Sociological and anthropological literature has examined how contemporary western society has become a “risk society.” *Education and the Risk Society* is the first volume to explore this seminal concept through the lens of education. Drawing on a theoretical literature that has great potential as a lens to view changes in neoliberal discourses of global capitalism from both critical and generative perspectives, *Education and the Risk Society* presents situated, empirical studies investigating an uncertain world as people practice it on the ground, through language and activity, within educational settings.

Cover image: *Steve Bialostok doing fieldwork in Afghanistan.*
Education and the Risk Society
Series Editors:

Michael A. Peters
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

Scope:

Contexts of Education is a new series of handbooks that embraces both a creative approach to educational issues focused on context and a new publishing credo.

All educational concepts and issues have a home and belong to a context. This is the starting premise for this new series. One of the big intellectual breakthroughs of post-war science and philosophy was to emphasise the theory-ladenness of observations and facts—facts and observations cannot be established independent of a theoretical context. In other words, facts and observations are radically context-dependent. We cannot just see what we like or choose to see. In the same way, scholars are argue that concepts and constructs also are relative to a context, whether this be a theory, schema, framework, perspective or network of beliefs. Background knowledge always intrudes; it is there, difficult to articulate, tacit and operates to shape and help form our perceptions. This is the central driving insight of a generation of thinkers from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper to Thomas Kuhn and Jürgen Habermas. Increasingly, in social philosophy, hermeneutics, and literary criticism textualism has given way to contextualism, paving the way for the introduction of the notions of ‘frameworks’, ‘paradigms’ and ‘networks’—concepts that emphasize a new ecology of thought.

This new series is predicated upon this insight and movement. It emphasises the importance of context in the establishment of educational facts and observations and the framing of educational hypotheses and theories. It also emphasises the relation between text and context, the discursive and the institution, the local and the global. Accordingly, it emphasizes the significance of contexts at all levels of inquiry: scientific contexts; theoretical contexts; political, social and economic contexts; local and global contexts; contexts for learning and teaching; and, cultural and interdisciplinary contexts.

Contexts of Education, as handbooks, are conceived as reference texts that also can serve as texts.
Education and the Risk Society

*Theories, Discourse and Risk Identities in Education Contexts*

Edited by

Steven Bialostok  
*University of Wyoming College, Laramie, USA*

Robert L. Whitman  
*Bunker Hill Community College, Boston, Massachusetts, USA*

William S. Bradley  
*Ryukoku University, Otsu-shi, Shiga-ken, Japan*
DEDICATION

To Joe and Ethan, my two greatest risks.
S.B.
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Marta Albert teaches in the Literacy Education Dept of SUNY Potsdam in upstate New York, with a focus on teaching writing; multimodal literacy learning and pedagogy; and sociocultural studies of literacy in families, schools, and community-based organizations. Her research interests focus on rural youth development, literacy studies, and educational policy, especially in relation to the experiences of youth in vocational education programs. For many years, she worked in a rural, school dropout-prevention project and administered a number of “school to work” projects aimed at enhancing the participation of young women in nontraditional trades and technology careers.

Steven Bialostok, an associate professor at the University of Wyoming College of Education, works as an educational and linguistic anthropology. He has published on metaphor theory and cultural models, classroom discourse and new capitalism, as well as on the subject of risk theory. Steve is currently doing “Funds of Knowledge” research on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming.

Marnie Bjornson has done research into immigration, citizenship and language testing in the Netherlands. She is currently completing her degree in linguistic anthropology at the University of Toronto.

William S. Bradley is a Professor in the Faculty of Intercultural Communication at Ryukoku University in Otsu, Shiga, Japan. He served as the Dean of the International Center from 2007–2009. He teaches courses in social theory, language, education, anthropology, and cultural studies. His research interests include the internationalization of Japanese higher, education policy, risk, and multiculturalism. He currently is one of the group leaders of a multiyear Japanese government funded research institute at Ryukoku, the Afrasian Centre, investigating the interrelations between the political economy and multicultural society.

Michelle Buchanan is a Professor of Early Childhood/Early Childhood Special Education at the University of Wyoming. She has more than 30 years of experience in these fields, and her research and teaching interests include the assessment of developmental characteristics of young children, including young exceptional children, building state early childhood readiness systems and equity, social justice and inclusion in early childhood education. Her articles have been published in, among others, Early Childhood Research to Practice, International Journal of Disability, Development and Education and the American Journal of Play.

Elsa Davidson is an assistant professor of cultural anthropology at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey. Her research investigates dynamics
CONTRIBUTORS


Deborah Golden was born in South Africa, grew up in London and now lives and works in Israel. She is a social anthropologist by training and Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Education, University of Haifa, where she teaches in the Program for Education, Culture and Society, and chairs the Multidisciplinary Program for Early Childhood Education and Development. Her research consists of an ongoing inquiry into the quest to nurture a deep sense of local belonging among new members of society, namely immigrants and children. She is also currently working on a cross-cultural study of mothering and education among Jewish, Palestinian and Russian mothers in Israel; she is also writing a book on an anthropological perspective on early education.

Shirley Brice Heath, Margery Bailey Professor of English and Dramatic Literature and Professor of Linguistics and Anthropology, Emerita, Stanford University, has long been a risk taker. From her early study of Castilian language policy in Mexico to her ongoing partnering research with young people to understand risk-taking in social entrepreneurship, she has worked to understand how the appeal of risk, the unknown, and even the impossible motivates learning and inspires creativity among young people. As a linguistic anthropologist, she sees language and other structured symbol systems at the center of all such creativity. Once caught in the mysteries of discovery and possible explanation, Heath sticks with groups and contexts. Her classic *Ways with Words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* (1983/1996) embraces a decade of language socialization practices in manufacturing communities of the southeastern United States. When the manufacturing economy collapsed, she followed 300 working class families, black and white, through the next three decades as they scattered to new jobs, schools, neighborhoods, types of family structuring, and patterns of using language in work and play. *Words at work and play: Three decades in family and community life* (2012) tells of the transformations and transitions that resulted.

Deborah Freedman Lustig is a Research Associate at the Institute for the Study of Societal Issues (ISSI), UC Berkeley. Lustig earned her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Michigan. Her research has focused on gender, education, and youth violence in the United States and Kenya, where she was a Fulbright Senior Scholar in 2004–5. Her research on teenage mothers has been published in the journals *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* and *Childhood and in Childhood, Youth, and Social Work in Transformation: Implications for Policy and Practice* (Columbia University Press, 2009). From 2006–2011 Lustig coordinated the research and training activities of the Center on Culture, Immigration, and Youth Violence Prevention, a project of ISSI.
Peter William Moran is an associate professor in Elementary Education and Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wyoming. He teaches undergraduate courses in social studies methods and art methods, and graduate courses in curriculum, policy studies, and history of education. Dr. Moran’s research focuses on the intersection of public policy and education, and the history of school integration in America.

Susanne Miskimmin is a Ph.D. candidate (A.B.D.) and occasional lecturer in the department of Anthropology at the University of Toronto. Her dissertation research concerns First Nations people living in Toronto and Aboriginal Head Start, a preschool program sponsored by Health Canada. She has taught courses on Language and Power, Language and Gender, and First Nations Ethnography at both the U of T and the University of Western Ontario. Earlier this year, Susanne was appointed Correspondence and Special Projects Officer at the Office of the President, University of Toronto.

Majia Holmer Nadesan is a professor of communication studies at ASU’s west campus. She has published three books, all of which explore the politics of life (biopolitics) and economics. She recently completed works on financial capitalism and structural adjustment in the US and is currently working on a project addressing the disposability of life under the evolving neofeudal regime.

Robert L. Whitman is an Associate Professor in the English department at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, MA. He is coordinator of developmental Reading and Writing Programs and teaches interdisciplinary freshman seminars on food, culture, and sustainability. His publication interests center on issues of risk, economics, and education. Dr. Whitman also runs a higher education consulting business concentrating on institutional evaluation, curriculum development, and professional development.
FOREWORD

Michael A. Peters

If anything, the original thesis concerning the “risk society” articulated by Ulrich Beck (1992) has taken on a new imperative in the twenty-first century, especially in relation to questions of security at all levels—national, personal and institutional—and in relation to educational futures as policies of privatization and student debt loadings rapidly increase. Beck was the first to put the notion of risk on the sociological agenda focusing on environmental, health and personal risk. The transition for Beck is not from “industrial society” to “post-industrial” or “post-modern society” but to “risk society” where the driving logic is no longer class politics as an organising principle, but rather socially manufactured risk and risk management. No longer are inequalities of wealth and income paramount (although such inequalities remain), the chief problems are now environmental hazards, which cut across traditional inequalities. As he explains: “Risk may be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself” (Beck, 1992: 21). He elaborates: “In contrast to all earlier epochs (including industrial society), the risk society is characterized essentially by a lack: the impossibility of an external attribution of hazards. In other words, risks depend on decisions, they are industrially produced and in this sense politically reflexive” (Beck, 1992: 183). In “risk society” Beck argues societal courses of action or policies based on calculated risk have been deliberately taken based on the assumption and paradigm of our technological mastery over nature. Modernity is a double-edged process for while it has greatly increased individual choice (and freedom) it has done so at a cost which points not only to the “globalisation of risk” (such as nuclear war or changes in the international division of labour) but also in terms of “institutionalised risk environments,” that is, new risks that arise from the nature of modern social organizations.

In the field education, there has been also some talk of “risk.” Arguably, notions of “at risk youth” and “nation at risk” predate uses of the term by Beck. “Nation at Risk” was the title that the US National Commission on Excellence in Education set up by the Secretary for Education, Mr T. H. Bell, under the chairmanship of David Pierpont Gardner in 1981. The Commission choose to point to a new “Imperative for Educational Reform” (its subtitle). The risk is conceived as a national one, calculated against the future of America’s pre-eminence as a world leader both economically and technologically. It is a multi-natured risk that places an onerous burden on education as the basis for the nation’s future economic and technological competitiveness. Education is forced to carry the burden of the nation’s future competitiveness.
The report focuses on the competitive element comparing the US in terms of efficiency to Japan, South Korea and Germany in producing capital goods. The risk is perceived as being not only tied to loss of position in the production of strategic goods but also the “redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe” that this signifies. The report goes on to emphasise an early view of the knowledge economy and the crucial role of education within it, stressing concepts of “excellence” and the “learning society”.

Fifteen years later in 1998 the same rhetoric is revived in a document entitled *A Nation Still at Risk: An Education Manifesto* (http://edreform.com/pubs/manifest.htm) signed by Jeanne Allen (President of The Center for Education Reform) and thirty-five prominent Americans, including school superintendents, US Education Department officials, businessmen, members from State House representatives, education commissioners, charter schools project managers, university staff, researchers and policy analysts from think-tanks (like Diane Ravitch from the Brookings Institute), and leaders of various project supporting “standards” and “excellence” in education.

