

# RESEARCHING WITHIN THE EDUCATIONAL MARGINS: SELECTED ANSWERS TO THE ORGANISING QUESTIONS

Deborah L. Mulligan and Patrick Alan Danaher

## Introduction

This chapter concludes this book about researching within the educational margins, and about effective and sustainable strategies for communicating and articulating the diverse voices that strive to be heard within those margins. The chapter does this by presenting selected responses to the book's five organising questions that were posed in Chapter 1:

1. How can education researchers help to analyse and explain *why and how* some individuals and groups come to be learning within the educational margins, and what the *effects* of learning within the educational margins for those individuals and groups are?
2. How can education researchers develop and apply *effective strategies for researching* with individuals and groups who are learning within the educational margins?
3. How can education researchers maximise the *innovativeness, reciprocity and utility of their research methods* for the marginalised participants in their research?
4. How can education researchers contribute to *educational fringe dwellers communicating their experiences and articulating their voices*?
5. How can education researchers assist the marginalised participants in their research to *become successful educational border crossers*?

In re-engaging with these organising questions, it is timely also to recall the book's division into five sections:

- Section 1: Contextualising and conceptualising researching within the educational margins.
- Section 2: Researching with children and marginalised youth.
- Section 3: Researching about cultural differences and intercultural experiences.
- Section 4: Researching about informal learning and with older learners.
- Section 5: Applications and implications of researching within the educational margins.

Against that backdrop, the chapter is organised around the following two sections:

- An initial distillation of selected themes arising from the preceding chapters' content.
- A targeted alignment of these themes to address the book's five organising questions.

## Selected Themes Arising from the Preceding Chapters' Content

From the numerous potential collections of ideas that presented themselves from the preceding chapters, we have selected three themes that we have distilled from those chapters that we consider reasonably representative of the widely ranging and richly illustrated propositions traversed in those chapters pertaining to researching within the educational margins:

- The importance of individualised learning, not only for the participating individuals, but also for the holistic wellness of society as a whole.
- The continuing constraints of educational marginalisation and the deleterious effects that these constraints have on the education system itself.
- The importance of the contexts of learning not being limited by formalised, tightly controlled philosophies of what it is to be an effective learner.

### The importance of individualised learning for the holistic wellness of society

In Chapter 3, Michelle Jayman argued persuasively that programme evaluation and development in the United Kingdom should include systematic strategies for harnessing the “unique voice” of the child in order to generate authentic and comprehensive understandings of the effects and the effectiveness of educational interventions designed to enhance children’s educational outcomes. More broadly, this chapter demonstrated the interdependent relationship between the individual experiences of the “targets” of educational interventions and the overall success of such interventions. Or to express this crucial proposition a little differently, programmes intended to increase learning outcomes can have deleterious unintended consequences that become apparent only by systematically mapping the participants’ experiences. If those experiences are negative, the holistic wellness of society cannot be progressed.

In Chapter 4, Corey Bloomfield and R. E. (Bobby) Harreveld pursued a similar proposition, but from the perspective of an alternative learning programme in Central Queensland, Australia. Methodologically, the authors elaborated ethical issues pertaining to informed consent and insider status related to researching with the marginalised youth who participated in that programme. The “institutional othering” that their analysis revealed as prompting the need for such a programme had created a fundamental disjuncture between the young people’s individualised learning on the one hand and the holistic wellness of the community to which they belonged on the other hand. From this perspective, alternative learning programmes can function to bring these two phenomena into closer alignment.

In Chapter 11, Mike Danaher explored the potential connection between individualised learning and the holistic wellness of society as encapsulated in a study tour to China in November 2018 by a group of Australian undergraduate students. Deploying the notion of critical interculturality to inform his research within this particular educational margin between the two societies, the author identified instances of transformed awareness by individual study tour participants that illustrated their attentiveness to a broader concern for intercultural understandings based on mutual rapport and shared respect. At the same time, some students’ utterances demonstrated the difficulty of shifting sometimes entrenched beliefs in a relatively short time frame. Nevertheless, the chapter reinforced the need for nuanced and sophisticated critical thinking as a vital element of effective cultural exchanges.

