

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas

September 9, 2026

ISSN 1094-5296

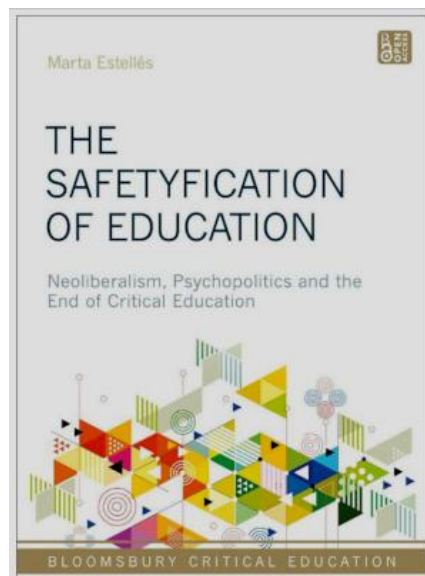
Estellés, M. (2025). *The safetyfication of education: Neoliberalism, psychopolitics, and the end of critical education*. Bloomsbury Academic.

138 pp.

ISBN 9781350533929

**Reviewed by Elsie Szecsy
Arizona State University
United States**

Over the past few years, I've learned that people's understanding of history may vary because each person's interpretation differs depending on their perspective. Also, some historical accounts can be brutal and uncomfortable to hear. Under these circumstances, how can educators help students get to the truth? The Italian researcher, Giovanna Leone (2017), in her work on historical reasoning, drew from the Ancient Greek and Foucault by invoking the word, *parrhesia*, "a kind of social discourse that, in addressing troubling issues, 'chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falseness or silence, . . . [and] moral duty instead of self-interest or moral apathy'" (p. 148). She also pointed out that being a *parrhesiastic* teacher can be perilous but also rewarding. When a teacher tells the uncomfortable truth about students' ancestors' colonial crimes, for instance, students are empowered by knowing the truth and consequently recognize the need to repair the damage. One could conclude that telling the truth enables students to feel safer enlightened than they would feel in the dark. In this light, I was eager to find out how Marta Estellés' concept of *safetyfication* might shed a different light on this issue from her perspective as a researcher of citizenship education.



Her book, *The Safetyfication of Education*, includes an introduction, six chapters, and final reflections. In the introduction, Marta Estellés gives an overview of what she refers to as *safetyfication*, "the process through which safety has acquired an omnipresent status in education" (p. 1). She states her aim to problematize this process and analyze its origins and political implications. The inquiry discussed in the book is based on her work in Aotearoa, New Zealand, where, beginning in 2020, she joined a group of scholars from the University of

Szecsy, E. (2026, September 9). 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.v33.4666>

Auckland who were investigating the impact of COVID-19 on New Zealand schools. Since this line of inquiry was too vast, she decided to focus on citizenship education, her Ph.D. research interest. She began a project on students' experiences of citizenship during the pandemic. One of the surprises of this study was teachers' constant invocation of safety. Sometimes, she noted, in the name of safety, teachers were preventing students from engaging in discomforting learning. At other times safety was used to limit student participation in school and wider society, often under racist and classist biases. Since she believed that education should raise critical consciousness and praxis (Freire, 2021), she found these uses of safety highly problematic. Safety was reconceptualizing the purpose of education away from political neutrality. Safety was providing hidden lessons about values and dispositions that a citizen should have, such as prudence, rule compliance, risk aversion, and conflict avoidance. She found that safety was contributing more to the political socialization of students than it was to citizenship education. From this discovery, she learned that this hidden curriculum (Apple & Beane, 2007) required further inquiry.

Subsequently, she received a grant for a research project that aimed to (a) explain how safety became an educational concern in the Anglophone world, and (b) study ethnographically how four secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand promote safe learning environments. In this book she reports on this research project. The first three chapters of the book define *safetyfication*, outline her study's theoretical framework, and explore the United Nations' and academia's contributions to the discourses guiding *safetyfication* in policy and practice. In the remaining three chapters, Estellés discusses educational policies and practices around safety in her New Zealand research sites.

