considered to be useless to teach this child arithmetic or reading. Instead, we must wait a year or two until the child is mature enough to pass the diagnostic tests.

This is a rather radical view that usually stems from stage developmental theories and especially from misinterpretations of Piaget’s work.²⁴ Special diagnostic tests have to be developed to assess “where the student is” on the developmental scale in order to define appropriate curriculum for the student to learn. The following quote from a textbook on educational psychology exemplifies this focus on accessing students’ developmental readiness prior to instruction:

Knowing, for example, that developing fundamental skills in reading, writing, and calculating are major tasks normally included in the six- to twelve-year age group enables us to design educational programs that help growing youngsters acquire these skills when they are developmentally ready to do so.²⁵

There is nothing (or nearly nothing) that the educator can do to affect development but to test the students in order to determine where they are on the developmental scale of their maturation and then wait until the student is mature enough and ready for the instruction. In this model, the development of the child is seen as independent of the observers, researchers, and clinicians responsible for establishing the scale of the universal stages of development and placing the child on the scale, while the teacher is seen as a nonparticipant in the student’s development. The role of the teacher in this model is to teach the students the required academic content when and only when the students are developmentally ready for it (that is, teachable). For example, when a child cognitively has developed enough to understand the conservation of volume and density, it can be a good idea for the

23. See, for example, Kaplan Early Learning Company, “Curriculum and Assessment,” <http://www.kaplanco.com/curriculum/assessment.asp>.

24. For further discussion of this point, see Eugene Matusov and Renée Hayes, “Sociocultural Critique of Piaget and Vygotsky,” *New Directions in Psychology* 18, no. 2–3 (2000): 215–239.

25. Don E. Hamachek, *Psychology in Teaching, Learning, and Growth*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1990), 468.

teacher to teach the student the conceptual relation between the volume and the density.²⁶ Teaching and development are separated in this model, with teaching waiting for development. Development can be postponed, accelerated, or enriched but not alternated.

We see potential educational benefits of this model in its search for situations in which the adult and the child do not perceive the world and act similarly. These situations of diverse understanding and acting can potentially create moments of teaching and learning, but, unfortunately, these moments are ultimately denied by the model.

DEVELOPMENT AS AN ACTIVE INTERACTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

In this model, development occurs as the individual actively tries to impose his or her schemes of actions on his or her environment and, as a result of "the resistance" of the environment to be changed in the desired way, the individual's schemes have to be changed. Development has an emergent character. In psychology, this interactive model of development was advocated by Piaget.²⁷ As he pointed out, this model is rooted in biology:

cognitive mechanisms constitute both the resultant general auto-regulatory processes in the living organization and are also specialized regulatory organs in exchanges with environment. If there is a good foundation for this hypothesis, it will mean that, from the functional point of view, certain general functions common to both organic and cognitive mechanisms do exist, but that, in the case of cognitive mechanisms, a progressive specialization of functions also exists.²⁸

Vygotsky's version of development as social-becoming-psychological can also fit here (to some degree).²⁹ The influence of this model on education has been seen in a pedagogical emphasis on active, meaningful, interactive, and relevant learning and hands-on activities. This model makes new demands on the instruction to focus on what a student does with learning material for his or her own purposes rather than on whether the student follows the teacher or acquires the academic curriculum in a way that the student can demonstrate it later on the teacher's demand. In this approach, the educator can speed up the developmental process or slow it down, but he or she still cannot shape it since the source of development is solely rooted in an active organism. This model is different from the last because the teacher is part of the development process. But still, as with the previous model, developmental goals are considered to be a universal given: "no one" defines development.

DEVELOPMENT AS A SELF-ORGANIZING DYNAMIC SYSTEM AND ECOLOGY

This model pushes further the often unpredictable character of transactions among different elements of a dynamic system. Unlike the interactive model and

26. Matusov and Hayes, "Sociocultural Critique of Piaget and Vygotsky."

27. Piaget and Elkind, *Six Psychological Studies*.

28. Jean Piaget, *Biology and Knowledge: An Essay on the Relations Between Organic Regulations and Cognitive Processes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 152.

