

Editorial Introduction

**Phyllida Coombes, Mike Danaher
and Patrick Alan Danaher**

**For Haruko Esumi-Danaher, loving wife
and Reanna Kristy Urquhart, the next generation**

*Sitting down you'll see
a sun peeking from a hill
pretty as could be.*

Anon

*Stop and consider! life is but a day;
A fragile dew-drop on its perilous way
From a tree's summit; a poor Indian's sleep
While his boat hastens to the monstrous steep
of Montmorenci.*

John Keats, "Sleep and Poetry"

Rationale

Strategic Uncertainties: Ethics, Politics and Risk in Contemporary Educational Research offers new perspectives on contemporary educational research in a wide range of contexts and settings. The authors provide fresh insights into the ethics, politics and risks of educational research through their deployment of up-to-date concepts and methods. They also bring educational research 'to life' as a series of meaningful and significant issues and dilemmas, and by drawing on the voices of 'real-life' research participants and practitioners.

In 2001, a theme issue of the *Queensland Journal of Educational Research* (Coombes & Danaher, 2001) was published under the title *Cui Bono?: Investigating Benefits and Interests in Educational Research*. In that issue, a group of authors from a range of academic disciplines explored the notion of who benefits from educational research and how such benefits might be identified, evaluated and weighed against potential costs to the research participants. The purpose of the contributors was not to view the intentions and results of research through rose-coloured glasses ('everyone benefits and everyone is happy') but to establish, as honestly as possible, whether the perceived benefits of a particular research project would actually occur without some cost to those involved. The key concepts, which were the focus of each article, were therefore the benefits and costs of educational research.

In *Strategic Uncertainties*, the focus of attention shifts to the potential risks of educational research and to the strategies that researchers might employ to minimise or from some perspectives try to eliminate these risks (and from other perspectives to embrace and celebrate such risks). Educational research, by its very nature, is concerned with people; it cannot function in a sterile vacuum. Where people are concerned, complete agreement among the participants can never be guaranteed. Thus stakeholders may compete for powerful speaking positions. Research projects, though conceived with the best of intentions, may serve to highlight the gap between researcher and researched by reinforcing the socioeconomic and educational inequities of their relationships with one another. These particular risks, among many others, emphasise the ethical and political dimensions of relationships among the participants and subject to critical scrutiny claims that research projects confer particular kinds of benefits. Educational research is indeed a 'risky business', but this should not deter researchers from engaging in the practice. It is the purpose of *Strategic Uncertainties* to apply theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous and experientially grounded critique to the 'murky shadows' and 'no-go areas' of contemporary educational research.

The title of this book, *Strategic Uncertainties*, is taken from the text of Ian Stronach and Maggie MacLure (1997), *Educational Research Undone: The Postmodern embrace*. The authors focused on

postmodern researchers' efforts to avoid being caught in the snares of:

the binary oppositions that have traditionally promised the comforts of certainty in philosophical thinking – between reality and appearance, reason and superstition, causes and effects, meaning and language, identity and imposture, local and universal etc. – they choose *not* to choose between them, not to work to transcend them, nor, importantly, to ignore them, but instead to complicate the relations *between* them. (p. 5; *emphasis in original*)

According to Stronach and MacLure (1997):

The kind of opening which such work attempts is that of the *rupture* – or interruption and disruption – in the (uncertain) hope that this will generate possibilities for things to happen that are closed off by the epistemologies of certainty....These are uncanny openings, then. They rupture things, not in order to let the light pour in, but to make it harder to see clearly. They open spaces which turn out not to be spaces, but knots, complications, folds and partial connections. It is impossible even to tell for sure whether they are openings or closings, since they are also blocking manoeuvres, which would prevent escape routes to happy endings...We try to practise this kind of **strategic uncertainty** throughout, and within this book. Our aim is to mobilise meaning...rather than to fix it. (p. 5; *emphasis in original*; **emphasis added**)

Elaborating and expanding on these propositions by Stronach and MacLure (1997), the content of *Strategic Uncertainties* is a set of accounts by contemporary educational researchers of the ethics, politics and risk of their own research projects. While those accounts draw on a multiplicity of theoretical, methodological and empirical resources to frame and inform their respective engagements with educational research, they have in common a general commitment to, and at the same time an ongoing interrogation of, the ideas encapsulated in the term 'strategic uncertainties'.