In Chapter 1, she investigates the origins and development of “*safetyfication* of education” in the Anglosphere as this would be key in understanding the multiple and entangled meanings of safety in education and their link with neoliberalism. Included are four historical phases, which she summarizes as (a) the development of mass education (1850s-1970s) when physical safety to prevent future harm was of importance and safety was a matter of (self-) risk management; (b) the conservative neoliberal turn (1970s-1980s) where well-being is encouraged by fostering individual entrepreneurial freedom and relying on psychopolitical strategies to address school violence and child abuse issues; (c) the neoliberal consolidation period (1990s-2000s) when well-being concerns proliferated and emphasis on individual autonomy and responsibility in managing risks was emphasized; and (d) the progressive neoliberal turn (2010s-present) where education is conceived as a pathway to justice and a reframing of school violence to school safety and a “politics of recognition” (Fraser, 2019) emerged.

Estellés' theoretical framework drew from the work of post Foucauldian (e.g., Foucault 1980) critical sociologists and philosophers (e.g., Dardot & Laval, 2013; Han, 2017) and their critique of neoliberalism and its techniques of self-governance. She points out:

...while safety in its initial meanings was used to legitimize disciplinary mechanisms, surveillance and control in schools, it has progressively moved towards the more “friendly” power, as Byung-

Chul Han (2017) describes it of neoliberal psychopolitics. In other words, that neoliberalism has transformed the notion of “safety in education” from a focus on physical discipline to a form of psychopolitical control that emphasizes mental optimization and self-governance (p. 3).

In the third chapter, she explores discourses of safety promulgated by UNESCO and academia during the 2012-2022 decade. They were inspired by progressive educational discourses and elevated safety to the status of a necessity or right for all children and especially for vulnerable at-risk children. They were also framed by fear and the need to shape policy to save children from harm. The tropes of vulnerability and harm were particularly evident with respect to at-risk children.

This fear-driven narrative was reversed with a pro-active approach infused with hope and positivity and an assumption that these dangers can be managed and controlled. Another assumption is that the more schools are run like businesses with clear goals and accountability, the more risks are mitigated. A second solution-oriented approach involved the provisioning of counselling services and psychological support for those harmed. A third approach was primarily pedagogical interventions that were at the core of UNESCO policy. The fourth and final set of suggested interventions was behavior management strategies. The saviors are teachers and school leaders who are given an essential role in the safety of students.

Estellés also criticizes educational scholarship: “Despite the widespread use of the term safety by this literature, most of the articles analysed did not engage in any discussion on what this notion means and/or implies in education” (p. 48). Further, educational solutions often overlooked the underlying context of safety problems. Finally, the role of the state was absent, and proposed solutions rarely pointed to broader socio-economic and political changes. Only in one article (Waghid, 2015) did the author note a lack of reference to the broader structural context in debates about student safety.

In summary, Estellés enumerates these themes in both UNESCO policy and the academic literature she reviewed:

1. Safety is a precondition for learning.
2. Educational space can be emptied of psychological harm.
3. (Socially excluded) children are objects of protection and do not have participatory rights.
4. Safety problems are considered technical problems that can be resolved through educational intervention.
5. Educators (not the state) are risk problem solvers or safety providers.

Estellés concludes that these discourses are replete with benign overtones and perhaps good intentions. They also subtly contribute to forms of psychologization, depoliticization, and individualism supportive of neoliberal rationalities of government. These entities “do not have the power to emit binding educational policies, yet they play a key role in the spread and legitimacy provision of seemingly progressive ideas, which are then taken up and reshaped by policy makers and schools” (p. 54).

The remainder of the book focuses on New Zealand's educational policy and practices related to safe learning environments, especially with respect to education equity for its Indigenous Maori population. In Chapter 4 she discusses the history of the evolution of safety discourse in educational policy and practice from the late 1980s to the 2020s, especially considering New Zealand education's priority to ensure learning environments are safe, inclusive, and free from racism, discrimination, and bullying. A variety of private actors representative of various ideological views provide educational services to schools. Estellés considers this privatization one of several dangerous effects of the spread of safety discourses in education. Though New Zealand's policies are noteworthy internationally, hidden neoliberal underpinnings and consequences need deeper examination and analysis.