29. See Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*.

the preprogrammed model, the dynamic systems model does not assume the developing actor's relative independence from the environment.

For example, a newborn child defines a young couple as new parents, and their parenting is shaped by the newborn infant. Instead of tracking dynamically interacting functions and actions of individual participants as previous models do, this model focuses the researcher's attentions on the emergence of stable patterns of relations among the participants as well as dynamic processes that disrupt the patterns.³⁰

In education, this model of development shifts the educator's focus from the student — how much he or she learns and how well he or she behaves — to the student's emerging relationships with the teacher, peers, and parents as “hidden curricula” of education.³¹ Similarly, a student's learning how to participate in the stable relationships that emerge in and around school arguably becomes the most important learning that the student does in (and around) school.³²

This model also attracts educators' attention to the relational contexts and “factors” within which institutionalized education operates, such as gender (sexism), class (poverty), race (racism), culture (ethnocentrism), political regime (oppression), social status (minority), institutional regime (hierarchy), and so on.

Within this model, it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain the independence of the phenomenon of development from its observer due to the interdependence and mutual definition of participants in the system. However, the dynamic systems model still often stops short of recognizing the observer as an important party in defining development since it does not include the observer/researcher as a part of a self-organizing system. At the conceptual level this model still neglects the fact that the observer participates in co-constructing the observed phenomenon of development. Some research examining the relation of poverty and related social issues to child development, for example, may never clearly define what development is, perhaps assuming that the nature of development is universally recognized.³³ Others more explicitly essentialize practices generally valued in school settings, such as memorization of the alphabet and responding eagerly to known-answer questions, by describing these practices as developmentally advanced rather than recognizing their value to be socially constructed.³⁴ This

30. Alan Fogel, *Developing Through Relationships: Origins of Communication, Self, and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Lemke, *Textual Politics*; and Esther Thelen and Linda B. Smith, *A Dynamic Systems Approach to the Development of Cognition and Action* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994).

31. Such a focus is exemplified in Philip W. Jackson's *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

32. Penelope Eckert, *Jocks and Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in the High School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1989).

33. Robert H. Bradley and Robert F. Corwyn, “Socioeconomic Status and Child Development,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 53 (2002): 371–399.

34. Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo, Anne R. Pebley, Mary E. Vaiana, and Elizabeth Maggio, *Are L.A.'s Children Ready for School?* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 2004).

conflation of socially situated practice with appropriate development runs the risk of implying that certain child-rearing practices that are not congruent with these practices are simply (developmentally) inferior.

SUMMARY: THE CONCEPT OF DEVELOPMENT

The history of the concept of development in the social sciences and education reveals the following important aspects:

1. *Directionality*: The concept of development focuses on progressive changes in its object, which, in the social sciences, is a subject with agency.
2. *Value Relativity*: The directionality of the concept of development is based on the system of values (what is desirable or undesirable) held by the observer and his or her community but that may or may not be held by its object-subject.
3. *Sociocultural Constructivism*: The process of defining a shared concept of development often creates new practices and norms that in turn alter the observer's community (its system of values), the changes in the object-subject (actions and behavior), and his or her agency (the subject's new values).
4. *Dialogism*: The object-subject of the concept of development often gets involved directly or indirectly in discourse about his or her own development as defined by others.

In the next section, we present a case through which we will abstract an alternative sociocultural model of development that includes the observer within the system that defines the development observed.

MIKE DEVELOPS...WHAT?

The following case illustrates challenges posed by the currently dominant models of development that have led some to call for a sociocultural notion of development. Eugene Matusov, a professor of education and an author of this article, was visiting local public elementary schools where his undergraduate students, preservice teachers, were placed for a teaching practicum. In one of the placements, he encountered a puzzling experience. It was in a second-grade classroom during a loosely planned language arts activity at the very beginning of the school day. There were two white middle-class teachers, Mrs. Grove and Mrs. Smith, working in teams.³⁵ Both teachers had about twenty years of teaching experience. Mrs. Grove was working on writing with a group of eight children sitting around a long table, while Mrs. Smith was reading a book with two other children. The rest of the class (about twenty children) was doing some independent writing work, apparently assigned previously by the teachers. They worked at their desks, arranged in clusters of four. The children could talk and even walk around the

35. Except in the case of "Eugene Matusov," pseudonyms have been used for the teachers, university students, and children described in this case study.

classroom. The class looked well organized — that is, the children seemed to know what to do and to work mainly on their assigned tasks.

