

Safety in schools during COVID-19, and its implications for democratic education

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, calls to protect children and young people have proliferated in educational contexts, consolidating safety as a core principle guiding an increasing number of decisions at schools. Recently, however, more and more scholars have begun to question the ambiguous nature of “safety”, analysing the tensions between this concept, education, and children’s citizenship. The purpose of this article is to problematise the political and educational implications created by concerns about safety in the unprecedented times of COVID-19. Using Apple and Beane’s (2007) classic work on democratic education, our study delves into the educational experiences of nine educators and eight students in Aotearoa New Zealand during COVID-19 to explore their uses of safety. Our findings highlight the nuanced ways in which the discourses of safety can lead to curricular and pedagogical practices of comfort, isolation, and control.

Introduction

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, safety—both in its physical and emotional dimensions—not only became a paramount public concern, but also a principle guiding curricular, pedagogical, and administrative decisions at schools. Calls for children’s safety in educational contexts are not new to the pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. This concept has been part of the Health and Physical Education curriculum for some time (Sullivan, 2014), increasingly governing more and more aspects of school life (e.g., Bennett et al., 2021; Stover, 2018). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the invocation of safety has been particularly persistent (e.g., Browning & Romer, 2020) and, not surprisingly, “keeping students safe” has become a priority for several educators in the country (Estellés et al., in press; Mutch, 2020). Despite the widespread use of this term during the pandemic, the meanings and

educational effects of putting “safety first” in classrooms and schools have often been taken for granted. In recent years, there has been an increasing number of scholars who have begun to question the civic and curricular implications of the educational discourses of safety, such as the prioritisation of children’s protection over their participatory rights (Warrington & Larkins, 2019) or the encouragement of a pedagogy of gratification that avoids any discomforting learning (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019).

The study reported here was prompted by the pervasive presence of the word “safety” in the data collected for our research on teachers’ and students’ experiences of COVID-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this article, we explore the implications for democratic education of their uses of safety. We begin the article with a brief literature review on the increasing calls for safety in education and their “dangerous” political and curricular effects before outlining our theoretical framework based on Apple and Beane’s (2007) classic work on democratic education. After describing the methodology, we present the findings of our analysis which highlight the nuanced ways in which the discourses of safety led to curricular and pedagogical practices of comfort, isolation, and control. The article concludes with a discussion of the democratic implications of such practices.

Safety discourses in education

Over the past two decades, the word “safety” has become increasingly present in New Zealand educational policies and debates. For example, the recently passed Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities (Ministry of Education, 2020a) has considered that New Zealand education’s number one priority is to “ensure [that] places of learning are safe, inclusive and free from racism, discrimination and bullying” (p. 1); and the main purpose of the Teaching Council of Aotearoa “is to ensure safe and high-quality leadership, teaching and learning for children and young people” (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018), n.p.). The concept of safety has become central in the framing of a broad range of educational issues, from concerns of students’ physical integrity and wellbeing through to children’s digital participation and the inclusion of minority groups. In the New Zealand curriculum, safety is a core principle of the Health and Physical Education learning area (see Sullivan, 2014), which aims to develop students’ competencies for safety

management for both themselves and their communities. As stated, for instance, in the Achievement Objectives for Level 6, “[students should] demonstrate understanding of responsible behaviours required to ensure that challenges and risks are managed safely in physical and social environments” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 58). Yet, as previously mentioned, safety as a principle has not only dominated educational policies related to students’ physical integrity and mental health, but also broader debates about social inclusion. An example of the latter can be seen in the current *Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030*. As indicated by the Ministry of Education in the Annual Report 2020:

To advance Pacific student success, the Ministry co-designed the Action Plan for Pacific Education with communities over a series of fono to help Pacific learners and their families feel safe, valued and equipped to achieve their education aspirations. (Ministry of Education, 2020b, p. 13)

Safety in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand has also been invoked to talk about antiracist education. The initiative called “Unteach Racism” launched by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa in 2018, provided a comprehensive website filled with resources for teachers and schools, and stated that their “vision is to empower the profession to have safe and productive conversations about racism, that result in greater understanding and changes in behaviour and practice”.

Despite the widespread acceptance of the word “safety” and its benign overtones, the meaning of the term has rarely been defined (Smith, 2014; Sullivan, 2009). This idea evokes notions of comfort, respect, freedom of expression, lack of discrimination, etc. that go beyond mere concerns about security and lack of physical harm. Yet, its actual meaning is usually taken for granted. As Smith (2014) has pointed out, the idea of safety appears to take on an almost sacred quality in current debates. Even in the COVID-19 crisis when several discussions have highlighted the tensions between freedom and security, the use of the term “safety” in education has remained unquestioned, when not idealised (e.g., Browning & Romer, 2020).