The risk posed to “tomorrow’s well-being” by “educational mediocrity” is now defined as “economic decline” and “technological inferiority.” The Report reads: “Large numbers of students remain at risk. Intellectually and morally, America’s educational system is failing too many people”. The Report suggests the Excellence Commission had the right diagnosis but was naïve as to the cure. “The real issue is power,” the Report advises and the way the “power-brokers” and “bureaucrats” hold on to power. It goes on to state: “It should now be clear to all that the era of the big-government monopoly of public education needs to end…” The nature of the risk is one spread by a failed public system of education that penalises “children of the poor and minorities.” The guiding principles and strategies for changes are clear: public education must be deregulated; it must staffed and delivered in new ways; “a vast transfer of power is needed from producers to consumers”; “There must be an end to paternalism; the one-size-fits-all structure; and the condescending, government-knows-best attitude. Every family must have the opportunity to choose where its children go to school”; but in order to exercise their power wisely “education’s consumers must be well-informed about school quality.” The main renewal strategies mentioned are: “standards, assessments and accountability” on the one hand, and “pluralism, competition and choice”, on the other (italics in original).

The document proceeds to outline the risk management regime for the US education systems in terms of “ten break-through changes for the 21st century” including the now familiar, “national academic standards”, “standards-based assessment” and “tough accountability systems,” alongside “school choice”, charter schools, deregulated teacher force, differential teacher pay systems, and “essential academic skills.” Policy observers and practitioners in the United Kingdom will recognise much of the rhetoric and the national risk management
strategy as that of the Blair administration’s approach to education policy in its second term and as reflecting more generally the change of ethos in public service philosophy and provision.

In a clear sense the same neoliberal ideology that posed risk as a crisis that can only be managed through forms of privatization is evident in Obama’s rhetoric today. While he himself is not a neoliberal his policies as they have been formulated and implemented by the Secretary of Education, Arnie Duncan, are neoliberal to the core.

In this new and important collection on risk and education entitled *Education and the Risk Society: theories, Discourse and Risk Identities in Education Contexts* the editors Steven Bialostok and Robert Whitman have assembled fourteen original chapters, including their own excellent introduction, that investigate the concept of risk in relation to children, “delinquents”, working class Latino youth, youth and young people, scientific management, teaching, and nursing in a variety of national and regional contexts: Israel, Canada, the Netherlands, Japan, and Silicon Valley. The result is a comprehensive theoretical analysis and well contextualized set of findings that demonstrate the ubiquity of the concept, its different theatres of application, and a theoretical discourse that challenges global capitalism. This is an important book that defines the risk society for education and provides a theoretical and comparative context for viewing its consequences. The editors and contributors are to be congratulated on an excellent contribution to the literature.

Michael A. Peters
University of Waikato, New Zealand
This collection of essays explores the concept of risk in both theory and practice as it is actualized in and through the broad lens of education. Our main argument holds that analyzing risks through multiple perspectives on risk itself and on education is crucial for a rich elucidation of the enactment of risk. The topic of risk has gained much prominence in contemporary social science theory, particularly within European sociology. While varying epistemological stances interpret and position conceptions of risk theory quite differently—as will be described later in this chapter—there is no question that the multifaceted nature of risk has mobilized a set of linguistic repertoires, everyday understandings, and government policies which have altered the patterns of social relationships and provided a powerful standpoint from which to examine contemporary societal change. But even though risk-talk saturates the field of education, ironically almost none of the literature has been theorized within any contemporary theoretical tradition of risk. Our book remedies this omission with a series of chapters which address a number of educational topics through one of several ways in which the phenomenon of risk is theorized within the social science literature.

The lexical items of risk and education, although not homogenous, when used conjointly nearly always index two traditions related to uncertainty. One representation is risk and adventure or pleasure, where risk-taking acts as a mark of an ambitious student willing to try something new and exciting (usually framed as “kids need the freedom to explore as part of growing up”). In the same vein as taking ‘good risks’ in order to make an economic profit, classroom teachers may encourage the student to willingly take risks in order to ‘profit’ in learning—to test an emerging, vague, and ambiguous learning hypothesis. Risk is required in order to make approximations to acquire new skills, knowledge, and concepts. This education literature, usually associated with schools and classroom learning, couples risk-taking with trust and non-threatening environments (see Cambourne, 1999; 2000). Occasionally, educational literature links such risk-taking with so-called “brain research” (e.g S. Jensen, 1998). Such positive representation of voluntary risk-taking—which involves coping with uncertainty and possible loss but expecting a
positive outcome—is also described in a variety of domains outside of schooling (see Lupton, 1999; Lupton and Tulock, 2002; Lyng, 1990; Simon, 2002).

In spite of the ‘risk-taking is good for you’ and ‘a risk worth taking’ messages in educational discourse, a second tradition links risk and education with undesirable outcomes. This tradition derives from living in a society where virtually every day involves acting, doing, behaving and planning in terms of avoiding something undesirable that might happen. While risk has different shades of meanings, from the way that it is so clearly and frequently linked with loss, injury and disadvantage (and the disadvantaged), the more frequent public interpretation of the noun and verb “risk” is synonymous with some potential form of negative outcome, danger or peril (see Hamilton, Adolphs, & Nerlich, 2007) and heavily medical (Hardy and Colombini, 2011).

Therefore, the more common association with risk and education emphasizes marginalized individuals and social groups such as those associated with social, medical, and problems such as “at-risk” youth. At-risk youth are considered vulnerable to future dependency, a condition believed avoidable or at least mitigatable through early intervention and risk management. Related to this concern is the national apprehension and fear about the future leadership role of the United States in a highly competitive world market. Underlying most education reform efforts in the United States are either direct or indirect references to risk—specifically claims of dropping educational standards and mediocre educational performance which compromise America’s pre-eminence in the world and its ability to compete technologically and economically. Fifteen years after A Nation At Risk—a publication applauded by policymakers who embraced many of its recommendations—the authors of A Nation Still At Risk wrote: “The risk posed to tomorrow’s well-being by the sea of educational mediocrity that still engulfs us is acute… Large numbers of students remain at risk.”

Ulrich Beck famously coined the term “risk society” to suggest that in modernity—where people must plan their own life trajectories—if risk itself is not objectively omnipresent then the perception of risk intruding upon our lives (and seemingly threatening the things that we value) nonetheless necessitates prophylactic action. Beck (1992) defined risk as “a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself” (p. 21). For Beck, “industrial society” did not transition to a “post-industrial society” but to a society organized around socially manufactured risks and their management instead of class politics. In a world where uncertainty and harm are governed through risk assessment and risk management, it is no surprise that so many educational experts similarly align loss, injury, and disadvantage with educational management strategies and discourses of “standards,” “assessment,” “standards-based-assessment,” “accountability,” and “choice.” Public programs such as Head Start (discussed later in this chapter), fashioned upon the perception of a perilous future, attempt to assess and manage negative risks to children and society, as do private intervention programs such as Boys and Girls Clubs and structured outdoor wilderness programs.
Risk, then, is defined as systematic ways of dealing with the hazards and/or insecurities introduced by modernization (Beck, 1992). Using our examples, laws that govern driving are intended to reduce the risk of accident. Electrical appliances are grounded to safeguard from electric shock; buildings offer emergency exits; automobiles include seatbelts, along with types of glass, tires, and brakes designed to keep us safe in case of an accident. Automobile insurance companies access credit card companies to identify bad risks. Software prevents online predators and identity theft. Automobile, homeowners, medical, and life insurance exist because we might need them. Schools install surveillance systems as a method of crime prevention. Since not all risks can be prevented, depending upon our options and beliefs, we take steps to soften their blow: Washing fruits and vegetables helps eliminate pesticides; eating “organically” offers another solution to tainted food. Death can’t be averted, but exercise and proper diet might forestall it; while monitoring family health history and “risk factors” might also help. There are also the risks associated with “edgework”, a term that Lyng (1990) borrowed from Hunter S. Thompson’s writings, applying it to voluntarily participating in dangerous and thrill seeking activities such as sky diving, extreme skiing, the use of recreational drugs, fast driving, recreational sex, or day trading.

Government and quasi-public institutions can also play a role. Indeed, if modernity transforms us into a “do-it-yourself biography” (Beck, 1992), or if “Taking charge of one’s life involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open possibilities contemplat[ing] novel courses of action” (Giddens, 1991, p. 73), then the everyday real-world management of risk is mediated by institutional risk discourses which offer a variety of reasons for action. Former President George W. Bush’s Department of Homeland Security utilized a color-coded “National Terrorism Advisory System” to warn Americans of the level of terrorist threat. The American Cancer Society publishes lists of “known and probable human carcinogens” as well as “causes, risk factors and prevention topics” for a frightening disease. The American Diabetes Association posts on its website “Who is at Greater Risk for Type2 Diabetes?” The National Institute on Drug Abuse lists “risk factors” in order to help prevent drug abuse among children and adolescents. The United States invaded Iraq in 2003 due to the possibility (risk) that Saddam Hussein would deploy “weapons of mass destruction.” In a press briefing on February 12, 2002, then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, addressing the absence of evidence linking Iraq with a supply of WMD, speculated:

As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” (http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=2636)

Rumsfeld’s concern for the “unknown unknowns” demonstrates how the “war on terrorism” expanded and amplified the rhetoric of risk, but worst-case scenarios that invoke risk have been deployed in a number of arenas, including concerns over climate change and species (human and other) survival and—as we describe
below—the institution of schooling. Educators have never been particularly sheepish about employing psychologists, counselors, social workers, special educators, and speech and language specialists to assess children and raise red flags for the possible risks and short- and long-term consequences of developmental delays and deficits, autism, hyperactivity, depression, learning disabilities, and violent behavior. As Nadesan (2009) points out, in the wake of the 2007 shootings on the campus of Virginia Tech, “psychiatric authorities are under increased public scrutiny for their role in protecting public safety through the identification and monitoring of risky individuals” (p. 391).

What should be evident is that Western society’s obsession with safety has led to the emergence of an influential cottage industry of risk experts—risk analysts, risk assessors, disaster preparedness experts, mathematicians, statisticians, actuaries—who have produced a plethora of theoretical work based upon universal generalizations of low-probability and high-consequence occurrences in order to identify, assess, and eliminate or reduce the possibility of loss, disaster, or misfortune. Beck (1997) claims that “risks deepen the dependency on experts” (p. 123). Risk experts range from those who advise on personal safety (“safer sex” practices), to school safety consultants, to self-proclaimed “experts” on Islam who have “cultivated a wide-ranging conspiracy theory that totalitarian Islamic radicals are bent on infiltrating America, displacing the Constitution, and subverting Western-style democracy in the U.S. and around the globe” (Possner, 2011). Professionally evaluating risk and advising on strategies for risk reduction is a defining characteristic of modern life.