Chapter 5 focuses on the ethnographic study that Estellés conducted with four New Zealand secondary schools in 2022 and 2023. She experienced challenges associated with accessing these schools, the multiple meanings assigned to safety in each school, and the uniqueness of each school's culture. Through focus group interviews, students complained that the school's focus on well-being was superficial and teacher-dependent. Among teachers and students there was consensus that the biggest safety challenges were online safety issues. Also, both teachers and students noted emotional safety was an increasing concern. With respect to emotionally triggering controversial topics, several teachers avoided teaching about topics that could distress the students. Pressures to address cultural safety, however, were lower. Estellés concluded that safety, whether physical, behavioral, or cultural, is not without conflict.

In the sixth chapter Estellés reflects on the hidden curriculum of safety, focusing on the ways in which tacit norms, beliefs, values and dispositions taught at schools legitimize, reinforce, and (re)create forms of neoliberal self-governance and dissuade attempts to alter the socio-economic and cultural order. Safety means complying with norms and being obedient. Estellés proposes instead of asking, "How can we help students cope with their circumstances and manage their mental health?" we might ask, "What is wrong with society and how can we contribute to change that?" (p. 96). Then she discusses the dangers of conflict avoidance and preservation of social order and the essentialization of both culture and identity: avoiding discussion of controversies within/across cultures dissuades the development of broader inter/intracultural perspectives.

In the final chapter Estellés calls for a move away from safety discourses. They oppose both in theory and in practice, critical and democratic ways of understanding education and the world. She writes,

The *safetyfication* of education is simply reducing the imagination about what is possible in education. ... democratic education always involves the 'risk' of students become citizens-subjects of action, which implies the possibility of our acts of power as educators remaining 'unresolved'; ...claims for cultural recognitions can only be realized through 'risky dialogues' between cultures that can 'lead to estrangement and contestation as well as comprehension and mutual learning' (pp. 106, 107).

Estellés ends with these questions for the reader to consider: which risks are worth taking [and] for what purposes? Indeed.

The Safetyfication of Education offers insightful perspectives that pose questions about school safety discourse and its unintended consequences. “Safetyfying” education without addressing conflict and examining at their root the societal triggers causing it may result in something other than safety. Education policymakers, administrators, teachers, and anyone else interested in decolonizing education, truth-telling, and school safety would benefit from reading this book.

References

- Dardot, P., & Laval, C. (2013). *The new way of the world: On neoliberal society*. Verso.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. Harvester Press.
- Fraser, N. (2019). *The old is dying and the new cannot be born: From progressive neoliberalism to Trump and beyond*. Verso.
- Freire, P. (2021a). *Education for critical consciousness*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Freire, P. (2021b). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Han, B.-C. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power*. Verso.
- Leone, G. (2017). When history teaching turns into parrhesia: The case of Italian colonial crimes.” In C. Psaltis et al. (Eds.), *History education and conflict transformation* (pp. 147-167). Temple University Press.
- Waghid, Y. (2015). Cultivating responsibility and humanity in public schools through democratic citizenship education. *Africa Education Review*, 12(2), 253–265.

About the Reviewer

Elsie Szecsy is an emerita research professional at Arizona State University, where her research interests were on intersections among teaching, learning, and leadership, with institutional, organizational, and instructional arrangements in linguistically and culturally diverse education settings. She was involved in several documentation research projects in metro New York and metro Phoenix, Arizona, that aimed to improve Latino representation among high school and college graduates and among faculty and administrators in K-12 and higher education. Her research interests have since expanded to include humanities-based approaches to discover racial and other injustices in schools and other educational settings. Elsie holds an Ed.D. in Educational Administration from Teachers College, Columbia University.



About the Author

Marta Estellés is a Senior Lecturer at the Te Kura Toi Tangata School of Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. 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, 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. 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).



Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas



Education Review / Reseñas Educativas / Resenhas Educativas edited by Gene V Glass & Yanming (Ami) Ren (English), Gustavo E. Fischman (Spanish/Portuguese), and Stephanie

McBride-Schreiner (Managing Editor) and supported by the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, if the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.



Education Review is free-to-read and free-to-publish.

Disclaimer: The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.