In Chapter 17, Deborah L. Mulligan interrogated the tragic phenomenon of older men’s suicide rates as a stark reminder of the absence of meaningful individualised learning for those men, and hence of a serious equivalent absence of the holistic wellness of the communities to which they belonged. The chapter investigated specific, all-male programmes – the Men’s Sheds movement and The Older Men’s Network (TOMNET) – as carefully targeted responses to these two parallel absences in South East and South West Queensland, Australia. The author also explored researcher reciprocity and situated ethics as important conceptual considerations when researching within these particular educational margins. This chapter highlighted poignantly and powerfully the potentially life changing and transforming dimension of the indivisible link between individualised learning and the holistic wellness of society.

In Chapter 18, Brian S. Hentz elaborated that same link from the different perspective of involuntary job loss for older, professional men in the United States. Drawing on phenomenological analysis, the author identified considerable divergence in the responses of individual men to this often traumatic situation. The individuals who demonstrated the highest degree of adaptive resilience in this study exhibited more developmentally complex ways of meaning-making, positioning themselves as “narratives” with subsequent chapters to be written in their lives. More widely, this kind of contained courage and individualised

resilience against the backdrop of systemic marginalisation was a recurring premise that was enacted in varied ways in several chapters in the book.

### The deleterious effects of the constraints of educational marginalisation on the education system

In Chapter 6, Jennifer Clutterbuck articulated how a particular education system was complicit, even if inadvertently and unintentionally, with the distinctive constraints of educational marginalisation, and in doing so contributed directly to the seriously deleterious effects of such marginalisation. The chapter demonstrated how OneSchool – an online student management system used in government schools in Queensland, Australia – viewed, governed and even “created” specific categories of marginalised learners. The author illustrated this disturbing argument by reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ Indigenous languages, as well as to a student’s acceptance of a “datafied” version of himself as his real identity. This situation also meant that the education system itself was less authentic, empowering and productive than it might otherwise be.

In Chapter 7, Christian Quvang presented segments of the narrative of Nanna, a young Danish woman with special educational needs. The narrative was conducted several years after the occurrence of the schooling experiences that Nanna recalled in the narrative. Despite glimpses of family members and teachers who sought to encourage and support Nanna, the narrative demonstrated that the education system largely failed to do so, and by contrast contributed to her continuing sense of educational marginalisation. The author linked this systemic failure for Nanna with the additional insights afforded by theorising educational exclusion and inclusion in terms of different kinds of relationships.

In Chapter 9, Bronwyn Wong drew on action research to co-construct with a group of her fellow teachers in an Independent Christian school in New South Wales, Australia her and their strategies for resisting the educational marginalisation of individual teachers by the market-driven schooling system in which they worked. These strategies were animated by the participants’ shared Christian faith, synthesised by the author’s Tripod of Shalom that constituted a crucial counterpoint to the competitive individualism of the schooling system that marginalised their students and them. The deleterious effects of this marginalisation notwithstanding, the action research project elicited more transformative understandings of teaching and learning that empowered the participants to work towards new educational practices. More widely, this interplay among marginalisation, resistance and in certain cases transformation was evidenced also in some other chapters in the book.

In Chapter 12, Samantha Burns and Patrick Alan Danaher investigated the inextricable links between individual learners and a national education system that in turn highlighted the contextual specificity and the cultural distinctiveness of those links. The chapter presented elements of the first-named author’s doctoral study about the educational experiences of a group of Dhofari women who were studying English language undergraduate courses in Oman. Informed by critical interculturality, the analysis identified the highly varied ways in which individual participants and their families interpreted and derived meaning from the widescale national changes enacted by the former Sultan Qaboos. In this situation, the character of the educational marginalisation experienced by the participants was more ambiguous and ambivalent than was the case with other chapters in the book.

In Chapter 13, Geoff Danaher and Patrick Alan Danaher interrogated the enduringly deleterious effects of education systems on members of the occupationally mobile fairground or show communities in Australia and Great Britain. The authors contended that these communities engaged in educational border crossing, moving across jurisdictions and systems, in ways that rendered them as invisible or as deviant from the perspectives of those jurisdictions and systems. At the same time, the chapter mobilised an updated version of the

concept of border crossings to illustrate the countervailing argument that, by virtue of this same educational border crossing, individual students and their families, and also teachers and administrative leaders, were able to generate material improvements to educational provision for these occupationally mobile learners. Likewise, as educational border crossers themselves, the authors and their fellow researchers engaged carefully with issues of rapport, reciprocity and representation to make their research within this particular educational margin as authentic and mutually beneficial as possible.

