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## EDUCATION AND THE RISK SOCIETY: AN INTRODUCTION

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 *nonthreatening 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 mitigate-able 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.