Since the English translation of Ulrich Beck’s *The Risk Society* appeared in 1992, scholars from a variety of disciplines have critically explored the concept of risk. What all of these studies have in common is their argument for risk as a fundamental factor in the way people, groups, institutions, and cultures make decisions about how to run their lives. The authors in this volume examine the ways in which people involved with youth and education give meaning to and deal with risk. Even though each author has provided a literature that grounds their stories, the remainder of this chapter will provide a historical accounting of risk, followed by summaries of the major social and cultural approaches to risk. We conclude this chapter with a historical and social accounting of risk and education which, admittedly, draws broadly—although not entirely and not explicitly—upon a governmentality perspective.

**RISK IN HISTORY**

The story of risk has several historical trajectories, from ancient games of chance based on throwing dice to what later evolved into probability theory. Increasing risk awareness eventually led to the need to control it and to possibilities for scientific risk assessment, and the breakthrough of the idea of mathematical risk calculus can be traced to the early modern period in history (1600–1750).

But ancient cultures did not have a concept of risk. They didn’t need one. Life was undoubtedly hazardous and dangerous, but those terms and concepts must be
distinguished from risk. There was no notion of risk (Giddens, 1998). What modern societies refer to as risk, societies such as Rome and China called luck, magic, fortune, or the will of the gods. In fact, in antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages, the words fate (fatum) and fortune (fortuna) were used indiscriminately (Gregersen, 2003). Prior to the logic of risk, the gods were thought to determine the potentially disastrous ends. But emerging from the Italian Renaissance, risk defied God. Risk, a term derived from the French “risqué” which in turn derived from early Italian meaning “to dare,” suggests that risk was considered a choice rather than fate (Bernstein, 1998). Risk was an act of boldness. For Christians, fate was understood in Augustinian terms as simply the rational order that God had created. Fortuna was understood as divinely ordered fate. There was no chance in God’s world but what “could only be accorded an epistemological status, since future contingencies are not foreseeable by finite agents” (Gregersen, 2003, p. 362).

The term was most likely used among the new merchant class in connection with commercial navigation in the 16th or 17th century. “At the time, risk designated the possibility of an objective danger, an act of God, a force majeure, a tempest or other peril of the sea that could not be imputed to wrongful conduct” (Ewald, 1993, p. 226). This idea of risk excluded human fault and responsibility. “Risk was perceived to be a natural event, such as a storm, flood or epidemic rather than a human made one” (Lupton, 1999, p. 5). Humans could do little to reduce the impact of a disaster. They could only estimate the likelihood that a catastrophe might occur.

Even then, risk was connected to what would become capitalism, or at least to capitalism’s early heroes. Maritime insurance was an early instance of planned risk control. Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch explorers—as they prepared for voyages across the oceans for what became a violent and bloody accumulation of capital—assessed the hazards of travel to future possibilities, and protected themselves against possible losses. Explorers risked their ships (and fortunes) in unpredictable adventures. What were the possibilities for a shipwreck when sailing into uncharted waters? Traders pooled their resources in order to manage the very real risk of losing one or more ships.

There was potential for great profit for merchants and for the monarchies which backed them. But this also required taking risks. Even then, speculation was an intrinsic part of what would become capitalism. Like today, the capitalist had to risk money in the hope of making more. Reducing risk or hedging against it became an objective for merchants. Monarchs in Spain, Portugal, England, and France granted charters which gave the merchants in a company monopolies on trade for a given number of years—together with strong legal powers to enforce order in distant places while carrying out its business. These monopolies effectively decreased risk for merchants. Still, though, there remained considerable risk for merchants to hedge against. Such voyages tied up large sums of money for long periods before any profit could be realized, in the capital cost of ships and the expense of their crews on journeys lasting months and sometimes years. A large number of speculators needed to be persuaded to share the risk. The resulting
organization was the joint-stock company, in which investors contributed variable sums of money to fund the venture. In doing so they became joint holders of the trading stock of the company, with a right to share in any profits in proportion to the size of their holding.

Risk, then, went hand in hand with the development of modern capitalism. But it was the creation of an insurance society that became an index of the 17th and 18th century transition into modernity (Ewald, 1986). While definitions of “modernity” abound, from Marx to Durkheim, Giddens (1991) refers to:

the institutions and modes of behaviour established first of all in post-feudal Europe, but which in the twentieth century increasingly have become world-historical in their impact. ‘Modernity’ can be understood as roughly equivalent to ‘the industrialized world’, so long as it be recognized that industrialism is not its only institutional dimension. I take industrialism to refer to the social relations implied in the widespread use of material power and machinery in production processes. As such, it is one institutional axis of modernity. A second dimension is capitalism, where this term means a system of commodity production involving both competitive product markets and the commodification of labour power. Each of these can be distinguished analytically from the institutions of surveillance, the basis of the massive increase in organizational power associated with the emergence of modern social life. Surveillance refers to the supervisory control of subject populations, whether this control takes the form of ‘visible’ supervision in Foucault’s sense, or the use of information to coordinate social activities. (p. 14–15)

Modernity depends upon the notion that emerged from the 17th century Enlightenment that the key to human wisdom, progress, and the social world is objective knowledge of the world through scientific exploration and rational thinking. It assumes that the social and natural world follow laws that can be measured, calculated, and predicted (Lupton, 1999, p. 6). By the mid-1700’s, people used insurance discussions as a means to understand risk (Sennett, 1998). Lloyds of London began as a coffeehouse where strangers talked and “exchanged information about shipping and other risky ventures, some of these talkers making investment decisions based on what they learned” (p. 81).

It was Swiss mathematician Jacob Bernoulli in the 17th century who would extend the use of probability beyond games of chance to methods demanding a sufficient amount of real-life information to compute a probability about the future. Bernoulli’s law of large numbers ultimately led to the creation of the modern protocols for testing new drugs, opinion polling, and stock market decisions. This surge of mathematical theory in the 17th and 18th century most likely sprang from economic needs, specifically the rise of capitalism. The new mercantile class required improved methods of business calculations “for the greater economic security in the form of insurance” (Covello & Mumpower, 1985, p. 36). Probability began to apply to the human condition, with individuals using mathematical theories of probability to examine life expectancies. In 1756,
Richard Price’s published the first edition of “Observations on Reversionary Payments” (Outreville, 1998). This was used for the first time by the newly created Society for Equitable Assurance for Lives and Survivorships. By the middle of the nineteenth century, mathematical techniques of life insurance and annuities had grown quite sophisticated. The first Actuarial Society was created in London in 1848, followed by France in 1890 and Switzerland in 1906 (Outreville, 1998).

With fire insurance in its infancy in the United States, catastrophic fires in Boston in 1630 and later in Philadelphia in 1739 eventually created an awareness for the need for some form of protection. There were various attempts to create types of insurance, including Benjamin Franklin’s 1752 efforts. Not until 1770 was there an attempt to organize a fire insurance company in New York City. The first stock insurance was chartered in 1792 as the Insurance Company of North America. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, 30 charters for insurance companies for mostly marine and fire had been granted and incorporated throughout the United States. At the beginning of the 19th century, train and steamboat accidents became common which opened a new field of activities for insurance companies. Casualty insurance developed during the nineteenth century. “Until the 1850s no company would underwrite a policy covering windstorm or theft. By the end of the century specialized insurance business for industrial and commercial risks had been established” (Outreville, 1998, p. 21). In 1880, The Employer Liability Assurance Corporation was created in England to cover the civil responsibility of employers, and in 1889, The Mercantile Accident Insurance Company of Glasgow issued the first theft insurance contract (Outreville, 1998). Railways and other mechanically driven machinery increased body injury and loss of property. The first automobile insurance policy was written in 1888 “as an extension of the forms used for the protection of owners of horse drawn carriages” (Outreville, 1998, p. 21). By the end of the century, automobile insurance began its expansive and rapid history of growth. Risk thinking “brought the future into the present and made it calculable” (Rose, 1999, p. 247). Once brought into the present, the potential problem can be acted upon in order to control the potential future.

Twentieth century’s capitalism’s emphasized individual choice and personal responsibility, and the collectivization of risk was displaced by an aggregated model that emphasized individuals rather than collective bodies taking responsibility over the personal risks of their lives (Simon, 2002). The name change of the 1996 welfare reform in the United States – from “Aid to Families With Dependent Children” to “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act” illustrates the ideological shift. With personal assumption of risk would come, it was believed, a greater self-consciousness of risk taking, “more rewards, and more responsibility” (Simon, 2002, p. 178). While legal decisions over the years—judges, juries, appellate courts recognizing that accidents were endemic to great industrial enterprises—aggregated aspects of insurance (e.g., unemployment protection), the individualizing principle, co-occurring with the principles of choice and responsibility, have remained central to risk.

If risk is ubiquitous to our modern lives, then it follows that risk is ubiquitous to our major institutions, including education, and that is the central focus of this
book. While readers will be familiar with terms such as the “at-risk” child and many will know the term risk-taking as a current buzz word in education, this book is about much more than those explicit places in the system where the metaphor is clearly at work. The volume explores the concept of risk in theory and practice as it is actualized on the ground in and through educational settings where risk is invoked both explicitly and implicitly as a central motif in the organization of lived experience. We explore the intersection of theoretical perspectives of risk with grounded, situated ethnographic description, and with close attention to written and oral discursive forms using methods drawn from critical discourse analysis and linguistic anthropology.

THEORIES OF RISK

Recognizing that various readers will come to this text with different degrees of familiarity with risk theory, what follows are overviews of three theoretical perspectives on risk within the social science literature and hope the summaries provide a reasonable introduction to neophytes who can later explore the references. For those already familiar with these theories, the section risk and education provides an empirical grounding in educational contexts and histories and offers connections to the risk literature.

Risk and Reflexive Modernization

While there have been a several names closely associated with the sociology of risk and reflexive modernization, Ulrich Beck’s writings about risk and society (Beck 1992, 1999, 2000; 2002) are most prominent and seminal to the sociology of risk theory. Therefore, it is largely Beck’s four major propositions that we will summarize here: 1) that a new modernity is emerging characterized by global competition and manufactured or perceived risks; 2) that a class society gives way to a risk society; 3) that intense processes of individuation put an end to traditional social ties and communities; 4) that the risk society pushes us beyond reflection and towards “self-confrontation” (self-reflexivity) of risk. We shall now detail these propositions.

Proposition 1: A new modernity is emerging characterized by global competition and manufactured or perceived risks. Beck argued that the old system of industrial society is breaking down and a second modernity has emerged, one with an entirely new set of emerging questions regarding the fundamental premises of the state. In contrast to traditional societies where people responded to received events, usually dangerous ones, this second modernity is a place where society’s attitude toward the world is one where the world itself is open to human intervention; it is a society of risks and uncertainties of our own making, that Beck refers to as “manufactured risks.”