Matusov was floating from one cluster of desks to another, observing children's work, asking kids questions, and occasionally helping them with their work. At some point, an African-American student named Mike came to Matusov with a slip of paper and a pencil and asked how to spell the word "brain." Matusov remembered seeing a big poster on the classroom wall with the diagram of the brain when he first entered the classroom. The poster included a title with the word "BRAIN" in large type and a recognizable picture of the human brain. Matusov pointed out this poster to Mike and asked whether he knew what the poster was about. Mike replied that the poster was about the brain. Matusov then asked whether Mike knew what the word with big letters in the title of the poster said. The boy appeared to guess with some doubt, "Brain?" revealing that he had difficulty reading on his own. Matusov nodded in confirmation. Mike happily picked up his slip of paper and carefully copied the word, letter by letter, from the poster.

Matusov heard another boy working next to them say, "Cheating!" This boy went immediately to Mrs. Smith, who was working with a group of kids, to report this double cheating. The first instance of cheating was Mike asking Matusov for help; the second one was Matusov showing Mike how to find the answer on the wall instead of forcing Mike to spell the word by himself, a kind of illicit scaffolding.³⁶ The teacher punished Mike for cheating on the spelling test and for "deceiving the visitor" (the university professor). Matusov felt embarrassed and apologized to the teacher.

A few moments after this incident, a special education teacher came into the classroom. She picked up Mike and said to Matusov, who was standing near the boy's desk, that Mike could not read or write and they were going to work on letter recognition. Matusov was shocked that the teacher Mrs. Smith apparently had given Mike the spelling test while knowing perfectly well that he had no resources with which to even approach the task. At a recess break, he asked Mrs. Smith if she knew that Mike could not read and write and that the spelling test was way beyond his skill level. The teacher replied that she knew about that but the test was a mandatory requirement from the district. Matusov made a point that the test had a clearly harmful effect on the boy in that it required him to do something that he could not do. Such requirements could destroy Mike's confidence in his ability to learn. Either Mike should be excused from the test or help should be offered to him. The teacher agreed with the concerns Matusov raised but said that exempting the boy from the test or helping the boy with the test was not in her power.

VARIOUS OBSERVERS DEFINE MIKE'S DEVELOPMENT (DIFFERENTLY)

Matusov presented this case to the students in his own undergraduate class and asked them what they thought about this scenario and how would they

36. David Wood, Jerome S. Bruner, and Gail Ross, "The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17 (1976): 89-100.

resolve the problem. Many students agreed that the spelling test probably had a detrimental effect on Mike and that as a special education student, he could and should be excused from the test. Karen, a student who was placed in Mike's class for her teaching practicum, reported that Mrs. Smith suspected that the boy had Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and believed that he should be put on medication. Matusov asked Karen and Jessica, another student working in Mike's class, why the teacher thought this about Mike and what was the evidence for her claim. The students replied that they were asked by Mrs. Smith to record how many times during a fifteen-minute period this boy would violate the appropriate sitting behavior (that is, to sit quietly, work on his own assignment, and not distract other kids). According to the teacher, this report was necessary for the school to request learning disability support for Mike as well as to make a case for putting him on medication. The teacher had complained to Jessica and Karen that the class could easily become unteachable because of the presence of kids like Mike with learning disabilities such as ADHD. Some other students seemed to agree with the teacher's evaluation that Mike had ADHD, and they asked Matusov how they could better diagnose learning disabilities in their future classes.

