A dangerous turn: the confluence of safety and citizenship discourses in educational scholarship

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A dangerous turn: the confluence of safety and citizenship discourses in educational scholarship

In recent decades, calls to foster safe learning environments have proliferated in the educational scholarship related to citizenship. Examples range from demands to keep young citizens safe in the digital world through to calls to hold safe conversations around controversial issues. These invocations of safety, however, have raised little opposition and debate. Using a Foucauldian lens, this article examines the 'truths' that underlie the discourses of safety and citizenship in the educational scholarship published from 2012 to 2022. In the 103 articles discursively analyzed, assumptions such as safety as an educational right, students as vulnerable objects of protection and teachers as safety providers are identified. The (dangerous) implications of these assumptions are critically discussed.

Keywords: citizenship education; safety discourses; literature review; Foucault

Introduction

Over the last few decades, the notion of 'safety' has acquired an omnipresent status in educational debates in a process that could be termed *safetyfication*. Safety, as a floating signifier, has not only permeated debates about disaster preparedness, physical and health education or student wellbeing, but also those related to citizenship. Indeed, guaranteeing safety in education has increasingly become for several scholars a way to fight against social inequalities (e.g., Carter Andrews et al., 2018).

Despite the increasing popularity of this term and the fertile discussions that have emerged from its antonym 'risk' in other social sciences (e.g., Beck, 1992; Giddens, 2002), safety has remained largely undertheorized in educational scholarship. As Smith (2014) has noted, notions of child safety appear to take on a sacred quality, which produces a series of 'truths' (Foucault, 1980) that have been taken for granted. These 'truths' of safety prompt affective, moral evaluations with dangerous political implications that require critical interrogation.

In this article, I use a Foucauldian lens to examine the confluence of safety and citizenship discourses in the educational scholarship published from 2012 to 2022. In particular, I explore the tacit assumptions that underlie these discourses.

Safety, citizenship, and education

Safety in education has been used to describe very diverse situations. Most popular conceptions have not only covered concerns of physical harm, but also notions of psychological and, often, cultural safety (Powell et al., 2020). Safety, however, has not always been a problem of educational concern, nor has it always been understood in the same way. Studies on the historical origins and developments of this concept have shown how safety concerns in education have not only acquired an unprecedented magnitude over the last decades but also expanded in meaning (see e.g., Sullivan, 2014). Initial calls for safety in educational contexts began in the twilight of the 19th century and were mostly related to the hazard prevention concerns that were arising in the labor world (Sullivan, 2014). Until the 1980s, educational debates about safety remained mostly restricted to concerns about physical integrity at schools, although they began to cover more areas of the curriculum. The neoliberal turn of the 80s initiated a move from child welfare to child protection/safeguarding in childhood policies, which brought the over-arching, psychological term of 'child abuse' to the forefront (Hyslop, 2022; Rogowski, 2015). During this time, as 'psy-' disciplines were becoming more influential in education (De Vos, 2012), arguably contributing to the production of the new neoliberal subject (Dardot & Laval, 2013), safety began to be understood as a psychological state needed for learning (e.g., Morrison et al., 1994). Over the last few decades, with the rise of what Ecclestone and Brunila (2015) call the 'therapization of social justice', safety has become increasingly pervasive in educational debates related to citizenship. To mention a few examples, anti-racist educational programs have claimed the

importance of holding ‘safe’ conversations around racism; calls for the inclusion of Indigenous students have made ‘cultural safety’ one of their main goals; and debates about youth digital participation have been particularly focused on how to ‘keep children and young people safe’ in the digital world. Despite the widespread acceptance of ‘safety’ in educational debates related to citizenship, there has been limited discussion on the meanings of this term and the consequences of its use.