This new society—which Giddens (1998) refers to as “post-traditional”—is one shaped by the intensification of capitalism under globalization and neoliberalism
driven by competition, entrepreneurship, and the search for new markets. All of
this orients us to the future. However, this also produces new manufactured risks—
risks created by the very progression of human development—which dominate our
thinking as well as our political agendas. In education, we see the emergence of a
rationality of the market over other rationalities, intensification of standards,
intensified control of teacher and student work, and students educated to stage their
own uncertain futures and pro-actively manage potential risks. In this post-
traditional world students, teachers, administrators, parents, and a host of “experts”
and expert systems are involved in managing risk and bringing emergent risks into
reality.

Proposition 2: A class society gives way to a risk society. The risk society has
replaced old social divisions of class and gender so that the negative consequences
of modernity are no longer inflicted on specific groups. This second modernity
therefore signals a transition from a class society to a risk society. Class societies
are scarcity societies that are concerned with socially distributed wealth. Risk
societies occur under uncertainty and the perception of danger, which are
themselves associated with modernization. While the effects of modernization
certainly depend on the inequality of class position, there is now a different logic.
Negative consequences affect everyone. Risk has an equalizing effect in that it
affects all individuals (as individuals), irrespective of their social and economic
circumstances. In other words, risk has spread to the middle and upper classes. The
current ability for the wealthy to withdraw into safe enclaves will no longer sustain
them against the really big risks. The effects of smog, as Beck points out, are
democratic, even for those who produce it. Ultimately in the risk society, central
concerns become not the reduction and prevention of inequality and poverty but
the knowledge of risk and the ability to safeguard oneself against it (Beck, 1992).

Proposition 3: Intense processes of individuation put an end to traditional social
ties and communities.

The globalization of modernization leads towards societal “individualization.”
In this second modernity, under greater public scrutiny and dialogue, tradition’s
truth-telling status is changed. Customs and rituals are questioned. The stability of
tradition—tight social communities and family life—plays less and less of a
significant role. There is now a loss of traditional securities such as faith, norms,
and values that used to guide behavior. Personhood and identity changes from a
collective sense governed by a received moral order and acquiescing to a given
destiny, to a modern sense of individuality. As people constitute themselves as
individuals, they are now free(er) from class commitment and communal ties to
design themselves, and to plan and stage their own biographies and chart their own
course through a highly complex and often scary world.

This does not mean that traditional institutions completely disappear. Rather,
hospitals, government, churches, social welfare systems, and schools, for example,
remain but they are restructured as quasi-markets where people increasingly
interact with traditional institutions as consumers. Doctors and nurses in hospitals become service providers under managed health care structures and patients are re-named “clients.” In education, public schools are increasingly privatized and/or marketized (for example, fast-food companies taking over food services in American universities), students are increasingly evaluated by for-profit testing companies, and standards are intensified under the rationale that students will need to grow up to compete in a global workplace.

Proposition 4: The risk society pushes us beyond reflection and towards the “self-confrontation” (self-reflexivity) of risk.

An unintentional side effect of the risk society is an era of “reflexive modernization.” Beck describes it as thus:

The combination of reflex and reflections which, as long as the catastrophe itself fails to materialize, can set industrial modernity on the path to self-criticism and self-transformation. Reflexive modernization contains both elements: the reflex-like threat to industrial society’s own foundations through a successful further modernization which is blind to dangers, and the growth of awareness, the reflection on this situation (Beck, 1996, p. 34, original emphasis).

Reflexive modernization is self-confrontation with the effects of the risk society that cannot be dealt with in the system of industrial society. A reflexively modern society is one where individuals are forced to engage as flexible producers and specialized consumers but must also self-critically confront, assess, and radically critique the consequences of a society where a sense of definite solutions has been lost. This self-confrontation is an inevitable part of modern life. In this life, agency has been freed from structure and a new reflexive space has opened up. But as the chapters in this book will clearly demonstrate, reflexivity is always strongly context-bound – what it means for a person within a particular discourse community to walk, talk, dress, move, and think reflexively is always bounded by a particular habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). That habitus is often enacted in and through educational contexts.

Risk and Governmentality

The four propositions of the risk society present one sweeping historical sociology and an all-encompassing existential notion of risk consciousness as a part of the consequences of the transition to modernity. Governmentalists—a term rooted in Foucault’s famous lectures on governmentality in 1978 (“Securite, territoire, et population”) and 1979 “La Naissance de la biopolitique”—approach risk with fundamentally different assumptions. The term governmentality is rightly identified by scholars as key (Besley and Peters, 2006; Dean 1999; Gordon 1991; Lemke 2001; Peters, 2002a; 2002b), and in these lectures Foucault used the term governmentality to explore governing in classical liberal societies of the 19th and 20th century. But he also presented schematically on the emergence of two
neoliberal rationalities for governing in post-World War Two Germany and the United States. Lemke (2001) argues that two key points are necessary to understand with regards to this theoretical tool. First, he says:

The concept of governmentality demonstrates Foucault’s working hypothesis on the reciprocal constitution of power techniques and forms of knowledge. The semantic linking of governing (“gouverner”) and modes of thought (“mentalite”) indicates that it is not possible to study the technologies of power without an analysis of the political rationality underpinning them. (p.1)

Governmentality then, is a tool that Foucault developed in order to study what he had always been interested in – the study of power and how it works. Second, Lemke points out that the everyday understanding of governing – that it takes place in the political realm – is broadened under Foucault. “Government also signified problems of self-control, guidance for the family and for children, management of the household, directing the soul, etc.,” (Lemke, 2001, p. 2). Governing is about much more than what goes on in the political realm and for Foucault becomes, famously, “the conduct of conduct. It operates along a continuum from the "governing of self" to governing others (Foucault 1982, Lemke 2001).

Foucault described governmentality as being a “contract between technologies of domination of others and those of self”. This process, through which the state of justice of the Middle Ages transformed into the administrative state during the 15th and 16th centuries, gradually became “governmentalized.” For Foucault, there became an assemblage formed by the institutions, procedures, analysis, calculations, and tactics that allowed the exercise of very specific but complex forms of power. This form of power usurped previous forms seen throughout the West, such as sovereignty.

Governmentality is an approach to social regulation—a strategy and rational that has dominated Western political power since the 18th century—that includes the formation of a whole array of specific governmental apparatuses. These technologies “connected up calculations of spatially scattered points where the constitutional, fiscal, organizational and judicial powers of the state connect with endeavors to manage economic life, the health and habits of the population, the civility of the masses and so forth” (Rose, 1999, p.18). It includes a growing body of knowledge that presents itself as “scientific,” which carries an imprimatur of respectability, contributing to the power of governmentality.

This power is not necessarily negative. In fact, it produces reality through what Foucault dubbed “rituals of truth” and creates a particular style of subjectivity to which one conforms or resists. Because the individuals are taken into this subjectivity they become part of a normalizing force. Governmentality, then, is not so much a thing as an adoption of a particular point of view, perspective, or attitude that relates to the governing of oneself in order that others may be governed. In genealogical approaches, governmentals problematize and disturb taken-for-granted forms of thought, practiced knowledge, modes of perception, strategies, vocabulary, types of authority, and forms of judgment that are employed in the practices of governing.
Like Beck and Giddens, governmentalists also emphasize the role of expert knowledge in shaping modern subjectivities. But unlike conceptualizing expert knowledges as a means of engaging reflexivity, governmentalists view expert knowledge as central to governing. Populations are examined, compared against norms, normalized and rendered productive. Risk operates as a strategy of regulatory power by which experts manage populations and individuals through the goals of neoliberalism. Genealogical studies analyze risk as a particular form of thinking born in the 19th century that entailed new ways of understanding and acting upon misfortune in terms of risk (Rose, 1999). Risk thinking is a way (or a set of different ways) of bringing the future present and rendering it into a calculable form. It is this form of calculation about reality, rather than the “naturally” occurring reality, that is the heart of risk.

For governmentalists, risk doesn’t exist in reality. In other words, as a concept risk is socially produced or constructed. Underlying that concept is a particular rationality of how people ought to be governed and how they should govern themselves. For example, in education we create the phenomena of achievement gaps, illiteracy, and – as we describe later – at-risk children. They are not part of nature’s reality; they are naturalized within human systems. There is nothing that forces society to create and respond to risk. Instead risk provides a way of thinking about reality. It has become a category of understanding that is about how society represents events, a category of understanding. Risk is understood as a specific way to shape and control populations, a way to govern selves and societies.

From this perspective, in the modern state, risk has become an essential task of government, complete with technologies to directly control bodies and persons. The individual becomes a constellation of indicators, part of a specific group formed by various risk factors that need to be treated. In other words, while risky individuals may be treated, it is the identified population – determined by a variety of indicators – that is the target of intervention. The identification of risk factors and of populations that are at risk is understood as “techniques” mobilized in diverse attempts to “make up” people (Hacking, 1986) – rational, choice making, autonomous citizens within neoliberal projects of government (Rose, 1996). Knowledge about people’s conditions, gathered through demographic statistics, their life expectancies, and the calculation of mortality and birth rates would be useful for those agencies that deploy prioritized resources, assign tasks and produce technologies aimed at enhancing the well-being of the population. Risk discourse places the citizen at the nexus of expert systems of knowledge. These discourses create rings of control by propagating the language of socially appropriate risk-free behavior. This is why risk is a moral technology, used to dominate time and discipline the future, to make it both predictable and controllable.