Matusov challenged his students to reconsider their conclusion, which was plausible but based on the very limited available evidence, that ADHD was the only or even the most probable explanation for Mike's behavior. Matusov asked Jessica and Karen during which learning activities they had made their systematic observations of Mike. The students replied that the teacher asked them to observe him during language arts (reading and writing) activities. As another plausible but alternative explanation for Mike's observable behavior, Matusov suggested that Mike's distracting sitting behavior could come not from any organic or psychological disorder but from the simple fact that the reading and writing activities were far beyond his skills and there was simply no way for him to participate in those activities. Matusov argued that the disability might be rooted not in the child but in the insensitively made demands of the classroom activity with regard to this child. He illustrated this point by asking his undergraduate students how long they would be able to sit still and remain attentive if his instruction had been in Chinese — a language that they could not understand. All students without exception declared that very soon they would exhibit behavior like Mike's in one way or another. They predicted that they might start talking with their neighbors, smuggle readings into the class, draw pictures, or daydream.³⁷ Based on this thought experiment, at least some of the students seemed to redefine Mike's development as exhibiting not ADHD but a "sitting" disability, thus shifting the locus from a purely medical-individual to a more social-relational and even instructional explanation. Matusov also pointed out that although the teacher's desire to inhibit Mike was understandable — indeed, it is very difficult to teach class when some kids are distracting other kids — putting Mike on medication for that purpose might not be in the child's best interest. Setting aside the issue of potentially

37. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms*.

harmful side effects of the medication, even if Mike were sitting quietly during language arts activities, it is not likely that he would learn much from continued instruction that was way above his mastery of literacy.

The discussion also led to the issue that, according to the students' and Matusov's observations, in the local schools where the students had teaching practicums, African-American boys were disproportionately put on medication and placed within special education programs. This observation is consistent with the national overrepresentation of minority children among those with learning delays and disabilities,³⁸ and with the reported tendency for teachers to refer children to certain high-incidence disability categories (such as emotional disturbance and learning disability) largely on the basis of their own socially constructed understandings of classroom behaviors.³⁹ In a 2002 study examining the overrepresentation of minority students in special education within the state of Delaware, John Hosp and Daniel Reschly found that African American students received less assistance in the general classroom than their white counterparts, although such in-class assistance significantly helped those elementary school-aged students who received it.⁴⁰

Some students in Matusov's undergraduate class concluded that mainstream schools do not fit children from some social and cultural groups, and the schools see medication as a major way to solve the problem. On this basis, Matusov and some other members of the class "diagnosed" the institution of schooling itself with having developed a serious diversity disability. Several students became upset that the teacher, Mrs. Smith, used their classmates, preservice teachers Jessica and Karen, to document ADHD rather than to investigate the roots of the problem: why Mike was disruptive during only certain academic activities in Mrs. Smith's classroom, or why Mike was not provided instruction sensitive to his needs.

Mike did not seem to have access to learning how to participate in classroom literacy practices and events. Mike's own ways of participating in literacy practices and events — ways likely characteristic of practices within his home community — were not welcome in the class. The only available developmental pathway left to Mike was the development of a learning disability in school as a result of the negotiation between the teacher's expectations about Mike's participation in class activities and his actual performance.⁴¹ By labeling Mike as an "ADHD/learning-disabled student," the teacher has created the zone of proximal development (in

38. Dalun Zhang and Antonis Katsiyannis, "Minority Representation in Special Education: A Persistent Challenge," *Remedial and Special Education* 23, no. 3 (2002): 180–187.

39. Kathy-Anne Jordan, "Constructions of Difference and Black Overrepresentation in Special Education" (paper presented at the Twelfth International Conference on Learning, Granada, Spain, July 2005).

40. John L. Hosp and Daniel J. Reschly, "Predictors of Restrictiveness of Placement for African-American and Caucasian Students," *Exceptional Children* 68, no. 2 (2001): 225–238.