Foucault’s investigations about power (1972, 1980, 2007) provide fruitful avenues to explore the discourses of safety in education. Using a Foucauldian lens, safety can be understood as a technology of power, as a way of conducting the conduct by creating a certain type of rationality that deems the practice of governance as ‘rational’. Safety discourses often operate to validate and authorize certain educational interventions. When the concept of safety is used in education contexts, a power relationship is articulated by recognizing the ‘citizen at risk’ who needs safety (or poses a potential danger) and by opening up (and restricting) possibilities of action. There has been, however, limited discussion on what is accepted as truth when talking about safety in educational debates related to citizenship. Examining the ‘truths’ embedded in the safety-education-citizenship triad will allow us to understand the subjects and possibilities/impossibilities produced by this discourse.

Theorizing safety in education: affective, moral, and political dimensions

Despite the widespread acceptance of safety in educational contexts, there has been limited discussion on how it operates in affective, moral, and political terms. Although safety has usually been described as a *state* of being protected from harm (e.g., Sullivan, 2014, p. 82), when we talk about ‘safe learning environments’, safety brings us into highly affective terrain. As studies on teachers and students’ perceptions of safety have pointed out, safety is

not only an ‘objective state’, but also a ‘subjective experience’, dominated by affects of control, confidence, uncertainty, anxiety, sense of vulnerability and fear (Hernández et al., 2010). Pro-safety initiatives in education are often driven by affects such as fear and anxiety of perceived risks (youth violence, sexual abuse, racism, etc.). These initiatives are somehow the expected educational response of a ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992) characterized by risk consciousness and avoidance. Yet, as Ahmed (2014, p. 68) explains, emotions such as fear and anxiety cannot be understood as a simple consequence of the ‘objectivity’ of threats and dangers. The language of safety involves the intensification of ‘threats’, and fear/anxiety would be the “effect of this process, rather than its origin” (p. 72). That is, the repetition of words related to safety (danger, harm, risk, etc.) elicits an affective response (fear, anxiety, sense of vulnerability, etc.) that grows upon repetition.

The affective responses that trigger and are triggered by the language of safety carry with them moral evaluations of what is prudent to do in schools and what is not. As some scholars have shown (Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2017), safety norms are increasingly informing what is accepted as appropriate and correct in schools to the point that any breach of the safety code prompts a ‘moral panic’. The discourses of safety, however, not only define *what is safe/correct* or *unsafe/incorrect*, but also *who is safe* and *who represents a danger* in educational contexts. The language and affects of safety help us connect with some people (those seen as vulnerable or ‘in danger’) while distancing us from others (those seen as a danger). As Ahmed (2014) would describe, the language of safety and its consequent repertoire of affects create a distinction between those who are in danger and those who represent a danger. In education, this distinction often reflects the adult-child dichotomy that positions children as vulnerable and immature in a dangerous adult world (Smith, 2014). But this is not always the case. In the educational discourse of safety, some children are also portrayed as a source of risk, especially when talking about school violence (Moore et al.,

2015). Under the logic of safety, those adults and children embodying a danger become legitimate subjects for fear (and, therefore, control, or pedagogical intervention). The distinction between the safe and the dangerous adults/children not only operates to justify exclusion measures, surveillance, or educational interventions but also to self-discipline the bodies (Foucault, 2007). In this sense, it is interesting to note that safety guidelines are often propelled by teachers afraid of being accused of 'breaking the rules' or even child abuse (Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2017).

In education, the language and affects of safety not only contribute to define the objects/subjects under threat and those that threaten, but also the solution to the problem of safety: the creation of safe environments. This response is often driven by feelings of compassion and protection desires. The idea of providing safe schools for (vulnerable) children generates a powerful narrative that inspires parents, educators, scholars, and policy makers (Walton, 2011). Even for those who have critiqued the paternalistic approach of safety initiatives in education, the ideal of safe schools offers a desirable aspiration and horizon to work towards, although for them children should "have more control and choice" over their safety (e.g., Moore et al., 2015). Some scholars, however, have questioned the very possibility of creating a safe learning environment (Barrett, 2010; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). As Barrett (2010) explains, the idea of safe spaces in education is a dangerous myth since the social interactions that occur in schools and classrooms do not take place in a vacuum.