Clearly, the concept of risk is not embedded only within institutions. People are positioned in governmental discourses, rendered active, and each forced to see him or herself in terms of risk. Adopting advice from governmental agencies and from experts who have problematized areas of life as risky, each citizen examines and monitors his or her own risk factors such as physical health, mental health, and
behaviors that potentially lead to undesirable outcomes such as sexually acquired diseases. Similarly, prevention of crime becomes the responsibility of the ordinary citizen as does planning for retirement. In education the achievement of a certain level and kind of literacy, mathematical skills and abilities, and the internalization of an individuated and self-knowing identity is the responsibility of the learner. People aspire to “transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). For this transformation to occur, individuals need not just a set of tools to deal with these risk factors, but a mindset, a way of thinking. This individualized care of the self that leads to knowing oneself, as Foucault would assert, is a technology whereby the rational individual:

…will wish to become responsible for the self, for…this will produce the most palatable, pleasurable and effective mode of provision for security against risk. Equally, the responsible individual will take rational steps to avoid and to insure against risk, in order to be independent rather than a burden on others. Guided by actuarial data on risks (e.g., on smoking and lung cancer; bowel cancer and diet, etc.) and on the delivery of relevant services and expertise (e.g., relative costs and benefits of public and private medicine), the rational and responsible individual will take prudent risk-managing measures. Within such prudential strategies, then, calculative self-interest is articulated with actuarialism to generate risk management as an everyday practice of the self. This is backed up by a moral responsibility, or duty to the self. (O’Malley, 1996, p. 199–200)

For governmentalists, what remains significant about risk thinking is all that risk gets attached to—the forms of knowledge that make risk thinkable—Statistics stand out, but so do sociology, management, and the technologies that seek to govern people, such as developmental screening, case management, social service intake interviews. All of these practices are bound to the authorization and strategies of “experts” who determine who is at risk and how to best intervene. Western society deems scientists, psychologists and psychiatrists, insurance company representatives (to name just a few) certified to write books, articles, blogs, and reports, appear on television, provide medical examinations, take family histories, and so forth. The management of risk, as stated earlier, is an enormous industry. Yet as Ewald (1991) points out, “there is no risk in reality. But on the other hand, anything can be a risk; it all depends on how one analyzes the danger, considers the event” (p. 199). In other words, risk and its reality are purely human constructs. Risk is not about a random set of unknowns or completely about private fears. It is about perceptions and the human calculation of perceptions.

Risk and Culture

Beck and Giddens were preoccupied with the universality of risk to a degree that, at least on paper, precludes notions of cultural variation or relativism. Similarly, governmentalists have been criticized for their generalized model of the self that
underestimates the possibilities and different responses to social risk demands (Lupton, 1999). By contrast to broad theories, cultural approaches—as construed by anthropologists and cultural theorists—attempt to examine empirically how people respond to risk within particular groups, organizations, and societies. Tansey and O’Riordan (1999) argue, “cultural theory is a way of interpreting how and why individuals form judgments about danger, pollution and threat” (p. 71).

Any history of a cultural theory of risk requires a summary of anthropologist Mary Douglas’s grasp on the centrality of a purposeful understanding of risk. She saw that any risk must be analyzed in terms of the function it plays in society. To that end—drawing on Emile Durkheim’s interest in the role of social factors controlling cognition—Douglas was committed to a structural-functionalist model of culture that emphasized the boundedness of societies and the cohesive ways they are held together. Instead of risks as the product of individual perception or knowledge, understandings of risk are shared within cultures and communities. Cultural responses to risk maintain social cohesion and order. Douglas suggests that the terms risk and taboo can be subsumed under the more encompassing term danger:

[The modern concept of risk, parsed now as danger, is invoked to protect individuals against the encroachment of others. It is part of the system of thought that upholds the type of individualistic culture, which sustains an expanding industrial system. The dialogue about risk plays the role equivalent to taboo or sin, but the slope is tilted in the reverse direction, away from protecting the community and in favour of protecting the individual (Douglas, 1992, p. 28).

Societies define themselves, Douglas argues, by how they characterize and manage risk. They are not a matter of individual, psychological cognition. “The professional discussion of cognition and choice has no sustained theorizing about the social influences which select particular risks for attention. Yet it is hard to maintain seriously that perception of risk is private” (Douglas, 1985, p. 3). That some things are identified as risks when others are not is a matter of an inability, as some psychometric risk analysts contend, to see things in terms of probabilities (see Lupton, 1999, chapter 2). Any given culture’s beliefs about purity, danger and taboo are arbitrary, but once fixed they organize, bind, and reinforce social order according to hierarchies of power that attach members to that culture. This is not to suggest that dangers are not real. A range of risks exists, and “the reality of dangers is not at issue…in modern and pre-modern. This argument is not about the reality of dangers, but about how they are politicized” (Douglas, 1992, p. 29). Societies select certain dangers over others for attention for reasons that make sense to that particular culture. Whatever objective dangers exist are mediated through sociocultural processes (Lupton, 1999).

In Purity and Danger, Douglas offers an explanation for ritual pollution, and why some things thought to have special religious significance are seen as a sacred higher form of thought while other thoughts are seen as magical, including pollution beliefs. She cites Lord Chesterfield: “Dirt is matter out of place.” In other
words, things are not considered dirty in and of themselves, but because of where they stand in a system of categories, which can include people as well as non-human classes of animate or inanimate objects. Shoes aren’t dirty in themselves unless they are placed on the dining room table. Douglas writes that dirt:

is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread or holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behaviour in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. (Douglas, 1966, p. 2)

Douglas describes how “rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience” (Douglas, 1966, p. 2) within social settings. Two such examples are the dietary laws from *Book of Leviticus*, and the Hindu prescriptions on ritual purity. Societies are likely to see things as taboo when they appear to defy classification, exist at the borders of society, or on the boundaries between categories. In such instances, they are perceived as possessing both power and danger. For some purposes the power may be stressed; for others the danger. In both instances, there may be a rule against contact with the marginal person or thing. In the case of Biblical laws that forbid the consumption of certain animals, instead of an objective health risk such as danger of trichinosis from pig, Douglas interprets purity as the maintenance of categories, roles, and boundaries in society. She claims that the characteristics of certain animals violated defied classification by violating the prototypes for edibility recognized in ancient Hebrew culture. Such prohibition against consumption made a social declaration of solidarity with their monotheistic community. Their adherence to the dietary laws was a measure of their commitment, particularly as they were surrounded by a polytheistic nomadic culture. Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) describe the taboo of contact between women and cattle among the Hima people of Uganda. The belief that such contact would result in the sickness and death of the cattle functions to attribute an act that would transgress moral norms thereby maintaining a set of hierarchical relations in that culture regarding the role of women. (A similar belief is that the adulterous act of a woman would cause her husband to receive a fatal arrow wound.) Rather than reflecting any objective risks, the belief maintains the social order.

Risk and pollution go hand in hand, but Douglas seeks to explain the culturally variable way in which societies recognize taboos and argues that ideas about pollution operate at two levels of society: instrumental and expressive. At the instrumental level, taken-for-granted beliefs about the laws of nature are brought into society’s moral code and operate as tactics to reinforce social pressures and influence one another’s behaviors. Dangers guard the ideal order of society against transgressions:

At this level the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code: this kind of disease is caused by adultery, that by incest; this meteorological disaster is the effect of political disloyalty, that the effect of impiety. The whole university is harnessed to men’s attempts to force one another into
good citizenship. Thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and
certain social rules defined by dangerous contagion, as when the glance or
touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbours or his children.
(Douglas, 1966, p. 3)

For Douglas, however, the expressive level is the more interesting of the two, for
“the kind of contacts which are thought dangerous also carry a symbolic load”
(Douglas 1966, p. 3). People create taxonomic schemas that relate to animals and
the natural world as well as those that relate to body metaphors. Here, pollution
beliefs act as analogies for expressing a view of the social order. Sexual patterns
may express and mirror patterns of understandings of hierarchy and symmetry:

Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder,
being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death. Wherever ideas of
dirty are highly structured their analysis discloses a play upon such profound
themes. (p. 6)

RISK AND EDUCATION

Most literature on risk and education emphasizes the countless ways in which
educators (e.g., teachers and academics) and those who care about the welfare of
children (e.g., policymakers and agencies) initiate reform efforts directed toward
the “at-risk” child. That is, how can we help children born to low-income, or single
parents, or (in the United States) non-English speakers, or unsupervised children,
or children who engage in unsavory activities such as using or selling drugs.
Academic problems, such as lower literacy and math performance are associated
with these populations. There is also a body of literature that challenges the
negative and stereotypical ways in which “at-risk” children are identified and dealt
with. This critical literature takes on the deficit view of the at-risk child and calls
into question the usefulness of the label at all. (See Gadsden, V, Davis, J, &
Artiles, A. 2009; Swadener, E., 1990; Swadener, B. & Lubeck, S., 1995). While
this book’s intention is quite different from the latter class of scholarship, we want
to contextualize the “at-risk” category—so prominent in education—as a concept
inextricably bound within the broader logic of risk. We believe that the “at risk”
child can only be imagined within a risk society.

For more than 400 years, children have been singled out for having severe
problems such as diseases, mental retardation, emotional disturbances, physical
handicaps, or for antisocial behavior, or have been identified as destitute, abused,
neglected, and illegitimate. These children have always been a source of social
concern and responsibility (Laosa, 1984). Even among the Puritans, one major task
involved saving children’s souls. Wollons (1993) writes:

Puritans considered children to be deprived from birth, and the child at risk
was one who might not ultimately find a home with God. While risks to
children’s health were high, control over a child’s health was minimal,
making salvation an even greater imperative. Insuring salvation was the
Castel (1991) suggests an understanding of how “at-risk” emerged as a marked category. The original nineteenth-century justification for intervention for psychiatric intervention was detecting, diagnosing, and treating dangerous individuals. Dangerousness was seen as a quality internal to the individual who was believed to be capable of perilous actions, e.g., a mentally ill person who commits a violent act. It might or might not happen. So effective prevention policy could not be founded on the dangerousness of an individual. Statistics had been used in the nineteenth century in the Europe census to define populations. The science of risk and probabilistic reasoning—starting about 1820 through 1900—came to be used to focus reforms on social problems, unhealthy situations, and dangerous, uncontrollable populations (Block, 2006; Hacking, 1991). This expansion of the use of risk assessment shifted the paradigm from describing the distinct person to an array of “heterogeneous elements” (Castel, 1991, p. 289). Risk grew autonomous from specific dangers. “[A] risk does not rise from the presence of particular precise danger embodied in a concrete individual or group. It is the effect of a combination of abstract factors which render more or less probable the occurrence of undesirable behaviors” (Castel, 1991, p. 287).

Castel extends his discussion from psychiatry to all the social-work and care professions and provides an example of a 1976 general system for the detection of childhood abnormalities in France that involved “making all infants subject to systematic examination…” (p. 287, emphasis in original). The data collected included certain illnesses, psychological deficiencies, and social characteristics such as being unmarried, a minor, and so forth. The information allowed for the grouping of what was otherwise heterogeneous information (e.g., an unmarried mother who was less than seventeen years old). “The presence of some, or of a certain number, of these factors or risk sets off an automatic alert” (p. 287) so that a specialist (e.g., a social worker) would be sent to the family to either corroborate or deny the presence of danger relying upon the probabilistic existence of risks. One did not begin with an observable problematic experience but rather deduced it from a description of the dangers one desired to prevent. Such prevention policies promoted the new mode of surveillance: systematic predetection. In this form of surveillance, the intended objective was to anticipate and prevent the emergence of an undesirable event (Castel, 1991).