41. Ray P. McDermott, "The Acquisition of a Child by a Learning Disability," in *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*, ed. Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

other words, the trajectories open for real development) for Mike, who then has no choice but to respond in certain ways to this labeling practice as well as to the people around him including his classmates, parents, family, friends, medical care providers, school administrators, and so on. The issue here is not that Mike is “mislabeled” by the teacher, although we believe that this is probably the case; nor is it that labeling must be avoided — we do not believe that this is possible or even helpful, because objectifying people is unavoidable and often is useful in setting up beneficial constraints for their practices and communications. The problem, in our view, is the teacher’s unilateral imposition of her own view in defining Mike’s development, without recognizing the ways in which this feeds back upon his actual development. There was not much dialogue among the teacher, Mike, his parents, the school administration, the state, the district, other teachers, the university professor, and the preservice teachers about the values that should define Mike’s development in literacy. Without this explicit negotiation, only the “default” option of developing a disability remained.

However, there was such a dialogue between Matusov and his students. If these alternative observers — alternative to the teachers diagnosing Mike with ADHD — had been invited to help define Mike’s development, they might have suggested such disparate developmental trajectories as an independent learner and socially resourceful strategist (through Matusov’s eyes), a cheater and traitor (through the eyes of one of his classmates and perhaps the teacher), a disenfranchised minority student (as interpreted by some of Matusov’s students and supported by literature), and a bored, restless boy (as perceived by some of Matusov’s students after reflecting on how long they might sit still in Mike’s position). These different trajectories are not all equally valid and are not mutually exclusive; they are evaluations that emerged through the dialogue of Matusov’s undergraduate class, and they could have been introduced in an explicit discussion of how different observers might differently define Mike’s development. This professional “internally persuasive” critical discourse about a student’s development is often absent in mainstream conventional schools.⁴²

HOW DEVELOPMENT IS DEFINED BY ITS OBSERVERS

In this section we identify and explain the five most compelling reasons why development cannot be viewed as fully independent of its observer and the act of observation within the fields of psychology and education.

VALUE RELATIVISM

Participants and observers (including current readers of this article) of a transformative event defining individual development may have different values that provide different frames of judgment for evaluating the event, the development (and its direction), and the individual. In the case just described, the value system of the teacher and specialist, as well as the classmate who reported the cheating behavior, all contributed to Mike’s development as having a learning disability.

42. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

Within the value system they share, asking for help during the spelling test was considered cheating, a symptom of moral decay. Development is in part determined by the observer's values. Different observers not only can recognize different patterns of change but can also define different developmental directions. For example, in a traditional classroom a student's unsanctioned asking for help from another student can be viewed by the teacher as cheating while in an innovative classroom the same action can be seen as the student's progress toward learning how to become more active and responsible for his or her own learning.⁴³ As applied to the case under consideration: while in an innovative school Mike might have developed a positive reputation through actively seeking help,⁴⁴ in this class he developed a learning disability.⁴⁵ In this way, the case illustrates that development can only be identified along the trajectory determined and valued by the observer.

DIVERSITY OF CONCERNS DEFINING THE SITUATION

Although the participants are involved in the same transformative event, they may define the situation they are in differently.⁴⁶ In the given case, the teacher Mrs. Smith was probably concerned about following the rules and about teacher accountability — legitimate concerns that are increasingly pressing for teachers in today's schools.⁴⁷ The boy who reported on Mike and Matusov was probably concerned about breaking rules and justice, considering it to be unfair that Mike was getting help on the test while other children could not. Mike's attempt to seek help on the test suggested that he was concerned, at least to some degree, about school success. Matusov was concerned that Mike was left without sufficient guidance in reading and thus had a harmful school experience. Readers may find other and different concerns while reading this article, based on their backgrounds, current historical events, their understanding of education, and so forth. The diversity of the concerns produces a diverse range of options for defining the situation, which in its own turn defines what develops and how it develops in the participants.

REFLEXIVITY

There is a loop of information circulating between the observer and the observed, and both parties are often active in trying to shape this flow of

43. Eugene Matusov, Nancy Bell, and Barbara Rogoff, "Schooling as Cultural Process: Shared Thinking and Guidance by Children from Schools Differing in Collaborative Practices," in *Advances in Child Development and Behavior*, ed. Robert Kail and Hayne W. Reese (New York: Academic Press, 2002).