A political analysis of the meanings and affects of safety in education could easily detect that these not only reflect socio-cultural experiences and hierarchies [1], but also reinforce pre-

[1] Studies indicate that understandings and feelings of safety are not universal, but vary in terms of gender (Hong & Eamon, 2012), race (Maffini & Dillard, 2021), culture/nationality (Ben-Arieh & Shimon, 2014) and are closely related to power relations and identity issues (Flensner & Von Der Lippe, 2019).

existing power dynamics. The above-explained distinction created by the discourses of safety between the 'dangerous' and the 'ones in danger' plays a key role in this process. The construction of the category of 'children at risk' has often been used to justify paternalistic interventions, accompanied with control and surveillance, to regulate their behaviors (Kelly, 2000; Smith, 2014; Warrington & Larkins, 2019). This is particularly the case with racialized students (Kennedy et al., 2019). The less-explored category of the 'dangerous adult' also has an imprint in children's imagination, which is not exempt from political implications. An interesting study conducted by Moore et al. (2015) about children's safety assessments and perceptions in Australia highlighted the value that children placed on the "'gut reactions' when they encountered new people", particularly "people from foreign countries, homeless people or people with different religions" (p. 70). Harden's (2000) exploration of children's feelings of safety also found children express concerns about their vulnerability in public life given their lack of trust in unfamiliar adults (strangers) and that this fear/sense of vulnerability reinforces their relegation into private spaces.

Even the more inclusive calls for safe spaces in education have dangerous political implications. These calls usually describe 'safe spaces' as places where students feel free to express their individuality (Flensner & Von Der Lippe, 2019, p. 277). This idea of the 'safe space', however, has been strongly criticized by several scholars for providing teachers and students with expectations of comfort (e.g., Flensner & Von Der Lippe, 2019; Zembylas, 2015). As these scholars have argued, classrooms in the name of safety become places where educators disregard any discomforting learning, producing a school culture in which conflict and controversy are displaced in favor of protection and comfort. As Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019) show, there are inherent tensions in dealing with controversial issues that the metaphor of the 'safe classroom' cannot resolve with its unproblematized promises of free individuality and protection from harm.

Finally, concerns about safety in education have not only been criticized for overriding children's participatory rights or instigating a culture of conflict avoidance, but also for diverting attention from students' material needs and broader forms of structural violence (Estellés, Romero, et al., 2023; Walton, 2011). As Beck (1992) explains, neoliberal societies prioritize the minimization of the arbitrary (risk) over meeting the material (need). In education, whether the management of risk is focused on introducing disciplinary techniques to guarantee safety or on providing spaces where students can have the freedom 'to be who and what they are', reducing the anxiety of risk becomes a priority over other material needs. Indeed, safety discourses are paramount in neoliberal societies where calls for economic deregulation coexist with calls for personal security as a manifestation of the individualization of social risk (Beck, 1992; Vandenbeld Giles, 2012). This individualization has also been noted by Walton (2011), who has analyzed how the problem of bullying in schools, framed as a behavioral issue, has been deeply depolitized in the discourses of safety and diversity. These discourses usually present the individual as both the problem and the solution, without considering broader forms of institutional discrimination (Walton, 2011).

In sum, safety discourses could be described as an example of what Popkewitz (2020, p. 2) calls "the paradox of the good intentions of inclusion" that exclude and abject. Analyzing the interplay between the affective, moral, and political dimensions of safety in education provides valuable insights into how safety operates in education, allowing for a critical interrogation of the assumptions that sustain this increasingly pervasive ideal.

The study

In this study, I performed a discourse analysis of the educational scholarship that entangles the concepts of safety and citizenship to identify the taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie this literature. Here, I understand 'discourse' in a Foucauldian (1972) sense; that

is, as a set of rules and practices that govern meanings in a particular area. From this perspective, discourses are not made of random words and statements, but rather are the "product of historical and social circumstances that provide the discursive practices—terminology, values, rhetorical styles, habits, and truths—that construct it" (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006, p. 655). My aim in this study was to explore the 'truths' (Foucault, 1980) that surround the safety-education-citizenship triad. In other words, I was interested in examining the assumptions upon which the notion of safety is used in the educational scholarship concerned with citizenship issues.