While Castel casts his argument within the Foucauldian paradigm, Mary Douglas’s (1992) comments echo this work when she asserts that the attraction of risk is connected with its scientific precision. For things that threaten us “danger would once have been the right word, but plain danger does not have the aura of science or afford the pretension of a possible precise calculation” (p. 25). Douglas goes on to state that another attraction of risk is that it suggests an analysis that is purely calculation, free of cultural or political bias. For Castel, the shift from dangerousness to risk offers “a potentially infinite multiplication of the possibilities for intervention” (p. 289). Interventions target populations at risk, not persons, endlessly multiplying the possibilities of government.

Within the United States, Cuban (1989) traces what he refers to as the identification of “at-risk” students and their families—those perceived as outside
the mainstream (e.g., poor, truants) back almost 200 years when identifying such students first appeared as a formula for reformers such as the New York City Free School Society, to stimulate public action (Cuban, 1989). Since the Common School, labels have served to describe poor children, usually nonwhite and from other cultures, as potential threats “to the larger society because neither parents nor existing community institutions could control their unacceptable behavior” (Cuban, 1989, p. 781). Since the beginning of public education, “poor academic performance and deviant behavior have been defined as problems of individual children or of their family” (p. 781).

Still, a careful reading of Cuban reveals that reformers never actually used the term “at-risk.” While we have pieced together a number of elements of the emergence of the “at-risk” category in education, there does not seem to be a precise chronological point where the term can be identified as having originated. We agree with Richardson, Casanova, Placier, and Guilfoyle (1989) and Swadener (1990) that its conspicuous use in educational discourse drew upon the science of epidemiology, a branch of medicine concerned with patterns of disease occurrence in human populations and factors that influence those patterns. Risk factors in epidemiology are characteristic of persons – demographic, biological, socioeconomic, or behavioral – which are associated with a higher-than-expected probability of being afflicted with a disease or other dangerous conditions. The notion of at-risk, Swadener (1990) argues, remains anchored in a medical model that focuses on “prevention, early intervention, and developmental screenings” (p. 22). Think, for example, of kindergarten health and vision screenings, or immunization requirements.

As discussed earlier, risk profiling’s long history dates back to the very beginnings of the insurance industry which used probabilistic and epidemiological knowledge to identify factors associated with higher risk of particular forms of ill-health and forms of pathology. Starting in the nineteenth-century in Europe and North America, a set of strategies emerged among those seeking to govern economic lives that aimed at the reduction of unfavorable events across a population (Rose, 2001). In addition, a type of risk thinking developed then to attempt to find factors that would enable the identification of high-risk groups which then enabled authorities to prophylactically intervene with these groups.

We can trace the epidemiological model of education at least as far back as the early models of school psychology – a hybrid of a variety of educational and psychological practices – which emerged during the social reform efforts of national compulsory schooling that were established in 1918 (Fagan & Wise, 2007).5 Massive numbers of children who would now attend school came from diverse backgrounds. Schools now provided evidence for the problem but they also offered the solution. Physical and mental examinations were required and school psychologists became the gatekeepers for the new field of special education. Through the equally new scientific and rational field of psychometric testing (e.g., Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon), early models of school psychology attempted to assess cognitive skills in order characterize the normal individual and
population (Rose, 1989). Testing rendered the intellect manageable. Correlations were made between cognitive skills and school achievement. Unlike the obviously different, such as the blind, “feeble-minded” children appeared to be otherwise normal but could not benefit from instruction. They would be placed in special education classrooms.

Similarly, traces of the epidemiological model of education can be observed in the early days of developmental psychology and the notion that characteristics of children could be linked and normalized over a unified sequential period of time. Beginning in 1890, the emerging field of psychology began format and colonize the language of risk. Spink, Menegon, Bernardes, & Coelho (2007) examine the academic literature from 1887–1998 (using the PsychoLIT data base) and identified four periods for the incorporation of the language of risk into psychology. The first period (1887–1949) included only 12 publications and did not address risk as a formal concept. The first article, published in 1928 Christian magazine, referred to Faith as Risk. The second period (1950–1969) represented the “peak of risk measurement and the experimental analysis of risk behavior” (p. 154). From 1920–1949, there were a total of 12 references with the word risk. In the 10-year period from 1950–1959, there were a total of 29 publications, and from 1960–1969 there were 40. The third period (1970–1989)– with a total of 154 publications –was characterized by “the hegemony of Psychological and Physical disorders and Health and Mental Health Treatment and Prevention” (p. 155). During this period, new areas of psychology, such as engineering and environmental psychology began incorporating the language of risk. The already established field of Psychometrics and Statistical Methodology also saw renewed interest in risk studies. The fourth period (1990–1998), with 803 publications with references to the word risk—was characterized by the “consolidation of Psychological and Physical disorders and Health and Mental Health Treatment and Prevention. For example, a large number of AIDS studies were published during this period. Of the eighteen domains, the large number of studies classified as Educational Psychology addressed what is now the familiar risk of academic failure. The academic challenge was to determine who was at risk in order to develop programs to prevent failure. With time and development now linked with and integral to science and evolution, so could the stages of the normal development of the child now be integral to science. Institutions for observation, such as clinics and nursery schools, made development psychology possible. Developmental norms became a standard based upon the average ability of children of a certain age to perform specific tasks (Rose, 1989).

The early days of school psychology did not address directly the “at-risk” child. But the scientific principles of school psychology (as well as the entrenchment of the science of psychology into schools in general) eventually became wedded to the late 1950’s–1960’s interest in the related concept of “cultural deprivation.” A general principle of epidemiology is that risk is always relative. Everyone in a general population is at risk for a condition to one degree or another. The would-be preventer of this condition seeks out the sub-populations who are at greatest risks in comparison to others.
Educational researchers of the 1950s and 1960s identified the poor as the sub-population most likely to fail or drop out compared to the rest of the populace. In the United States at the time these were disproportionately African Americans and Mexican Americans. Epidemiologically speaking, in the 1960’s (as now) “risk factors” that predicted school failure included minority status, poverty, and language differences. Since schools were not in a position to prevent the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that make these characteristics risky for persons in the society, schools saw their function as that of an intervening treatment. Swadener (1990) describes the sociopolitical forces that at the time contributed to the construction of the at-risk notion. They included “the deficit model child-saving slogans, recurrent references or insinuations of cultural deprivation” as well as forced school segregation of Black and Mexican American students and language suppression of Mexican American students.

We argue that the terminology of risk exploded in the 1980s as part of the emergence of a neoliberal “regime of truth” that produced and emphasized risk discourses. Earlier, by the mid-1970’s, the progressive open education movement in American schools had peaked and was ultimately rejected due to low achievement, as reflected by standardized test scores. In 1975, SAT scores had dropped significantly from the previous decade. A 1977 report by the College Entrance Examination Board attributed the drop in part on an increase in numbers of test-takers, particularly more low-income and minority students taking college boards. In a famous 1981 interview, Boston University president John Silber maintained that high school diplomas demonstrated nothing about a graduate’s actual competence. Silber went on to cite a supposed lowering of academic standards and student attitudes: “[Students] become arrogant and cocky because they have not experienced the kind of rigorous curriculum that would have demonstrated how little they know, relatively speaking, and how much more remains to be learned” (1981, p. 53).

Margonis (1992) persuasively argues that the current popularity of the term at risk gained prominence within educational policy as a reaction to the excellence reports released in 1983. The “excellence” reform movement within the United States was born in the 1970s out of reformers’ desires to improved those falling standardized test scores among growing numbers of students (especially among poor children of color), emerged full throttle with the 1983 publication entitled *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education). Commissioned by Terrence Bell, Ronald Regan’s Secretary of Education, a blue-ribbon panel of educators and elected officials examined the quality of American public schools and warned against a “rising tide of mediocrity” that threatened the nation’s future. As much an open letter to the American public as an official report, its scathing attack on contemporary American education is worth quoting at length:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds
American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them. This report, the result of 18 months of study, seeks to generate reform of our educational system in fundamental ways and to renew the Nation’s commitment to schools and colleges of high quality throughout the length and breadth of our land. That we have compromised this commitment is, upon reflection, hardly surprising, given the multitude of often conflicting demands we have placed on our Nation’s schools and colleges. They are routinely called on to provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems that the home and other institutions either will not or cannot resolve. We must understand that these demands on our schools and colleges often exact an educational cost as well as a financial one…. 

The Risk

History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when American’s destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America’s position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer. The risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently than Americans and have government subsidies for development and export. It is not just that the South Koreans recently built the world’s most efficient steel mill, or that American machine tools, once the pride of the world, are being displaced by German products. It is also that these developments signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe. Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce and are today spreading throughout the world as vigorously as
miracle drugs, synthetic fertilizers, and blue jeans did earlier. If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefit of all—old and young alike, affluent and poor, majority and minority. Learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the “information age” we are entering. Our concern, however, goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society. The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom…Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent: All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself. (http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html)

_A Nation at Risk_ expanded the register of risk to include the entire population. Everybody and everything is now at-risk. A mediocre educational system has produced workers who can no longer compete with those Europeans and Asians who are making superior machine tools, steel mills, and automobiles. This same “rising tide of mediocrity” explained the lackluster 1983 American economic performance. But beyond the economic and cognitive-intellectual risks, two additional risks threatened America’s future: the moral and spiritual strengths of Americans were at risk; our culture itself was at risk. “A high level of shared education is essential to a free and democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture.”

Like many policies promoting standardized testing, accountability, competition, school choice, and privatization, _A Nation At Risk_ reflected the rise of neoliberal policy discourses ushered in by the Reagan administration. By positing that the solution to achieving technological and economic advances was “excellence” in the educational system, and by—quite literally—marketing fear to a society already skeptical about public education, _A Nation at Risk_ ushered in an era of large-scale risk management in American public schools. Achievement should occur at the individual level (“performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace”), school/college level (“sets high expectations and goals”), and society. Educational reform should focus on creating a “learning society” a term that—depending on who discusses it—refers to global economies, politics, societies, knowledge...
and lifelong learning consonant with excellence, performance, quality and accountability. Such policy stressed individual attainment in learning and work as the means to succeed in contexts of social and economic transformation.