Current calls for safety in education have not been exempt of critique. Scholars have warned about the dangerous political and curricular implications of this apparently benevolent discourse. As some have argued, safety discourses tend to prioritise children’s protection rights above those of participation,

creating a false juxtaposition between both types of rights (Warrington & Larkins, 2019). This juxtaposition helps justify paternalistic approaches that are usually accompanied by control and surveillance (Kelly, 2000; Smith, 2014), particularly with racialised students (Estellés et al., in press; Wiley & Somerville, 2021). In classrooms, as Zembylas (2015) explains, the preoccupation of safety discourses with students' vulnerability and emotional fragility often leads to the avoidance of any discomfiting learning, encouraging a "pedagogy of comfort" (Amsler, 2011) based on gratification. Similarly, Flensner and Von der Lippe (2019) argue that the metaphor of the "safe learning space", with its promises of free individuality and protection from harm, cannot resolve the tensions inherent to addressing discomfiting/controversial issues in classrooms. Instead, these scholars, along with others (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Boostrom, 1998; Iversen, 2018), use the metaphors of classrooms as "brave spaces", "agora", or "communities of disagreement", which "entail no promises of safety and comfort" (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 284).

Some scholars have even questioned the possibility of creating safe learning spaces (e.g., Barrett, 2010; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). As Barrett (2010) argues, the idea of a safe learning space is a dangerous myth, as the interactions that occur in classrooms and schools reflect broader social dynamics and hierarchies, which are hidden—and, therefore, reinforced—in the safety discourse. As she explains:

Students who belong to racially, socially, or economically marginalized groups live in a world which is inherently unsafe—a world where racialization, sexism, ableism, classism, and heteronormativity pose genuine threats to their psychological, social, material, and physical well-being. To contend that the classroom can be a safe space for these students when the world outside is not only unrealistic, it is dangerous. (p. 7)

In this sense, the use of "safety" in educational contexts seems to connect with the so-called "soft" pedagogies (Romero & Luis, 2005), based on the Rousseauian leitmotif of protecting childhood from the problems/risks of society. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this focus on safeguarding in childhood policies was brought to the forefront with the neoliberal reform (Hyslop, 2022; Keddell, 2018; Rogowski, 2015). The aspiration of child protection that underlies current calls for safety should, therefore, be more carefully considered before being embraced as a legitimate educational aim.

Democratic education and safety during COVID-19

Despite the democratic rhetoric of most educational systems in the world (Ramírez et al., 2007), the ideal of democratic education, as advocated by philosophers of education such as John Dewey, Maxine Greene, and Paolo Freire, is progressively fading in current neoliberal times (Apple, 2014; Beane, 2019; Kincheloe, 2012). Debates on the type of societies we want and how education can contribute to shape these visions have been increasingly replaced by concerns about efficiency, school performance, accountability or, at best, school climate and student wellbeing (Evans, 2015; Westheimer, 2015). In this scenario, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a proliferation of reports, policy briefs, and other publications aimed at avoiding losing “learning”—on what Apple (2014) would call “official knowledge”—in online settings, while still looking after student mental health (e.g., Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Not surprisingly, the implications of the pandemic for democratic education in this context have been part of a considerably peripheral debate (Estellés & Fischman, 2020; Mathison & Ross, 2022; Rapoport, 2020). This has occurred despite a political arena full of contentious public discussions about the tensions between freedom and social responsibility, the increase of social inequalities and the rise of nationalism, political polarisation, digital surveillance (e.g., Bieber, 2020; Harari, 2020; Žižek, 2020) and an ephemeral appreciation for the public (de Beer & Keune, 2022) and social relationships (Westheimer, 2021).

As Apple and Beane (2007) explained in their classic book *Democratic Schools*, democratic education does not happen by chance in schools; it requires explicit attempts to bring democracy to life. For them, such a project requires two lines of work. The first refers to the creation of democratic structures and processes through which school life is organised, which implies the participation of all those directly involved in the school, including children, in the processes of decision making. The second line of work refers to the creation of a curriculum that provides children and young people with democratic experiences. This curriculum is based on the premise that, if democracy involves the informed consent of people, schools should provide children and young people with access to a wide range of information about the matters that affect their lives and help them to voice their ideas. This second line of work was further developed by Beane (1997) in his famous model for student-centred curriculum integration that has long inspired educational practitioners and scholars in

Aotearoa New Zealand (Brough, 2012; Dowden, 2010; Fogarty-Perry, 2017). This model aims to enhance “the possibilities for personal and social integration through the organisation of curriculum around significant problems and issues, collaboratively identified by educators and young people” (Beane, 1997, p. 6).