44. Barbara Rogoff, Carolyn Goodman Turkanis, and Leslee Bartlett, eds., *Learning Together: Children and Adults in a School Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Donald MacLeod, "'Well Done, Mate': Academics Are Fascinated by a School Where Pupils Monitor One Another's Learning," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2005.

45. Varenne and McDermott, *Successful Failure*.

46. James V. Wertsch, Gillian D. McNamee, Joan B. McLane, and Nancy A. Budwig, "The Adult-Child Dyad as a Problem-Solving System," *Child Development* 51 (1980): 1215–1221.

47. Alexander M. Sidorkin, *Learning Relations: Impure Education, Deschooled Schools, and Dialogue with Evil* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); David F. Labaree, "On the Nature of Teaching and Teacher Education: Difficult Practices That Look Easy," *Journal of Teacher Education* 51, no. 3 (2000): 228–233; and Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink, "Sustaining Leadership," *Phi Delta Kappan* 84, no. 9 (2003): 693–700.

information. Teachers' opinions about student potentials guide how they organize instruction and relate to students, who, in turn, arrange their own actions based on what they know about the teachers' expectations.⁴⁸ A mistake made by a "good" student can be viewed as an opportunity for the teacher to provide instruction while the same mistake made by a "poor" student can be viewed as evidence of the student's deficiency.⁴⁹ Mike performs his act of "cheating" with some awareness of the teacher's expectations (he is not able to read, he is likely to need help) as well as his teacher's values (asking for help is cheating).⁵⁰ It is probably not a coincidence but a calculated decision to request help from the outsider, who may not share these expectations or values, or may not know the classroom rules. Mike was punished not only for cheating but also for "deceiving the visitor." His subversive actions based on his understanding of teacher expectations may have resulted in reinforcing teacher expectations (that he is underachieving) and possibly to create or reinforce another expectation (that he is dishonest). In this sense, feedback (often unconscious) resulting from teacher/observer interpretations serves to shape Mike's development. In brief, the observer is always a participant, and development is always an ideology — it incites and shapes actions.⁵¹

SOCIOHISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF FRAMES THROUGH NEGOTIATION

Not only does feedback from the observer influence development of the observed, but both parties also participate in a negotiation of the nature of the development. We refer to "negotiation" as the process of establishing an agreement among involved parties of what are considered valuable and desirable directions for change (that is, a "frame"). Following Etienne Wenger, we urge readers not to assume that this is necessarily a harmonious process — it can be oppressive and even violent.⁵² In the case study examined here, for example, Mike participates in the negotiation that results in his developing a learning disability.⁵³ One possible response to this could be that his family, friends, and community might find the label a challenge and, with Mike's collaboration, spend hours working intensively after school until Mike is reading at grade level. In this case, Mike may be able someday to tell his story of academic success against the odds. Another possibility is that Mike will reject the teacher's notion of literacy and his subsequent failure, instead defining and developing along another, possibly oppositional, trajectory (for example, creating poetry or hip-hop lyrics of protest). However, another possible scenario is that he will become bored and disenfranchised

48. Michael Cole and Sheila Cole, *The Development of Children*, 2d ed. (New York: Scientific American Books, 1993); and Samuel S. Wineburg, "The Self-Fulfillment of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," *Educational Researcher* 16, no. 9 (1987): 28–36.

49. Lemke, *Textual Politics*; and Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

50. Matusov, Bell, and Rogoff, "Schooling as Cultural Process: Shared Thinking and Guidance by Children from Schools Differing in Collaborative Practices."

