

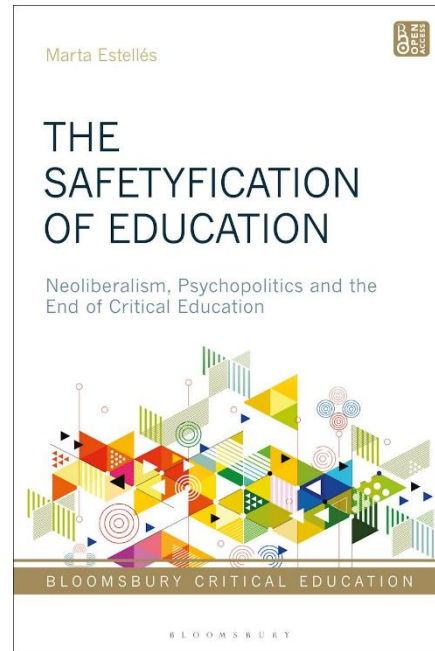
May 13, 2026

ISSN 1094-5296

Estellés, M. (2025). *The safetyfication of education: Neoliberalism, psychopolitics and the end of critical education*. Bloomsbury Academic.

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During the past two decades, the word “safety” has colonized the language of contemporary education: safe spaces, safe conversations, digital safety, safeguarding, safe schools. In *The Safetyfication of Education*, Marta Estellés offers a lucid and unsettling analysis of this phenomenon, revealing how the seemingly benign pursuit of safety has become a pervasive political logic that reshapes teachers, students, and schools. Rooted in both genealogical and empirical inquiry, her study situates the rise of safety discourse within neoliberal regimes of governance and shows how it quietly replaces the discomfort and contestation that sustain democratic education.



The book’s central argument is that *safetyfication*—the expansion of safety as a moral, pedagogical, and managerial ideal—operates today as a form of psychopolitics. No longer dependent on the “negative” techniques of discipline that Foucault described, neoliberal education governs through positive techniques of self-optimization, resilience, and emotional regulation. The security of the child, the wellbeing of the teacher, and the creation of psychologically “safe” climates all appear humane; and yet, as Estellés demonstrates, they simultaneously individualize social problems and depoliticize the educational project itself. The result is a subtle re-education of affects and civic dispositions, where compliance, prudence, and avoidance of risk masquerade as care.

The introductory chapter traces how safety has traveled from its original reference to the prevention of physical harm to a far broader regime of emotional and moral management. Estellés writes from within her own trajectory as a scholar of citizenship education. There she first observed that the rhetoric of safety, which intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, had begun to displace the vocabulary of participation and dissent. Her conceptualization of *safetyfication* thus arises from empirical observation as well

Palacios Díaz, D. (2026, May 13). Review of *The safetyfication of education: Neoliberalism, psychopolitics and the end of critical education*, by M. Estellés. *Education Review*, 33. <https://doi.org/10.14507/er.v33.4605>

as theoretical synthesis—a strength that grounds the book’s critical tone in lived educational experience.

Across six chapters, the argument unfolds in three movements. First, a genealogy reconstructs how, from the 1960s onwards, safety became a key concern of mass schooling. In English-speaking systems, moral panics over school violence and child abuse expanded the meaning of risk—physical, emotional, sexual—and produced new categories of the dangerous person. These anxieties dovetailed with the consolidation of neoliberalism’s economic and political repertoire: entrepreneurial freedom, individual responsibility, and the primacy of market solutions. Within education, these ideals translated into frameworks of control, surveillance, and risk management.

The second movement examines the consolidation of safety under neoliberal psychopolitics. By the 1990s, punitive discipline had given way to a therapeutic ethos. Safety was no longer a barrier against harm but a precondition for learning, linking emotional wellbeing to measurable outcomes. Here Estellés analyses policy texts, research agendas, and teacher-training frameworks that elevate resilience and self-regulation as cardinal virtues. The “psy-disciplines” expand their reach, recoding the classroom as a site for emotional optimization. Students become projects of self-management; teachers, guardians of mental hygiene. Safety, once external protection, turns inward as a moral technology of the self.

The third movement explores the contemporary re-semanticisation of safety through inclusion and recognition discourses. In a world newly attentive to trauma, identity, and inequality, safety now appears as the ethical condition of care. Yet this apparent progressiveness conceals what Estellés calls a trap: the same logics of control persist under the banner of justice. In what she terms progressive neoliberalism, policies of diversity and wellbeing are mobilized to legitimize marketized, managerial regimes. Even the pursuit of social justice is translated into a promise of therapeutic equilibrium and measurable performance. In this sense, the safety turn does not abandon neoliberalism; it perfects it.

The book’s empirical core situates these dynamics in Aotearoa New Zealand, a revealing case of “neoliberalism with a social conscience.” Drawing on interviews with teachers and students, Estellés documents the institutional pressures to keep students safe—pressures that yield paradoxical outcomes. Initiatives of wellbeing and self-care often result in over-regulation of everyday interactions, externalization of services, and privatization of support. Schools outsource emotional labor to consultants, psychologists, or digital platforms, producing what the author calls well-being washing: a managerial appropriation of care. Through these practices, safety becomes a currency of legitimacy; its promise circulates widely but delivers little transformation.

What distinguishes *The Safetyfication of Education* from prior critiques of the “vulnerability zeitgeist” (Ecclestone & Rawdin, 2016) is its genealogical patience. Estellés does not merely condemn safety as sentimental or excessive, she historicizes it as a technology of power that travels, mutates, and aligns with

broader political economies. Her use of psychopolitics—drawing on Han (2017) but inflected by feminist and post-Foucauldian insights—offers a powerful lens for understanding how neoliberalism governs not through repression but through the affective production of compliant subjects. In this sense, the book resonates with work on the therapeutic turn (Brunila, 2012), while extending their arguments into the terrain of contemporary educational governance.