Significance

It is no coincidence that the term 'strategy' originated with the Greek word *strategos*, which referred to an Athenian general in the fifth century BC. Thus strategy was a military term meaning a battle plan, now used in more general terms as a plan of action. A strategy, by its very nature, implies some degree of uncertainty, since in planning for future action, as in a battle that is yet to take place, one can never be completely sure about what will happen. The most effective strategists, it can be argued, are those who allow for flexibility and for dealing with the unexpected.

From that perspective, there are three points of particular significance within the theme of 'strategic uncertainties'. Firstly, the design and development of contemporary educational research are usually uncertain proceedings, beset by tensions, competing external pressures and often an uneasy ambivalence on the part of the researchers about the enterprise. For example, where research is funded, researchers might feel that they owe some sort of allegiance to their sponsors that might conflict with their loyalty to the educational institution where they work.

Secondly, the switch from singular to plural case for 'uncertainties' reflects the multiple possible ways in which the ethics, politics and risk of educational research might be enacted in particular situations. For instance, the principle of informed consent suggests that all participants should be thoroughly aware of the aims and possible outcomes of the research, and that they should signify their agreement to be involved on an individual basis. However, in schools it is often the practice for a principal or teacher to consent to participation on behalf of students. This practice evokes the multiple and sometimes competing interests and speaking positions imbricated in a seemingly straightforward element of planning and conducting educational research. Thus *Strategic Uncertainties* can be said to deal with a variety of uncertainties rather than with uncertainty *per se*.

Thirdly, the adjective 'strategic' signifies that the authors share a belief that it is beneficial to engage with the tensions and limitations of educational research in an attempt to enhance and refine its elements and outcomes. This we believe is preferable to the alternatives: that is, to fail to acknowledge the ubiquity of such tensions and limitations, or else to avoid participating at all in a field of research where the risks of power differentials and marginalisation are legion.

In recent years, educational research has been subjected to a fair degree of 'bad press' (Pring, 2000). It is criticised for being fragmented, built on such a variety of databases that a global view of education is scarcely possible. Educational researchers would seem to be forever embarking on new areas of research rather than developing what has gone before. They are said to base their opinions on their own ideologies or political purposes, rather than on the disinterested pursuit of truth. The methodology employed, usually qualitative, is supposedly sometimes flawed and lacking in rigour. Research papers are ostensibly often written in complex language and are published in journals that few people, other than educationalists, would be likely to read. While some truth, no doubt, pertains to these criticisms, the critics often ignore the other side of the argument. The authors of this book perceive engaging with the strategic uncertainties of educational research as one way of presenting that

alternative case.

Martin Bibby (1997) has noted that “there has been little discussion of the ethics of educational research” (p. 1). Despite the earlier publication of Burgess’ (1989) edited book *The Ethics of Educational Research*, and the subsequent publication of texts such as the edited books *Situated Ethics in Educational Research* (Simons & Usher, 2000) and *The Ethics of Educational Research* (McNamee & Bridges, 2002), *Strategic Uncertainties* seeks to redress this evident shortcoming identified by Bibby through an explicit focus on ethical issues. In other fields of research, notably medical science, the issue of ethics has received, and continues to receive, protracted attention and has generated considerable debate. Ethical and moral behaviour in educational institutions has also sometimes been the focus of attention. However, in the arena of educational research it would seem that researchers might maintain formal ethical standards (through, for example, informed consent or the protection of anonymity) without engaging in explicit discussion of what the ethical dimension might actually mean. Bibby (1997) argues that for educational researchers to secure benefits for the participants in research without access to more literature on the ethics of the field would be difficult if not impossible. We agree, and we also accept the responsibility of educational researchers to help provide that literature if it does not exist. Defining and evaluating the precise nature of educational benefit is a difficult task and can be said to provide another element of the strategic uncertainties that have been addressed in this book.