In Chapter 15, Marlyn McInnerney illustrated the material constraints of alienating education systems and their deleterious effects on individual learners and their families in her account of women schooling their children on their generally very large farms or properties in remote Queensland, Australia. As a member of this community with her own property, the author reflected on her application of insider research to understand the convergent and divergent approaches to schooling their children implemented by her fellow mothers and property owners. On the one hand, the participants discussed particular innovations that facilitated these schooling approaches. On the other hand, these innovations were developed against the backdrop of a largely unheeding education system that in turn was less effective than it might otherwise have been owing to this devaluing of certain kinds of diversity of approach and experience among the recipients of that system.

#### Learning contexts not being limited by formalised, highly controlled philosophies of effective learners

In Chapter 5, Naomi Ryan explored a specific flexible learning programme for marginalised youth in South West Queensland, Australia. What emerged clearly from the author's analysis of that programme was the opportunities for educational innovativeness afforded by empowering school-level and pedagogical leadership that refused to be constrained by a tightly controlled philosophy of who and what effective learners and learning are. Acting in concert with this more inclusive and empowering approach, the author enacted particular ethnographic research strategies to exhibit insight and sensitivity when engaging with the programme's multiple stakeholders. Flexibility and attentiveness to individual needs and local contexts emerged as powerful findings for learners, educators and researcher alike.

In Chapter 8, Karen Glasby demonstrated equivalent flexibility and innovativeness in her design and implementation of her qualitative case study of autistic individuals transitioning to post-secondary school opportunities in South West Queensland, Australia. The chapter examined the effectiveness of this approach in terms of the participants' agency, capacity and voice. As with the researcher's strategies, so too with the education system needing to be open to more nuanced and situated understandings of young autistic individuals if the latter's educational experiences were to be meaningful personally and to facilitate sustainable post-school earning and learning possibilities. From this perspective, a single, "one size fits all" policy would elide crucial individual differences and contribute to the students' already existing educational marginalisation.

In Chapter 10, Megan Forbes generated corresponding findings from her study of the complex interplay between acts of memorialisation and individual and collective social and emotional wellbeing on the part of Aboriginal communities in rural and remote areas of South West Queensland, Australia. Similarly, the author applied the interpersonally authentic and situationally specific process of yarning, developed by the communities themselves, as a means of researching ethically and reciprocally in this particular educational margin. The chapter demonstrated how privileging participants' voices, against the backdrop of their prior and continuing marginalisation, can contribute to challenging that marginalisation. This demonstration had wider implications about the common humanity of research participants and researcher that resonates also with other chapters in this book.

In Chapter 14, Linda Clair Warner, Pirita Seitamaa-Hakkarainen and Kai Hakkarainen explored the innovative research strategies that they used to investigate the informal learning attending collective quilting in Aotearoa New Zealand. Linking the quiltmakers' marginalisation with inaccurate stereotypes about quilting as a rule-bound activity that restricts creativity, the authors established that, by contrast, the quiltmakers engaged in highly creative and innovative approaches to their craft that constituted the authors' "Apprenticeship Model of Craft Community Learning". Likewise, the chapter discussed the authors' creative and innovative approach to researching ethnographically with this informal learning community. In both cases, the quiltmakers/researchers became border crossers and generated new knowledge of a previously poorly understood phenomenon.

In Chapter 16, Brian Findsen presented a selected distillation of research strategies and findings related to his decades of work as a scholar concerned with learning in later life. The chapter included examples of particular research projects conducted by the author in Aotearoa New Zealand and in Glasgow, Scotland. The author advocated a research approach predicated on participatory strategies and directed at honouring the integrity of older adult learners. Again centralised, homogenised, system-level constructions of "normal" learners and learning were displaced by more contextualised, heterogeneous and participant-led understandings of such learners and learning.

### **Aligned Themes to Address the Book's Organising Questions**

In this section of the chapter, we build on the three themes elicited in the previous section and align them with the book's five organising questions. This textual strategy is designed to synthesise responses to those questions that engage with some of the diversity and sophistication of the analyses in the book's preceding chapters, while also inviting readers to re-engage with those chapters, and thereby to encounter even more of that diversity and sophistication.

How can education researchers help to analyse and explain *why and how* some individuals and groups come to be learning within the educational margins, and what the *effects* of learning within the educational margins for those individuals and groups are?

