

specific measurable goal. Teachers are supposed to announce the objective at the start of the lesson, remind students of the objective throughout the lesson, and demonstrate attainment of the objective at the end.

Such a utilitarian view of education has a long history, but in recent years it has overtaken education discourse. It can be attributed to the loss of a literary culture, the introduction of business language and models into education, and the resultant streamlining of language. Schools and industries have become less concerned with the possible meanings of words, their allusions and nuances, than with buzzwords that proclaim to funders and inspectors that the approved things are being done—goal setting, “targeted” professional development, identification of “best practices,” and so forth. Thus, we lose the means to question and criticize the narrow conceptions of success that have so much power in our lives.

Just as we dream of attaining success, we dream of obliterating failure. In *Facing Up to the American Dream* (1995), Jennifer Hochschild writes, “Because success is so central to Americans’ self-image, and because they expect as well as hope to achieve, Americans are not gracious about failure. Others’ failure reminds them that the dream may be just that—a dream, to be distinguished from waking reality.”¹⁵ Many believe that, in order to attain success, they must somehow distance themselves from failure. Some believe that if they forbid failure or erase it from the books, it will disappear. With enough slogans, chants, and pep talks, perhaps, just perhaps, they can drive it away.

Geoffrey Canada, president and CEO of the Harlem Children’s Zone, wrote in an op-ed in 2010: “Visitors to my public charter school often ask how the students feel about the signs on the walls that say: ‘Failure is not an option.’ They are surprised to hear that the signs are really for the staff.” But if failure were not an option, why would one bother saying so? What’s hiding here is the acknowledgment that failure is an ever-present option, one that Canada and

his staff fight every day. The Harlem Children’s Zone aims at breaking the cycle of poverty for Harlem children through a combination of education and social services. Using a “conveyor belt” model, which takes children from infancy up to college, it strives to provide seamless supports so that no child falls through the cracks. Yet failure happens even in the Harlem Children’s Zone. In March 2007, Canada announced that he was phasing out the Promise Academy middle school, which he originally had intended to expand into a high school. All the graduating eighth-graders would have to find a high school elsewhere, and there would be no incoming sixth grade. Why? The preliminary test scores weren’t high enough, and Canada felt he had to change course.¹⁶ It was a wrenching decision for him, and the question remains: If failure is not an option, what does one do with it when it appears?

In many situations, the stakes demand that one try to prevent failure at all costs. This is the case in surgeries and wars, in high-poverty schools at testing time and earthquake rescue missions. Even in safer places such as concert halls, there is tension and expectation when the moment comes. Laxity in those cases will not do. But even there, failure happens, and one must have a way of reckoning with it. One must have a language for it, a kind of dignity around it. If all one hears about is success, then those who fail are left stumbling and bewildered, and the audience, equally confused, points fingers and makes noises of blame.

If we try to exclude failure, we deny much of existence: we disregard wars, famines, and other disasters; we wish away low test scores, college rejections, romantic rejections, divorce, poverty, addiction, death, injustice, car accidents, lost jobs, misspelled words, stutters, misunderstandings, and our daily mistakes and slippages. Those who take on the slogan “failure is not an option” wittingly or unwittingly paint over their lives and the lives of others, and the result is not only false but flat. Such a paint job can’t render anything close to a