Search process and criteria

In this study, I reviewed the contemporary academic literature on safety-education-citizenship. This review was focused on peer-reviewed educational scholarship published from 2012 to 2022 over which time safety appears to have gained popularity in the field of citizenship (Estellés, Dawson, et al., 2023). I performed initial keyword searches in the databases of Scopus and ERIC, as the former contains a wide range of published interdisciplinary content and the latter provides extensive access to a broad range of educational literature.

I reviewed educational publications that combined safety and citizenship and searched for articles that included the term "safe*" together with others related to the field of citizenship such as civic, citiz* or politic* in their title, abstract, and/or keywords. Only peer-reviewed articles were included as they represent mainstream research. Only works written in English were included in the review.

The process of review inclusion/exclusion followed a similar procedure to that conducted by other scholars in the field of citizenship education (e.g., Sant, 2019). Figure 1 provides an overview of this process. Finally, 103 articles were included in this review. A list of the articles included in this review has been included as a supplementary file.

Analysis

The analysis was inspired by the work of Foucault (1972, 1980, 2007) and educational scholars who have further developed his ideas (Fejes, 2010; Fejes et al., 2018; Nicoll et al., 2013). I considered *discourse* as "the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation" (Foucault, 1972, p. 107). For this reason, the focus of the analysis was on identifying patterns or regularities of statements in the collected data (Fejes et al., 2018; Nicoll et al., 2013). The articles examined were treated as texts that illuminate the object of interest: the confluence of the concepts of safety and citizenship in educational scholarship literature. In the reading of the texts, attention was directed at "recurrent concepts, meanings, and relationships formed through regularities both within and between descriptions" (Fejes et al., 2018, p. 465). I particularly focused on the languages (rhetorical style, vocabulary, slogans, terms, etc.), rationales, claims and evidence provided (or omitted) that reappeared across the selected articles when mentioning safety in citizenship contexts. Following the work of educational scholars, such as Dunne (2009) and Fejes (2010), the following questions guided the analysis:

- What is being represented as truth when talking about safety in educational debates related to citizenship?
- What is made problematic (dangerous, risky, unsafe) and what is not?
- What subjectivities are made possible from how safety is constructed in the texts and what is disallowed? And, therefore, what is normalized, criminalized and pathologized?
- Who is positioned as responsible for the safety of the students/citizens at risk?

Findings

The educational literature reviewed, which combine notions of safety and citizenship, is focused on a variety of educational topics. The most prominent foci of the literature reviewed are digital citizenship, citizenship education and the teaching of controversial issues, yet other topics such as youth citizenship, school violence and gender and sexuality education were also prevalent. Most of the studies were US-based (42 out of 103), followed by Australia (7), UK (6) and Canada (5). Despite the popularity of the term 'safety' in the literature analyzed, most of the articles do not engage in any discussion on the definition and/or implications of this concept. Only 8 out of 103 critically question this notion somehow. Across the articles analyzed, the following assumptions were identified regarding the use of safety in citizenship and/or education contexts: 1) safety as a right, moral compass and, ultimately, a possibility, 2) students as objects of protection, 3) education as the solution to safety issues and 4) teachers as safety providers.

Safety as a right, moral compass and, ultimately, a possibility

Most of the articles analyzed conferred feelings of safety a status of educational necessity or right. The following quote extracted from Cornell and Limber's (2015) study on the conceptual challenges of bullying for policy efforts captures the rationale behind this idea well: "A school where children don't feel safe is a school where children struggle to learn. Every student deserves to thrive in a safe school" (p. 337). While most articles advocated for this notion without further justification, some explicitly stated its foundations based on biopsychological theories. This is the case, for example, of Klopper's (2021) research on South African parents' view of their role in the education of young children as democratic citizens. This study supports the idea of safety as an imperative to 'successful' education based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development (see p. 227). Others use Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy for this same purpose (e.g., Slade & Griffith, 2013).