If we extrapolate from our discussion in Chapter 2, where we articulated wicked problems as one possible way to conceptualise educational marginalisation, such marginalisation emerges as multi-causal and multifaceted, and also resists single, simplified solution. From this perspective, the reasons why, and the processes by which, particular individuals and groups come to be learning within the educational margins are as diverse as the contexts in which those individuals and groups strive to learn. At the same time, rigorous research strategies can identify specific causes, and can trace the genealogy of those causes over place and time. Similarly, the multitudinous effects of educational marginalisation on those individuals and groups can be mapped and evaluated within the governance and power networks that frame and constrain their learning.

For instance, in Chapter 6, Jennifer Clutterbuck analysed the causes of particular groups' educational marginalisation in terms of massive, system-wide data infrastructures operating in government schools in Queensland, Australia. Likewise, the effects of those infrastructures on the learning outcomes of those groups were highly deleterious, perpetuating existing inequities and prompting some individuals to assume their assigned and negative identities as their own. Similarly, Bronwyn Wong used Chapter 9 to link a market-driven schooling system in New South Wales, Australia with negative educational outcomes for her fellow action researchers and herself, and also for their students. The effects of learning within these educational margins were demoralising and destructive for teachers and students alike. Moreover, in Chapter 15, Marlyn McInnerney analysed the educational

marginalisation of women living in remote areas of Queensland, Australia in terms of the women's physical and sociocultural distance from the centre of educational decision-making in metropolitan Brisbane.

How can education researchers develop and apply *effective strategies for researching* with individuals and groups who are learning within the educational margins?

It is clearly crucial for researchers to avoid inadvertently contributing to the continuing disenfranchisement of individuals and groups who are learning within the educational margins. This could be done, for example, by unintentionally misrepresenting the diversity of experiences among those individuals and within those groups, prompting ill-advised, superficial policy prescriptions that might benefit some learners but further marginalise others. Accordingly, researchers must ensure that their research strategies are effective in engaging comprehensively and directly with the distinctive contexts in which individuals and groups experience educational marginalisation, and in generating new and informed understandings that challenge existing prejudices and stereotypes.

For instance, in Chapter 3, Michelle Jayman demonstrated how carefully targeted educational intervention programme evaluations in the United Kingdom can be successful if they include equally carefully developed techniques for recording, respecting and understanding the “unique voice” of the child who is positioned as the recipient and the hoped-for beneficiary of such evaluations. Similarly, Naomi Ryan exemplified in Chapter 5 how her distinctive application of ethnographic research, exhibiting researcher insight and sensitivity, contributed to her comprehensive mapping of the diverse and sometimes contradictory experiences and worldviews of different participants and stakeholders in a flexible learning programme in South West Queensland, Australia. Furthermore, in Chapter 16, Brian Findsen used his account of the philosophical, pragmatic and ethics issues encountered by later life learning researchers, grounded in his own research in Aotearoa New Zealand and in Glasgow, Scotland, to explain how such research can be participatory and even emancipatory.

How can education researchers maximise the *innovativeness, reciprocity and utility of their research methods* for the marginalised participants in their research?

We assume and expect that researchers seek to act ethically and professionally, and that they employ research methods that are appropriate for the concerns and contexts of the participants with whom they research. Yet researching effectively and ethically within the educational margins sometimes requires new and innovative approaches to existing strategies, and/or entirely new strategies that align more closely with the material realities of particular marginalised communities. For example, in Chapter 19, the first-named author related her provocation about researchers be(com)ing activists to her determination that reciprocity should be “real world” in character, and should be situated in the aspirations and needs of the research participants rather than deriving primarily from the researcher's desires.

For instance, in Chapter 4, Corey Bloomfield and R. E. (Bobby) Harreveld interrogated such ethical issues as informed consent and insider status when navigating the affordances and challenges of insider and outsider research with participants in an alternative learning programme in Central Queensland, Australia. Likewise, Samantha Burns and Patrick Alan Danaher used Chapter 12 to investigate Dhofari women's experiences of studying English language undergraduate courses in Oman, with Samantha combining the roles of researcher and the students' former teacher, and using her finely honed intercultural competence to develop rapport and trust with the participants. Additionally, in Chapter 14, Linda Claire Warner, Pirita Seitamaa-Hakkarainen and Kai Hakkarainen demonstrated heightened innovativeness and utility in their employment of ethnography to work closely with the two

quiltmaking communities in Aotearoa New Zealand with whom they developed contextually appropriate reciprocity.

How can education researchers contribute to *educational fringe dwellers communicating their experiences and articulating their voices*?