Ladson-Billings (1999) points out that the “risk” in A Nation at Risk began as a message describing a variety of national concerns related to education but quickly and subtly morphed into language aimed at those “other than White and middle class” (p. 219). Whereas Ronald Reagan had wanted to dismantle the Department of Education, George H.W. Bush, wanting to be seen as the “education president,” worked closely with the nation’s governors to develop a national agenda for the improvement of schools, its prescriptions ultimately targeting poor and minority students. In 1985 and 1986, the National Governors’ Association created seven task forces to examine the state of education and to make recommendations. The National Governors’ Task Force on Readiness, headed up by then-South Carolina Governor Richard Riley began to identify the readiness factors that effectively prepared young children for school. The readiness task force concluded that:

States must develop initiatives to help at-risk preschool children come ready for school. Possible state initiatives include: provide all in-home assistance for first-time, low-income parents of high-risk infants; develop outreach initiatives using community and religious organizations to assist and support young children with absentee parent(s) or guardian(s) as their sole source of nurturance; providing high quality early childhood development programs for all four-year old at-risk children, and, where feasible, three-year-olds…

By 1987, “at-risk” had become a catchphrase, a commonplace adjective used by the academic and education-policy community to mean any student for whom, for one or more reasons, failure in school and life would be likely (Nardini and Antes, 1991). The term appeared neutral, not directly associated with the “culture of poverty”, a concept that could be equally associated with white suburban youth and poor African-American children. “This apparent neutrality is the concept’s greatest ideological strength: a deficit conception with egalitarian pretensions” (Margonis, 1992, p. 346). With the term now less associated with culture and poverty, risk evolved into an important indicator in a grid of government intelligibility, covering a wide terrain. Increasing numbers of state and local agencies and school districts began to focus on at-risk students, and introduced intervention programs designed to prevent these children from failing in school. Within this regime, heterogeneous networks—medicine, public health, child psychology early education, child welfare, social policy (Swadener, 1990; Swadener and Lubeck, 1995) quickly and efficiently attached themselves to the historical concern for insuring the salvation of problematic children. These professionals now would systematically order, manage, and attempt to reduce the numbers contained in the category “at-risk” children. Although the phrase “at-risk” is closely associated with education, the phrase retained its epidemiological connection suggesting the threat of disease or injury:

During the past decade, practitioners and researchers in education adopted this conceptual paradigm for elucidating educational problems. They defined those conditions that tend to affect children in negative ways and reduce
success in traditional school settings as producing “risks,” and, gradually, educators developed a set of characteristics that place children “at risk” for school failure (Winborne, 1991, p. 252).

For example, fueled by the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986, there has been an increased interest in intervention programs for infants and toddlers considered “at risk” for developmental delays. Federal policy for early intervention programs for infants and toddlers gained ascendancy in the 1960’s with the passage of PL 88–156. This legislation expanded maternal and child health services for expectant mothers from low-income families to prevent mental retardation. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act provided federal funds to state-operated schools for children with disabilities. Initial delivery models located in hospitals and emphasizing “infant stimulation”(Winderstrom, et al, 1997) evolved into interdisciplinary teams which carried out assessments and program implementation. So too the “curriculum” grew from a narrow focus on the child’s physical, motor, or health concerns to helping the infant achieve “optimal development” which included “cognitive and communication skills, emotional well-being, and parent and peer interactions” (Winderstrom, et al, 1997, p. 6). Early intervention began shifting from determining factors within the child’s family that affected that child. Thorough effectiveness of the intervention now required full participation from the family. A variety of government intervention programs service newborns and infants with risk or disability. Participating states are required to identify, assess, and treat children birth to age 3 with disabilities and their families.

Because children ages 3–21 must have a diagnosed disability in order to receive special education services, federal legislation recognized that “later disabilities might be prevented if infants who were at developmental risk could receive services” (p. 8). Therefore, developmental risk or delay were defined as follows: 1) Established risk—a diagnosed physical or mental condition which has a high probability of resulting in developmental delay; 2) Biological/medical risk—a condition that makes the child more likely to develop a delay than children without the condition 3) Environmental risks list among their eligibility criteria include poverty, parental substance abuse, and parental age and educational attainment. We do not question the idealistic motives that established these types of programs, nor do we necessarily question their effectiveness. But the category of “environmental risk” reveals how critical programs intended to address medical concerns become linked to the moral technology of risk. Families not meeting the expectations that form the culture of education, schooling, and society are deemed flawed, needing to “governed at a distance” (Rose, 1999).

The underlying (and sometimes explicit) ideologies of many programs such as those described above conflate their paradigms so as to fall within the so-called “culture of poverty” a term coined by cultural anthropologist Oscar Lewis in Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty (Lewis, 1959). Lewis portrayed “those people who are at the very bottom of the socio-economic scale, the poorest workers, the poorest peasants, plantation laborers, and that large heterogeneous mass of small artisans and tradesmen usually referred to as the
lumpen proletariat” (p. xxv). Lewis popularized the term in a *Scientific American* article (Lewis, 1966) in which he asserted that his research identified 70 “traits” that typified the “culture of poverty.” Foley (1997) argues that Lewis formulated his model “in such a categorical, objectivist manner that it was easy [for others] to appropriate [it] as a literal, absolute truth claim” (p. 116). For example, the National Center for Family Literacy targets “at-risk” children and their families in order to “[break] the cycle of poverty and dependency” (Brizius and Foster, 1993).

Consider the words of NCFL founder and president, Sharon Darling, who wrote:

> Children from educated families are exposed to print at an early age. Their parents read to them, encourage their early “reading and “scribble writing,” develop their language skills through conversation and their thinking skills through questioning. Through their own reading and attention to their children’s school activities, these parents demonstrate that they value learning. All this happens naturally in many homes. But “at risk” children most often come from disadvantaged undereducated homes, and they do not acquire the pre-literacy skills developed by more fortunate children. As a result, they begin their schooling behind, and may never catch up. (p. 1)

Such sentiments also emerged from the sociology of education literature of the 1960’s, which similarly linked poverty, social disadvantage, and learning. In 1968, in what became a standard textbook, sociologist Olive Banks wrote:

> Poverty can make a parent less willing to keep a child at school, can make it difficult for him to afford books and toys, or expeditions which help a child to learn, can enforce housing conditions which make the whole family strained and unhappy or make it almost impossible for parents and child to talk or play together. Moreover, even where these conditions are no longer present, the fact that they have existed in the recent past, or were a feature of the parents’ own childhood, may exert an influence on attitudes, values and aspirations for a generation or more. (p. 75)

As scholarly literature increasingly emphasized “cultural deprivation” and “cultural disadvantage,” school failure increasingly became framed in terms of a failure of early detection and the minimization of risk to the community at large. As we described previously, federally funded services can be provided to the infant or young child once it is determined that an “environmental risk” exists, and intervention will reduce the possibilities of dependency, institutionalization, health care costs, and so forth. Various organizations have been created to address school dropouts, crime, pregnancy, drug abuse, and incarceration, linking risk to dangers that will likely be inflicted upon innocent others without intervention or treatment of the at-risk child. Preschools working with at-risk populations are understood as early-intervention programs where the goal goes beyond preparing children for school to reducing the rate of future substance abuse and incarceration. The preschoolmatters.org website includes the following:

> While the goal of high-quality preschool programs is to ensure all young learners are ready to succeed in school, these programs are linked with a
number of impressive long-term outcomes. Children who attend high-quality preschool are more likely to graduate from high school and go on to higher education than are their peers who did not attend. They are also less likely to require special education services or repeat a grade in school, both of which contribute to savings for taxpayers. Benefits extend well beyond reducing education costs. The societal and cultural improvement stemming from education reduces future crimes and future victimization. Students who attend these programs are less likely to become teenage parents, become dependent on welfare, and, notably, commit crimes as teenagers or adults. (http://preschoolmatters.org/2011/07/29/early-education-the-power-to-reduce-future-crime-victimization)

Head Start is the paradigmatic signifier of “at risk” and “high quality preschool programs.” Head Start began under President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty and built around the “Cultural Disadvantage Model” which routinely deployed the popular discourses of “poverty” and “disadvantage” but not “risk.” Sargent Shriver, the driving force behind Head Start echoed the language of the culture of poverty, describing schools as being “as intimidating to these disadvantaged children as the inside of a bank to a pauper” (Zigler and Muenchow, 1996, p. 6).

The scholarly roots of Head Start grew from—as well as in—the arguments put forth in the 1960’s by educational psychologists Benjamin Bloom and J. McVicker Hunt. Bloom and Hunt argued that I.Q. was not fixed but that intervention during the “critical period” of the first five years could boost the intelligence of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Several experimental early programs—eight-week summer classes and eventually full-year—that emphasized cognitive improvement—were the conceptual foundations for what became Project Head Start. Bloom and Hunt’s work led to the pioneering research of Susan Gray and Robert Klaus “Early Training Project” in Tennessee and the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program in Michigan in 1962 (Vinovskis, 2005). These programs targeted improvement of intellectual performance (as the measure of their success) of children born into poverty. While never using the term risk, Gray and Klaus demonstrated an “offset” of “progressive retardation” of children through early enrichment and parent involvement.

Despite these studies, Head Start barely survived the 1970s. But several events had important impacts on its popular and governmental support. First, several long-term studies (such as the Perry Preschool) demonstrated that preschool can have long-term positive effects on disadvantaged children. Secondly, the 1980s saw an increased number of poor children and an increased proportion of young mothers in the labor force. Third, while there is no direct evidence, we suspect that Head Start’s gradual adoption of the language of risk (rather than preventing poverty) helped save it. Spending money on Head Start would not only save society money in terms of expensive special education but also would also reduce social services, crime, and cut welfare dependency.
For all the justifiable criticism of the Cultural Disadvantage Model—a discussion which lies outside the scope of this overview—Head Start’s emergence under Johnson’s “War on Poverty” was a government attempt to actually address and end poverty. Head Start’s eventual shift in language to emphasize those “at risk” reflected the intense shift of government that de-emphasized preventing poverty in favor of preventing risk. Risk, as a useful point of entry, can be managed more easily than poverty. Instead of preventing poverty, professional experts working with families identify risks, instruct families under their authority about the riskiness of their practices and/or behavior, and manage them in such a way to reduce the risk their pose to themselves, their children or to the public (see Rose, 1996).

Similarly, a salient feature from Head Start’s inception was “empowerment” for the entire family through the community. But empowerment programs, as was Head Start, are frequently conceptualized in terms of risk to the community – the risk posed to individuals who cannot manage themselves in the community; the risks to the community posed by individuals who cannot manage themselves; the risks posed to their children (and then later to the community) if parents fail to provide proper management. As Cruikshank (1999) writes, “empowerment” is one form of “social vaccine” where self-confidence and positive self-regard inoculates individuals against “the lures of crime, violence, [and] substance abuse [to] create a ‘true’ democracy” (p. 89). Head Start’s current website describes how the educational, economic, health and law enforcement “benefits” of the program reduces risks. For example, under “Law Enforcement Benefits, the document reads:

Along with improving the health of its children and families, HS benefits its children and society-at-large by reducing crime and its costs to crime victims. HS children are significantly less likely to have been charged with a crime than their siblings who did not participate in HS. (http://www.nhsa.org/files/static_page_files/399E0881-1D09-3519-AD56452FC44941C3/BenefitsofHSandEHS.pdf)

Head Start, with its widespread name recognition, provides a useful exemplar for the “at risk” category, but the category’s chronic and broad use within formal educational settings – now so ordinary—has achieved the status of common sense and led to numerous intervention programs.10 As we described at the beginning of this chapter, thinking in terms of risk is part of our everyday experiences.