From a social justice perspective, some articles highlight that feelings of safety are not only a sign of individual wellbeing, but also social inclusion (e.g., Cornell & Limber, 2015; Larrotta, 2019) and, as such, educational efforts *should* aim to foster these feelings. The main argument from this perspective points to perceptions of safety in educational settings being highly influenced by social conditions (race, gender, class, etc.). For this literature, the creation of safe spaces in education is essential to compensate for social inequalities. See, for example, the following quote by Larrotta's (2019) discussion on immigrant English learners:

> Educators everywhere are trying to figure out how to address this new reality – how to make sure that all students feel safe and able to learn, how to encourage critical thinking about daily events, and how to break down the manufactured fear of black and brown immigrants that keeps us from coming together to build alliances (p. 63).

The inspiring notion of safety as a right and imperative for a 'good' education was also very present in the literature focused on citizenship education and the teaching of controversial issues, which predominantly describes a safe learning environment as an imaginary, benign space where students feel secure to voice their opinions. See, for instance, the following quote by McSharry and Cusack's (2016) article on teachers' stories of engaging students in controversial action projects: "Classrooms can act as places where complicated issues are explored in 'extraordinary conversations' … and where students feel wholly safe in doing so" (p. 67). This safe space allows the creation of the desired citizens, who embody the virtues of moderation, tolerance, critical thinking, etc. One of the articles analyzed, however, raised serious concerns about the desirability of creating safe learning environments, given its civic implications for the discussion of controversial (i.e., uncomfortable) issues: "if implemented seriously, it [safety] would make the discussion of some topics almost impossible" (Ramsay, 2017, p. 154). Another exception to the safety approach described

above could be found in two articles (i.e., Evans et al., 2020; Karsgaard, 2019) that use the term 'safe*' to describe civic pedagogical experiences lacking depth and critical value.

Apart from these exceptions, the descriptions of safety were surrounded by taken-for-granted benign overtones, which made use of generic –rather than specific– language, as noted by other scholars (Walton, 2011). This combination provided the concept of safety with an aura of moral authority able to judge what is appropriate and what is not in educational contexts. As expressed by Larrotta (2019), "A learner who does not feel safe in the classroom will hardly be able to concentrate, study, or participate in adult education" (Larrotta, 2019, p. 56). Questions such as 'What is safety?' 'Safety for whom?' 'Who ensures safety?', etc. that contribute to relativize the moral principle of safety were only considered by a handful of exceptions in the literature reviewed (e.g., Dylan, 2012). The unquestioned moral authority of the term was accompanied with several affective invitations: from the fear and anxiety instilled by the dangers that stalk students through to the hopes infused by educational dreams. See, for example, the following quote by Mikhaleva's (2016) study on media literacy for young people:

> The growing generation should be prepared to live and survive in the information society; should be aware of their rights and benefits in this society, including potential harms and risks, and ways of safe behavior and self-defence in the digital world (p. 118).

As can be seen in the quotes above, both moral and affective dimensions were involved in the articulation of the widespread assumption of 'safety as an educational right'.

The assumption that underlies the idea of 'safety as a right' is not only that safe learning environments are better environments to learn in and necessary to form citizens and include disadvantaged groups, but also –and primarily– that these social spaces are *possible*.

Students as objects of protection

Most of the articles analyzed are very descriptive of the type of dangers and threats that students are exposed to. In particular, the literature focused on digital citizenship issues provides extensive details on types of online risks, appealing to a language of fear and anxiety in their descriptions with several references to "cyberbullying, online sexual exploitation, image-based abuse, exposure to sexual content online, and exposure to cyber-hate…, and recruitment to substance misuse and extremism" (Walsh et al., 2022, p. 2). Other popular risks highlighted by the literature include political polarization (Kennedy et al., 2018), extremism (Davies, 2016), racism (Hacker, 2015), homophobia (Bellini, 2012) and bullying (Shelley et al., 2021). Most of the literature reviewed are focused on the (often psychological) effects of the risks for the students, rather than on the (structural) causes behind these risks. See, for example, the following quote by Shelley et al.'s (2021) study on public perceptions of racial differences in the prevalence of bullying at schools that emphasizes the psychological effects of bullying, while leaving unquestioned its structural causes:

> Victims of bullying have higher rates of depressive symptoms, social disintegration, and negative self-perceptions (Solberg & Olweus, 2003), and display greater propensity toward gang involvement (Apel & Burrow, 2011), weapon carrying (Apel & Burrow, 2011), and delinquent actions (assault, lying, running away, drug use, vandalism, and theft; Decamp & Newby, 2015) (Shelley et al., 2021, p. 827)

The descriptions of risks in the literature reviewed are often outlined under the premise of student vulnerability, which positions them 'in need of safety'. While some openly critique

this framework for its connection with safeguarding measures[2], the assumption of children as 'objects of protection' is still present in those articles advocating for educational interventions, although in a more subtle form. Children in these cases are still regarded as, for example, not being aware of the dangers posed by digital technologies (Al-Abdullatif & Gameil, 2020; Gleason & von Gillern, 2018; Lewin et al., 2021), as lacking dialogical and critical skills or being susceptible of political radicalization (Kennedy et al., 2018). These implicit portrayals of students justify the focus on capability development and educational intervention shown in the next section.

In some of the articles analyzed, the subjects in need of protection are groups of students identified as particularly vulnerable, such as immigrant (Larrotta, 2019), LGBTQ+ (Bellini, 2012; Hsu, 2017), refugee (Thomas, 2016) and Muslim students (Jerome & Elwick, 2019). For this literature, the safety of these 'vulnerable' groups requires educational interventions directed at both the vulnerable students themselves –through enhancing their political agency– and the non-vulnerable (potentially dangerous) students –in the form of developing civic skills (tolerance, empathy, cultural responsiveness, etc.). While the portrayal of the 'vulnerable' child/student in need of safety is questioned by some literature reviewed (see Black et al., 2022b; Edwards, 2021), given the removal of agency that this image implies and its nexus with safeguarding measures, the implicit, parallel portrayal of the dangerous students/citizens remains unquestioned.

Education as the solution to safety issues

[2] See, for example, Edwards' (2021) critique on the nexus between vulnerability and safeguarding/surveillance derived from policies such as Prevent duty. The author, instead, advocates for the development of citizenship resilience.

Through framing social threats as avoidable, safety assumes a sense of urgency, and educational intervention is presented as a hopeful solution necessary for risk mitigation. For most of the articles analyzed, education is seen as a solution to safety issues. The educational solutions proposed could be broadly categorized into two groups: a) developing students' competences and/or b) increasing surveillance and control. The first type of educational interventions is aimed at equipping students with the necessary skills that will keep themselves and others safe from the identified risks. For some, the identified risks are associated with civic trust decline and political polarization and their proposed solution relies on the development of students' dialogic and critical skills (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2018). For others, media literacy skills are essential to avoid cyber-risks and promote digital civic participation (e.g., Lewin et al., 2021). To prevent violence and conflict, some authors support the development of "peaceful attitudes and values" (Mishra et al., 2020), while others advocate for "teaching students to empathize with varied belief systems" (Pandey et al., 2020). To "neutralize potentially dangerous influences", articles highlight the importance of developing resilience (Edwards, 2021, p. 55) and critical thinking skills (Jerome & Elwick, 2019). Whatever the specific risks, educational solutions invoke a powerful, affective narrative for the literature reviewed.

The first type of educational interventions explained above is sometimes advocated for in conjunction with monitoring measures (i.e., the second type of educational interventions). This is often the case of studies dealing with online safety issues (see, for example, Mark & Nguyen, 2017; Napal Fraile et al., 2018), although there are some exceptions (Black et al., 2022; Jones & Mitchell, 2016). These monitoring measures, however, are usually presented under euphemistic, elusive terms, such as "protection of devices and digital content" (Napal Fraile et al., 2018, p. 5), "electronic precautions to guarantee safety" (Ribble & Miller, 2013)

or “accept[ance of] joint responsibility to keep youngsters safe” (Mark & Nguyen, 2017, p. 62).