A key element of this book's focus, represented in the book's subtitle, has been directed at communicating and articulating the diverse and multiple voices that can and should be heard when researching within the educational margins. Yet this seemingly straightforward goal is sometimes fraught with challenging questions. For example, whose voices should be communicated and articulated? What should researchers do if those voices are contradictory and discordant rather than being expressed consistently and in harmony? How do researchers avoid having their judgements swayed by individuals and groups with strong voices arising from their dominant speaking positions? By contrast, how can researchers seek to meet individuals and groups whose voices are typically unheard, and which strategies can they use to generate rapport and trust with those whose voices they consider should be heard more often and should be spoken more loudly? Researchers need to dig deeply into their methodological toolkits to be able to address these kinds of thought provoking queries.

For instance, in Chapter 7, Christian Quvang demonstrated the effectiveness of the facilitated retrospective narrative that he conducted with Nanna about her experiences as a young woman with special educational needs in Denmark as one successful approach to assisting educational fringe dwellers to communicate their experiences and to articulate their voices. Similarly, Karen Glasby explained in Chapter 8 how carefully tailored research strategies directed at optimising strengths and at minimising potential risks for participants were implemented in her study of the post-secondary school opportunities of autistic individuals in South West Queensland, Australia. In Chapter 11, Mike Danaher applied the notion of critical interculturality as an analytic lens to interpret the heterogeneous assumptions and attitudes of a group of Australian university students about their study tour to China, thereby highlighting the research rigour that can derive from a sophisticated concept's application to thematic analysis in order to amplify participants' voices. Moreover, Geoff Danaher and Patrick Alan Danaher used Chapter 13 to exemplify how, understood as agential border crossers, education researchers can work collaboratively with Australian and British fairground or show communities to elicit participants' voices by means of such approaches as intercultural communication, nuanced vocality and co-authors of research presentations and publications.

How can education researchers assist the marginalised participants in their research to *become successful educational border crossers*?

Perhaps the most challenging, yet also the most potentially productive, element of research ethics is centred on moving from the somewhat passive and reactive injunction to "Do no harm in one's research" to the more positive imperative to "Do good with one's research", focused on the notion of research beneficence. Yet this imperative is attended by all manner of snares and traps for the unwary. For example, as we noted above, what might count as "good" for some individuals and groups in a marginalised community might have more negative outcomes for other individuals and groups. From a different perspective, allying oneself with certain individuals and groups in that community might – intentionally or unintentionally – challenge the formal and/or informal power grips that operate currently in the community. Nevertheless, we contend that researchers should be attentive to opportunities for working with marginalised participants in order to assist them to become successful educational border crossers.

For instance, in Chapter 10, Megan Forbes exemplified how her employment of the Indigenous practice of yarning was indispensable in her being able to enact research strategies based on active listening, respectful silence, attentiveness to what was not being said as much as to what was being said and awareness of voices being heard in the environments that for the participants constituted the community's lifeblood – all crucial elements of her goal of privileging the voices of Aboriginal communities in South West Queensland, Australia. Likewise, Deborah L. Mulligan explained in Chapter 17 how her research with older men in South East and South West Queensland, Australia included her explorations with them of the notion of contributive needs, which constituted a powerful and empowering counternarrative to contribute to their status as educational border crossers moving away from suicide ideation. Furthermore, in Chapter 18, Brian S. Hentz's phenomenological research with older men who had lost their jobs in the United States incorporated his facilitation of participants' narratives that included more enabling and potentially transformative accounts of their possible future lives.

### **Conclusion**

From the distilled discussion outlined in this chapter, and from the much more comprehensive accounts presented in the preceding chapters, it is clear that the applications and implications of researching within the educational margins that were canvassed in this final section of this book, and that have been elaborated in different ways in Chapter 19 and in this present chapter, are complex, contextualised, politicised, animated by aspirations of beneficence and empowerment, yet situated within historically constructed networks of power and regimes of truth. Relatedly, the continuing project of devising effective and ethical strategies for communicating and articulating the multiple voices associated with educational marginalisation is equally challenging and crucial.

As editors of and contributing authors to this book, we contend that, in diverse yet equally provocative and successful ways, the chapters in the book draw on high quality research, characterised by methodological rigour and theoretical sophistication, that can yield principled and practical insights that can support researchers and research participants alike. From this perspective, the reminder of the book's five sections, the identification of three themes running through the chapters and the synthesis of those chapters' responses to the book's five organising questions presented above all highlight the broader relevance and the wider significance of these varied approaches to researching within the educational margins, and these equally varied strategies for communicating and articulating the voices that can and should be heard within those margins.