51. James Paul Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*, 2d ed. (London: Taylor and Francis, 1996).

52. Wenger, *Communities of Practice*.

53. McDermott, "The Acquisition of a Child by a Learning Disability."

in the classroom. As this case suggests, this seems to be the most likely possibility, since his teachers are already starting to negotiate with Mike the development of another social construct, ADHD, that probably will lead to Mike's medication.⁵⁴

It is important to note here that this negotiation is not just an interactive process involving immediate participants but always involves broader historical, cultural, and social frames of reference more or less available to the participants. For example, the historically developed frame of "learning disability" was available to the teacher but probably not to the second-grader, Mike (although it may be available to older children who have learned the norms and terminology of the school culture), in their negotiation of what is going on, but this does not mean that second-graders may remain discursively indifferent and passive in the face of powerful others defining their development and labeling them. However, such historical frames as "possessed by the devil" or "moron" that had been available to previous generations of teachers were not available to this teacher (at least, not for public negotiation) at the end of the twentieth century in the United States.⁵⁵ Similarly, for us, as the authors of this article, and for Matusov, as the professor of the undergraduate class, other frames were historically available, such as "schools aiming at reproduction of the society's status quo," "culture as disability," "social constructionism," and so on.⁵⁶ It is important to analyze social, historical, and political conditions that promote different frames of reference.

DIALOGISM ABOUT EDUCATIONAL VALUES

Educational stakeholders are involved in a dialogue about what constitute educational values and priorities that in their own turn define development. This dialogue may take the form of "cultural wars" about values or the form of collaboration toward building a reform or an innovative school or program.⁵⁷ In the present case, there were, at least, two such dialogues. One dialogue was between Matusov and Mrs. Smith, one of Mike's teachers, about why the teacher gave the spelling test to Mike fully knowing that he could not do it. Their brief exchange involved issues of the teacher and student's safety (and well-being) and whose agent the teacher should be — in other words, whose demands and needs the teacher should prioritize: those of the district that requires mandatory testing or

54. See Hugh Mehan, "Beneath the Skin and Between the Ears: A Case Study of the Politics of Representation," in *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Context*, ed. Seth Chaiklin and Jean Lave (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Hugh Mehan, Alma Hertweck, and J. Lee Meihls, *Handicapping the Handicapped: Decision Making in Students' Educational Careers* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1986).

55. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, rev. ed. (New York: Norton, 1996).

56. For discussions of schools reproducing the status quo, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); and Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). For a discussion of the frame "culture as disability," see Ray P. McDermott and Hervé Varenne, "Culture as Disability," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1995). For a discussion of social constructionism, see Kenneth J. Gergen, *Social Construction in Context* (London: Sage, 2001).

57. Ira Shor, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration 1969–1984* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

those of the student who could be harmed by the test.⁵⁸ This dialogue revealed the difference in the assumed educational priorities between the teacher and the professor of education but did not have any resolution.

The second dialogue was between Matusov and his undergraduate students. This dialogue was about what constitutes a learning disability and where it is rooted: solely in a child or in an activity system that includes the child? It also involved the issue of whether the child should fit the classroom or the classroom should fit each child. The dialogue revealed that there might not necessarily be an either-or solution, but that both possibilities in various combinations should be considered in order to benefit all students in the classroom. In essence, a dialogue about educational values can serve as a part of participants' efforts to transcend their individual circumstances, backgrounds, attitudes, and values for "a new good" (or "an old good") that emerges in the dialogue and practice at large.

IS REDEFINING THE NOTION OF DEVELOPMENT A NEW UTOPIA?

Development defines an observer no less than the observed. In our view, this fact should not paralyze or prevent educators and researchers from using the notion of development. We suggest that the notions of development and progress, as changes proceeding in a desired direction, can be "saved" in the paradigms of postmodernism and social constructivism through revealing and emphasizing their social (and cultural, historical, political, economic, aesthetic, and so forth) constructionist and relational nature in a professional discourse regarding specific cases (similar to one provided in this essay) that addresses the students involved.⁵⁹

We call for new educational and professional discursive practices. It is crucial to acknowledge that both development and progress are notions based on an implicit recognition of what is good. It may be that psychology's attempt to be scientific and value-neutral has led education to emulate this so-called "objective scientific approach," forgetting that in education participants are subjects first and foremost and only peripherally objects (of pedagogical actions). Education deals with prescription, not description, and is primarily concerned with "how people can best be enabled to reach a particular, explicitly described end-state of educational maturity."⁶⁰ The problem with "development" emerges when we try to disguise these values as common sense or universal (natural) norms. School is fundamentally a site for social design, and while these designs may differ widely (from Puritan evangelism to Deweyan democracy), they are strikingly similar in sharing the value-laden and social goal of "designing human kinds."⁶¹

58. David Blacker, "Sphere-Specific Responses in Education: The Case of Proposition 187" (paper presented at the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society, Lexington, Kentucky, October 1998).