Politics in its simplest sense may be perceived as referring to government or the state. In the context of educational research, politics has a far more profound and subtle connotation. Here we are concerned with notions of power but not necessarily of dominance. We seek to move beyond the binary oppositions often associated with such notions, such as the powerful and those whom they control, and to consider whether power can work in either direction, as authors such as Foucault (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000) have theorised. Thus, for example, where the researcher can work together with the researched, or the educator with the student, to achieve a common and mutually beneficial goal, some of the risks of educational research might be overcome. From that perspective, the university is a complex political institution, usually hierarchical in structure, but in the contemporary world it can no longer be regarded as autonomous. Even those at the top of the hierarchy are themselves subject to higher powers outside the university: the government agencies, financial bodies or multinational corporations that provide the funding. It is therefore vital that in such a political structure the role of the student is recognised as an integral and necessary part of the whole.

Process and Structure

The notion of strategic uncertainties has enabled a diverse group of researchers from a number of educational institutions in Australia and overseas to come together and to engage in a shared project. Some but not all of the authors contributed to the theme issue of the *Queensland Journal of Educational Research* (Coombes & Danaher, 2001), where the focus was on the costs and benefits of education research in answer to the question “*cui bono?*” (who benefits?). In *Strategic Uncertainties*, researchers have had the opportunity to move to another stage of analysis of their research. The intention has never been merely to indulge in morbid introspection in order to confirm our suspicions about the inherent risks of educational research. Each author has examined the issues pertaining to his or her own particular field in order to plan a practical and useful strategy to proceed further. We believe that reflection can be a precursor to change or transformation where it is deemed necessary.

The topics of the 14 chapters in *Strategic Uncertainties* are as widely ranging and as individual as the authors, yet they are united by a common focus as stated in the book’s subtitle: *Ethics, Politics and Risk in Contemporary Educational Research*. In pre-publication meetings and in ongoing discussions, the authors have concurred that these three issues are an integral part of educational research, yet they believe that the problems are not insurmountable. The various ways in which the researchers have approached these issues have produced some richly varied viewpoints.

The three editors have divided the text into four sections, each focusing on a particular theme. These themes are by no means discrete, and some of the chapters could quite easily fit into more than one category. However, it is felt that to provide a logical structure and to facilitate the reading and understanding of the text such a division has best served our purpose. Section One (edited by Patrick Alan Danaher) is entitled *Researching Language and Literacies*. Here five authors have focused on the language and literacies of students from primary school to adult postcompulsory and pre-undergraduate learners. In Section Two (edited by Mike Danaher), *Research Collaborations*, one sole and two joint authors have described and analysed their experiences as collaborative researchers. Section Three, *Researching Environments and Spaces* (edited by Phyllida Coombes), concentrates on a variety of educational environments, including the spaces occupied by female academics and ethnic minority and mobile communities, and moves outside the classroom to consider the implications of the germane ecological issue of whaling. Finally, in Section Four, *Researching Technologies* (edited by Mike Danaher), attention shifts to the relationship between education and technology at the secondary and tertiary levels. Máirín Kenny has contributed the respondent's conclusion.

The text of *Strategic Uncertainties* has eventuated from a group of authors who among them possess considerable experience in educational research. All are educationalists, though they are engaged with a wide diversity of practice, institutions and students. The contributors, through their experiences with their own particular educational research, can relate with empathy to the focal issues of ethics, politics and risk that underpin this text. Each chapter is linked to a particular theoretical base that can provide a sturdy framework for research practice. *Strategic Uncertainties* does not claim to provide all the answers to the problems of educational research, but the editors hope that the book will open up some significant and compelling fields of inquiry.

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In: Strategic uncertainties: ethics, politics and risk in contemporary educational research. Post Pressed, Flaxton, Qld, pp. 9-10. ISBN 1 876682 72 8. As the authors represented in this section of the book ably demonstrate, researching language and literacies is a strategically uncertain enterprise " or a "risky business"™, as several of the authors in this book term it " imbued with ethical and political responsibilities and imbricated with risks connected directly with people's™ life chances and lifeworlds.