The use of surveillance and control measures to ‘keep students safe’ was more commonly problematized in those articles dealing with extremism and terrorism, given the public debate that arose from the approval of policies such as the Prevent duty in the UK[3] (see Bryan, 2017; Ramsay, 2017). In this field, some voices argue the need to foster resilience (Davies, 2016) or critical media literacy (Jerome & Elwick, 2019) over safeguarding methods.

Teachers as safety providers

In the articles reviewed, the obligation to provide student safety is often placed on teachers and/or educational leaders (e.g., Ribble & Miller, 2013), although sometimes the role of other adults such as parents are also highlighted (e.g., Klopper, 2021). The responsibility placed on educators is exalted through sentences like the following stated by Hubbard and Maloley’s (2013) study on teacher candidates’ perceptions about global citizenship education: “teachers must adopt the pedagogies necessary to eradicate ignorance and dispel harmful national stereotypes that threaten cultural understanding and safe learning environments for all students” (p. 209). Within this rationale, the role of teacher education is also overstated. The argument used by most of the literature is simple: educators need to be prepared to develop their student’s civic/(self-)care skills that will allow them to create a safer world. This logic is well captured in the following quote by Mirra et al.’s (2022) exploration of principles and elements of digital citizenship education for teachers: “teachers need new instructional strategies and systemwide support to educate students about the threats that racism, hyper-partisanship, and disinformation pose to democracy” (p. 31). Some of the articles analyzed

[3] A policy introduced in the UK under Section 29 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 “to stop people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism”.

(e.g., Bellini, 2012; Mishra et al., 2020; Morrison, 2015) consider role modeling as the best form for educators to help students keep themselves safe, reinforcing the individualization of safety issues.

While in the literature on extremism, the additional role of the state is assumed. For the rest of the articles, the references to other structural conditions are barely present. Only one of the articles analyzed (Waghid, 2015) problematizes this lack of reference to broader socio-economic-political factors and the exclusive responsibilization of teachers over students' safety.

Discussion

Over the last decade, there has been a notable increase in educational scholarship dedicated to addressing both safety and citizenship issues, as has previously occurred with other educational concerns[4]. This process of *safetyfication* has been underpinned by a number of assumptions that are, as I argue below, highly problematic.

For most of the literature reviewed, safety is conceptualized as an educational right or a desirable educational ideal. It is conceived as a precondition for learning based on psychological grounds. For some articles, safety is also considered as a path towards social justice. This notion, however, is often taken for granted and presented as an always-virtuous value. It is invoked without any consideration over what constitutes as safety or what are the implications of applying this principle to educational contexts (i.e., what is missing or silenced, what is privileged, who benefits and who does not, etc.). As an example, safety as an aspirational educational goal is often defined in emotional terms (as feelings of comfort)

[4] See, for example, previous explorations on how notions of safety were introduced in debates about physical and outdoors education (Sullivan, 2014) and religious education (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019) .

with little consideration of the inherent tensions, complexities, even pains involved in the discussion of controversial and social justice issues in the classroom (Flensner & Von Der Lippe, 2019; Zembylas, 2015). The sacralization of the notion of safety also misses any interrogation on how education is being redefined as a practice of 'risk mitigation', which has important pedagogical implications (see Biesta's, 2016, critique in the *Beautiful Risk of Education*) and whose primary goal is to create 'safe spaces'. This goal contrasts with previous critical efforts in democratic education which had as an aim the strengthening of the connections between schools and society for the sake of democracy and social change (see Apple & Beane, 2007; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1993). The emphasis on creating 'safe spaces' also reveals a clear shift in the focus of critical education from the *causes* of risk/injustice towards their (often psychological) *effects*. A shift that, as warned by Ecclestone and colleagues (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2019), often leads to the therapization of education and social justice.