59. Matusov, "When Solo Activity Is Not Privileged."

60. Kieran Egan, *Education and Psychology: Plato, Piaget, and Scientific Psychology* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1983), 8.

61. Thomas S. Popkewitz, "Pedagogy as a Design Problem: Governing the Child and Its Technological Sublime" (paper presented at the Twelfth International Conference on Learning, Cordoba, Spain, July 2005).

These implicit values coded as universal norms can result in age discrimination as we declare children to be more or less cognitively and socially mature on a scale designed according to an undefined (adult-centered) perspective.⁶² The blurry notion of “self-esteem” that plays a role in emotional maturity can be interpreted as code for engaging (in other words, following school rules) and can function as a sort of “soft therapeutized language for control and conformity expectations.”⁶³ It is important to make the values behind the desirability explicit. This means shifting from imposing one’s own hidden values, which are perceived and promoted as natural or objective, to inviting collaboration with involved others to develop shared values and shared concerns.⁶⁴ Asking questions such as why are changes in this direction good, good for whom, good at whose and at what expense, what are the limits of these benefits, and so forth in a professional discourse regarding specific cases will allow us, participants in institutionalized education, not only to deconstruct the notions of progress and development but to reconstruct them to make them negotiable, relativist, subjective-objective, sociocultural, critical, and collaborative. Practically, this means organizing forums where development has to be defined by all relevant participants, including teachers, students (even as young as kindergartners), and parents where the participants discuss the listed questions about development and participants’ goals.⁶⁵ These diverse public forums have to be extended to federal political discourse about educational policymaking that goes beyond manufacturing consensus through populist slogans like “no child left behind.”

Sounds like a new utopia? Well, nobody promises success in this endeavor. However, any failure (of collaboration of the involved parties) would be a “new failure” in the sense that it would be a failure to collaborate about developing shared values of social good with others and not a failure to impose one’s values on others as it was/is in traditional definitions of the notions of progress and development. The analysis of the failure to define progress in a given situation can be very informative about the sociocultural and political contexts of each specific situation.⁶⁶ We personally prefer the “new type of failure” because it is more transparent about social relations than the old failure, which is assumed to reside inside the individual rather than in a breakdown of social relations and sociocultural

62. Bev V. Clark, “On Ignoring the Hidden Laughter in the Rose Garden; or How Our Anxiety of Immaturity Enables Us to Belittle Students,” *Feminist Teacher* 8, no. 1 (1984): 32–37.

63. Nancy Lesko, “(E)Strange(d) Relations,” in *Speaking the Unpleasant: The Politics of (Non)Engagement in the Multicultural Education Terrain*, ed. Rudolfo Chávez Chávez and James O’Donnell (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 271.

64. Walkerdine, “Beyond Developmentalism?”

65. Barbara Rogoff, Leslee Bartlett, and Carolyn Goodman Turkanis, “Lessons About Learning as a Community,” in *Learning Together: Children and Adults in a School Community*, ed. Barbara Rogoff, Carolyn Goodman Turkanis, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Kathleen M. Minke and Kellie J. Anderson, “Restructuring Routine Parent-Teacher Conferences: The Family-School Conference Model,” *Elementary School Journal* 104, no. 1 (2003): 49–69.

66. Alan M. Dershowitz, *Shouting Fire: Civil Liberties in a Turbulent Age* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).

practices. This approach makes more evident the socially constructed nature of the concept of development (in contrast to its essentialization).

We think it can be useful to apply these new postmodern notions of progress and development to the practical issues of accountability and sustainability of innovative projects for (re)framing existing/new educational institutions like traditional schools, innovative schools, and afterschool programs.