Neoliberalism is now a cultural form affecting virtually everyone (Leonard, 1997), whether they recognize it or not. Risk was not invented in the 1980’s, and risk in education certainly predates Beck’s “risk society” (Besley & Peters, 2007), but the prominent use of the ideas that emerged during this period reflects the rise of neoliberal political rationalities that placed emphasizes the self-governance of individuals (Besley & Peters, 2007). Now, individuals themselves, “as workers, managers and members of families, can be mobilized in alliance with political objectives, in order to deliver economic growth, successful enterprise and optimum personal happiness” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 28).
Important as it may be, the attention given to the “at-risk” category in education, is not – thankfully – the emphasis of the authors of this book. Our chapters provide very different accounts of everyday (common sense) portrayals of risk. Each author describes a highly contextualized and systematic study of risk and education and theorizes her or his work through the contemporary social scientific literature on risk—risk and culture; risk and reflexive modernization; risk and governmentality. Their empirical observation and careful analysis has avoided the reductionist accounts of risk so pervasive within the field of education. Instead, rich descriptions of risk and education open up new accountings of the subject as explored and challenged through topics and themes such as socialization and learning, pleasure, marginalized youth, citizenship, early childhood, vocational education, scientific management, neoliberalism, and the media.

Majia Nadesan introduces readers to a complex and critical picture of children and risk in a world post the great recession. Both neo-liberal governance and the emergence of a neo-liberal capitalist plutonomy figure strongly in her analysis of children. Gone is the world where children are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, one of the great attributes of the social welfare state of the last century. She writes “the role of education as a social leveler is quickly eroding…” and as property values decline so does the tax base for many schools. Class sizes begin to go up and we get more crowded classes and “elective” programs such as history, music, and physical education get squeezed out, more vulnerable “high-risk” communities are disproportionately effected. A quick look around schools and cities during the last few years will provide plenty of evidence that Nadesan is not predicting. She is, in fact, reporting what is going on now.

Peter Moran connects the history of scientific efficiency in the form of Taylorism to the modern neo-liberal world of risk. This reminds us that classical liberal economic theory and neo-liberal economic theory root us in practices that promote the de-skilling of workers in order to create efficiencies and profit. The deskilling of bricklayers and other professional shop workers in the early 20th century looks eerily familiar to the deskilling of teachers at the end of that same century. He identifies A Nation at Risk as a seminal document and turning point in U.S. educational history. And like the deskilling of 100 years ago when hoped for efficiencies and outcomes do not appear, “the problem resides with the workers (teachers).

Steven Bialostok’s chapter, as many in this volume do, reminds us of the important roles teachers play in deciding who is “at-risk” and what productive “risk-takers” do. His in-depth interviews with two middle-class teachers illustrate the congruence between ideologies of welfare state dependency and children who behave in “at-risk” ways. One of the teachers, Kathy, illustrates this in a vivid fashion, saying, “When you look at kids and they become so adult-dependent that they don’t think they can function without somebody next to them going ‘Keep going’ or ‘You didn’t do that right.’” or “they just sit there. I don’t want helpless people.” The discourse connects middle-class teachers with children who become “at-risk” as well as those who become productive risk-takers.
Robert Whitman looks at how risk discourses are instantiated at micro-discursive levels in a nursing education program. Nurses, like the teachers in Steven Bialostok’s chapter are the risk managers of the institution. They carry the discourse and practices that will have to be inculcated into children or, in the case of nurses, the person in the bed. Whitman’s analysis looks at risk mechanisms at the level of multiple choice test items, lectures that teach students about acceptable noun-verb phrasing, and note-taking forms for documenting the risky path of the person in a hospital bed. In the end this analysis shows that people do push against the discourse in productive ways while the words of our risk society embed people in new structures for creating old inequalities.

Michelle Buchanan points out that in the current climate that “all children are at-risk to some degree and will require prevention or intervention services as some time. Nowhere is this more true than in early education in the United States. Like literacy before it, early childhood education is now being touted as the cure for a host of social ills. This includes better readiness for successful learning, lower crime rates in adulthood, less drug use, and an overall better economy. In this sense the ostensible goal that we will “fix children at-risk” leads ironically to deficit and skills-based pedagogies that proliferate in early education programs. They pop up in new guises and discourses and tend to reproduce poor educational outcomes for young children.

Susanne Miskimmon sees similar patterns to Buchanan in her chapter entitled “Regulating Risk” about aboriginal pre-school programs in Canada. She argues that “risk discourse serves to re-inscribe Aboriginal people into systems of inequality by invoking a discourse of inclusion that does not bear up to close examination.” She cites a long history of colonialism of the tribes by the Canadian federal government as well as adoption of the U.S. Head Start model for early childhood intervention. Both have cultural-deprivation theory at the heart of how they interact with aboriginal peoples. These deeply held ideologies inevitably find their way into policies and practices of the pre-school programs for aboriginal children.

Marnie Bjornson provides an illustration of another “risky” population, immigrants in current-day Netherlands. Her chapter “Mouthy Citizens” explores how language requirements become first a tool for “problematizing” a group, in this case immigrants. Policy morphs into practices for creating exclusion in a time when nationalism and it’s (all too often) counterpart, racism, are on the rise in Holland. Bjornson follows the thread from growing nationalism, to the introduction of policy and legislation, to concrete effects on the ground in terms of teacher practice in a bilingual education program. In the end all aspects of this program become ‘outsourced,’ costs are privatized, and immigration of particular groups from particular places is for all practical purposes, zeroed.

In the chapter called “Birds of a Feather?” Deborah Freedman Lustig and Kenzo Sung present us with an apparent anomaly that shifts our thinking about so-called “risk factors.” In a study of urban youth where structural risk factors such as unemployment, lack of housing, police harassment, poor schooling, and gang violence was very high they discovered that academically successful students often
maintained productive friendships with “delinquent” peers. Contrary to popular conclusions coming out of the behavioral studies of risk factors these young people used linguistic and cultural resources of their more delinquent peers in positive and productive ways to negotiate neighborhood life in a very high-risk urban environment. They took the popular dictum of “you’ll be judged by who you hang out with,” currently reified into the social sciences, and turned it on its head.

“Managing Risk and Giving Back” provides another example of how education in the risk society gets complicated through lived social practice. Elsa Davidson presents an ethnographic study of an Hispanic “at-risk” population attending a ‘School-to-Career Biotechnology Academy’ in California’s Silicon Valley. In a study that illustrates the tricky intersection of risk society with class Davidson finds that these students often eschew joining the techno-entrepreneurial economy and instead enter the public service jobs and the military indexing a community and class set of beliefs about “giving back.”

In “New Learning, New Youth,” Marta Albert, like Lustig and Sung is asking a question. Does a new articulation of Career and Technical Education (CTE) live up to its promise of changed identities and increased occupational opportunity? Again, as in many of the other chapters in this book, pre-existing social class structures play a role in whether a new articulation of this kind of education can provide access to work. Albert describes a program that tries to integrate more “Englishy” kinds of tasks into an occupational curriculum and shows that students do indeed see their literacy practices as successful and becoming more ‘academic.’ However, in a larger context of peers, friends, and adults in the community their work is still glossed as of “less” value because it is associated with an occupation like nursing assistant, cosmetology or heating and ventilation certification.

In William Bradley’s “Risk, Media, and Japanese Youth” he argues that in order to understand risk in culturally situated contexts we need to focus on “modes of perception.” These include “modes for framing, cognitive structures, and collective processing of cultural models of reality.” Contrary to other scholars who have written about risk and Japan Bradley finds that Japanese young people have some strong understandings of risk, risk-taking, and risk in society.

Our last author, Shirley Brice-Heath is also interested in the social construction of risk perception. In her chapter on “The New Risktakers” we are presented with a portrait of risk-taking amongst the privileged young. She looks specifically at privileged youth entering the world of social entrepreneurship where the socialization processes they experience while very young set them up to believe they can “channel their risks toward doing good while keeping in mind the necessity of doing well by being profitable. Growing up in a context “without having to deal alone with any of the consequences that might follow from their actions,” their start-up social entrepreneurial projects often do not do well, have unintended consequences, and do not take into account already vested economic and cultural interests. They usually fail but when they do these young adults tend to chalk it down to a transformational learning experience and move on to the for-profit sector. Like the bankers on Wall Street, they are effectively insulated from the consequences of their own risks.
These chapters emphasize a risk-theoretical literature that has great potential as a lens through which researchers can view changes in discourses of global capitalism from both critical and generative perspectives. Our situated and empirical studies have both a discourse and ethnographic focus which uncovers a risky world as people practice it on the ground, through language and activity, and in institutional settings.

NOTES

1 Thanks to historian Mark Potter (Metropolitan State College, Denver, Colorado) for taking the time to provide a brief European history lesson.
2 The oldest strategies for coping with risks date back as far as 3000 BC. (Pfeffer, I., Klock, D., 1974).
3 It wasn’t until 1947 when economists finally applied Bernoulli’s theories to risk aversion Outreville, 1998).
4 “Prior to this work “there seems to have been a taboo on speculations with regard to health, philosopher implying that to count the sick…was impious in that it probed the inscrutable purpose of God.”
5 Swadener (1990) has written extensively on the historical development of the “at-risk” label in education. She convincingly argues that the medical etiology of at risk can be found in the 1860’s German-style kindergartens, compulsory schooling, and compensatory education. Scholars who have written on the historical trajectory of early childhood education focus on the role of the ‘social ameliorists” who established the infant schools, early public schools, and kindergarten for poor and immigrant children. This emphasis on “child saving” formed the basis of the “at-risk” construction.
6 Norman Friedman provides a very thorough description of this issue which began in a 1955 presidential address at the School Psychology division of the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association which dealt with “child deprivation and child development.” Friedman points out that an important twist in thought and experimentation in the 1960’s was the new emphasis on preschool as an “antidote” for cultural deprivation.
7 We deliberately use the plural children to signify the bureaucratic emphasis of population identification and management and discursive process through which “at risk” children are constituted.
8 “The Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments, governing services to newborns and infants with risk or disability, was passed in 1986 as an amendment to the Educational for All Handicapped Act of 1975…In 1991, these amendments were incorporated into the reauthorization (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act” (Wilderstrom, et al, 1996, p. 6).
9 Two works by Richard R. Valencia have been very important to help us understand the history of issues related to “deficit thinking” and led us to a variety of primary sources: Dismantling Deficit Thinking (2010) and The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice (1997).
10 See Valencia (2010) for a thorough examination of deficit thinking models.
11 Gadsden, Davis and Artilles (2009) very useful volume examines and reconceptualizes the multiple ways that the concept of “at-risk” has been inscribed in discourses and experienced in and out of school, paying particular attention to the issues of equity.

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