What is also problematic about the assumption of safety as an educational right is that it confines the scope of educational action to a closed, limited space where safety can supposedly be guaranteed. The possibility of creating safe spaces in education has been questioned by scholars from different perspectives, who argue that pretending to isolate students from the power dynamics present in society is a fiction, since social interactions in schools do not take place in a vacuum, but reflect broader social hierarchies (Barrett, 2010; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Zembylas, 2015). Perhaps not surprisingly, studies have indicated that a greater concern over schools' safety does not necessarily lead to more protection for students from disadvantaged groups (Walton, 2011) and that safety programs are often the product of discrimination biases (e.g., Wiley & Somerville, 2021).

The assumption of students as vulnerable objects of protection that underpins some of the safety discourses in the literature review is also highly questionable. This image not only

forgets students' participatory rights under paternalist protection desires (Warrington & Larkins, 2019), but also is used to justify narrow educational interventions focused on skill development and, in some cases, behavioral supervision. This is not the first time that educational discourses evoke fear of harm to children to justify certain interventions (Hyslop, 2022; Keddell, 2017; Kelly, 2000). In previous decades, the fears/anxieties of child harm fueled prolific discussions on the 'dangerous youth' and, later, the 'at-risk youth' (Castel, 1991; Kelly, 2000; Tait, 1995). As Castel (1991) and Tait (1995) explain, the move 'from dangerousness to risk' eased the operation of a new form of government, as it became no longer necessary to exhibit any symptom of dangerousness to activate the interventions, but instead any 'objective' risk factor. From a Foucauldian perspective, the current emphasis on safety (over 'danger' or 'risk') implies a further expansion of the possibilities of government. Under the rationale of 'safety as an educational right', the possibilities for intervention, regulation and surveillance are simply multiplied.

The assumptions of 'education as the solution to safety issues' and 'teachers as safety providers' have too dangerous implications, as they actively contribute to the depolitization of safety issues. By highlighting the role of education in risk control and mitigation, the agency of individuals (in this case, teachers and students) is stressed, while social, economic, cultural and political structural constrains are pushed into the background. As previously noted by Walton (2005, 2011), the discourses of safety at schools portray violence as the result of lack of empathy and/or discipline. This diagnose leads to a solution focused on behaviour regulation and control, overlooking the ways in which school violence reinforces broader social dynamics and hierarchies.

Through this depolitization of safety issues, the assumptions of 'education as the solution to safety issues' and 'teachers as safety providers' also contribute to what Bauman (2001) calls the 'individualization of social risk'. A neoliberal trend that the field of citizenship

education has experienced in the last few decades (Estellés & Fischman, 2021; Evans, 2015; Romero & Estellés, 2019). Most of the literature reviewed attributed the responsibility for providing safe learning environments to educators who need to make sure they instill in their students the necessary abilities to keep themselves and others safe. Again, this emphasis on the obligation of individuals ignores the wider economic and sociocultural structures that contribute to the conformation of feelings of safety. This individualization, which comes hand in hand with the previously explained idealization of the school as a vacuum space, burdens educators with an impossible task and leaves social structures unquestioned.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, the notion of safety has become increasingly present in the educational scholarship concerned with citizenship issues. This notion, however, has been adopted with little consideration of the assumptions over which it rests and the implications of these assumptions. As I argue in this paper, safety discourses, despite benign overtones and intentions, contribute to depolitize education and safety issues, individualize social risk and, often, justify narrow educational interventions and safeguarding measures.

While certainly, as Zembylas (2015) warns, pedagogical projects for citizenship cannot be construed under the absence of safety, the pervasive use of this ambivalent notion signals some dangerous trends that scholars concerned with both education and citizenship should carefully consider.

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[5] This reference list does not include the articles analyzed as part of the systematic literature review. These have been included as a supplementary file.

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Figures

Figure 1. Diagram of the review inclusion/exclusion process