The writing combines analytical clarity with ethnographic sensitivity. Vignettes from New Zealand classrooms punctuate the theoretical exposition, grounding abstract notions of power in the rhythms of everyday schooling. Teachers describe their anxiety over potential conflicts, their duty to protect, and their fatigue under constant scrutiny. Students recount being shielded from controversy, trained to communicate politely, and to avoid discomfort. Estellés reads these narratives not as failures of goodwill but as symptoms of a political economy that confuses comfort with care.

Her conclusion is intentionally provocative: “... safety has little to offer to a project of critical education” (p. X). Yet the provocation is tempered by nuance. She does not advocate the abolition of safety but its decentering: to refuse safety’s totalization as the organizing principle of education. Instead, she calls for a pedagogy that re-embraces uncertainty, risk, and disagreement as constitutive of democratic life. In her words, the task is not to glorify insecurity but to reclaim the educational value of discomfort, to cultivate citizens capable of inhabiting conflict without seeking immediate reassurance.

The historical reconstruction is particularly compelling. Estellés demonstrates that safety discourse emerged in tandem with managerial rationalities of efficiency and accountability. From the 1980s onwards, documents such as *Violent School—Safe School* (1978) and *New Zealand’s Tomorrow’s Schools Reform* (1988) reframed educational risk as an administrative problem. By the 2010s, with UNESCO and the OECD promoting safe learning environments, the vocabulary of safety had become a global *lingua franca*. In this respect, the author’s focus on UNESCO policy intersects with critical work from Latin America (e.g., Abramowski & Sorondo, 2022) that interrogates the moral and therapeutic drift of wellbeing agendas during the pandemic. Through this comparative lens, *safetyfication* appears not as a local idiosyncrasy but as part of a worldwide emotional-political regime.

The book also speaks powerfully to current research in Latin America, where scholars have described the emotionalization of education as a new moral order. Studies by myself and my colleagues (Palacios et al., 2024) reveal parallel dynamics of well-being washing and therapeutic governance in Latin American schooling. By placing Estellés’s analysis alongside these perspectives, one can see how the psychopolitical regime of safety travels across linguistic and cultural borders, adapting to distinct institutional histories while preserving its neoliberal DNA. This cross-regional dialogue enhances the book’s significance for the global South, inviting comparative inquiry into how safety and wellbeing discourses reconfigure citizenship education under different modernities.

Stylistically, the text is accessible yet intellectually demanding. Estellés avoids the jargon that often plagues Foucauldian critique, opting instead for a precise and elegant vocabulary. Each chapter concludes with a reflection that situates the preceding analysis within broader ethical and political questions: What kind of citizen is the safe citizen? What happens to pedagogy when risk is no longer an educational resource but a moral failure? The book's rhythm alternates between historical exposition and philosophical meditation, producing a reading experience that is both rigorous and affectively charged.

If the work has a limitation, it lies in its geographic concentration on the Anglophone world. While New Zealand offers an exemplary site to observe the moralization of safety, extending the analysis to post-colonial or non-Anglophone settings would illuminate other genealogies of the safetyfication subject. Estellés herself acknowledges this in her *Final Reflections*, encouraging researchers to examine the contradictions of safety in their own contexts. This gesture opens the concept of *safetyfication* to further theoretical thinking rather than closure.

Beyond critique, *The Safetyfication of Education* performs an act of intellectual recovery. By tracing how safety became synonymous with goodness, it exposes the political cost of this equivalence. In protecting ourselves from risk, we may also protect ourselves from change. In making every encounter comfortable, we impoverish our capacity for solidarity and dissent. Estellés reminds us that education's democratic promise has always depended on its willingness to unsettle—the courage to face what is unsafe because it is unknown. For researchers, the book provides a conceptual toolkit to interrogate the emotional governance of schools, the language of wellbeing, and the managerial appropriation of care. For practitioners, it offers a mirror to question everyday routines that prioritize tranquility over transformation. And for policymakers, it poses a difficult but necessary challenge: to imagine protection without pacification, care without control.

In an era saturated with protocols, apps, and metrics that claim to keep us safe, Estellés's question echoes long after closing the book: what do we lose when everything must be safe? Her answer is neither cynical nor nostalgic but insistently political—the loss is our capacity to think, feel, and act together in uncertainty. *The Safetyfication of Education* is thus both diagnosis and invitation: a call to recover the pedagogical value of risk and the democratic necessity of discomfort (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2025).

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Marta Estellés is a Senior Lecturer at the Te Kura Toi Tangata School of Education. She has previously been a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Auckland (2020-2022), a Lecturer at the University of Cantabria (2017-2019) and a visiting scholar at the University of British Columbia (2019, 2020) and Arizona State University (2015). Her research analyses educational policies, discourses, and curricula and their implications for critical education and democracy. Her research draws from a variety of disciplines, including sociology of education, curriculum and policy studies, social studies education, social theory, history and philosophy. Over the past three years, she has been working on a project funded by the Spencer Foundation, which explores the increasing confluence of safety and citizenship discourses in educational debates. During her career, Dr. Estellés has received several awards and appointments, including Best Conference Paper Award by the AERA Democratic Citizenship in Education SIG (2024), Research Excellence Award by the Division of Education (2023), and Best Dissertation in Humanities by the University of Cantabria (2018).

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