While the lines of work identified by Apple and Beane (2007) are still relevant today (Beane, 2019; Kincheloe, 2012; Westheimer, 2015), including in Aotearoa New Zealand (Wood & Milligan, 2016), how the pandemic has expanded or restricted them has not awoken much research interest. During this time, studies and policy guidelines have mostly focused on the nascent distance learning models and the wellbeing of students in such unprecedented circumstances (e.g., Education Review Office, 2021; UNESCO, 2020, 2022). This focus on students and their learning, which takes for granted questions about what learning is about and what it is for, reflects what Biesta (2010) calls a process of “learnification of education”. The debates on student learning and wellbeing have brought the term “safety” to the forefront. In relation to digital learning, *safety* has been predominantly used to guarantee that the online educational experience is “child-friendly” or directly adult-controlled, raising little concerns about the contradictions between this practice and the democratic recognition of students as equal citizens. An obvious example of this could be seen in the following study:

[This study] explores and describes the numerous online teaching platforms, study materials, techniques, and technologies being used to ensure that educating the students does not stop. Furthermore, it identifies the platforms, technologies which can be used to conduct online examination in a safe environment devoid of cheating. (Pandey et al., 2022, p. 1)

In the debates about student wellbeing during the pandemic, references to safety have also been abundant to highlight the importance of a learning environment free of emotional harm. The following quote is representative of this intersection between safety and wellbeing discourses during COVID-19:

The study highlighted that schools are a staple in their communities and offer a lifeline for many students. They provide a space, not just for learning and intellectual stimulation, but also a place of safety, connection, predictability and routine. This study provides evidence of the collective resilience, resourcefulness and sense of solidarity that exists within school communities. However, it raises inevitable questions around what is expected of schools vs what is feasible for

them, given available resources. With evidence of increased distress and trauma experienced by children during the pandemic, it is clear that schools will need greater awareness of trauma and how it impacts students' lives. (O'Toole & Simovska, 2022, p. 57)

With regards to progressive initiatives like these, Apple and Beane (2007) argue that democratic education cares deeply about young people but, unlike other child-centred or humanistic pedagogies, understands that such caring requires educators to “stand firm against racism, injustice, centralised power, poverty, and other gross inequities in school and society” (p. 7). This is not the first time, however, that in (post-) crises contexts, therapeutic approaches introduced under progressive concerns about student wellbeing have dominated educational debates over critical pedagogies (Amsler, 2011; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008; Estellés et al., 2022).

Safety, as a floating signifier increasingly pervasive in educational debates, has helped to frame educational concerns during COVID-19 and, therefore, the solutions offered. As explained by Tierney (2015), the discourses of safety privilege particular solutions to the problems of safety defined by the perceived risks. The consequences for democratic education of such discourses, amplified by the pandemic, are still underexplored. In this study, we examine the implications for democratic education of the uses of safety by a group of teachers and students in Aotearoa New Zealand during COVID-19.

Methodology and methods

The data for this article are drawn from a larger qualitative research project aimed at exploring teachers' and young people's experiences of COVID-19 during the first year of the pandemic. The project involved the collaboration with eight primary schools and four secondary schools across Aotearoa New Zealand in the co-construction of a detailed case study (Stake, 1995) of each school's experience. The schools were diverse in terms of their socioeconomic status (decile rating), student population (ethnicity), location (city size), and nature (state and integrated). In this article, we focus on the experiences of nine educators and eight students at these schools who used the term “safe” in their interviews/focus groups. The educators were two educational leaders (an Asian female and a NZ European/Pākehā male) and seven teachers (all female and NZ European/Pākehā, except for one Asian) with varied professional

experience: three had more than 15 years' experience, three had between 5 and 15, and three of them had less than 5 years. The students were eight senior students (six females and two males) from diverse ethnicities (four Pacific, three NZ European/Pākehā, and an Indian).

The study was underpinned by a constructivist theoretical framework (Burr, 2015) and used a range of open-ended methods for data collection to allow participants to construct the narratives of their own experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These qualitative methods were negotiated with the participants. The main method for data collection with the teachers was semistructured interviews, which lasted approximately 1 hour. Students participated through semistructured interviews (1 hour approximately), focus groups (1½ hours approximately), and/or sharing their schoolwork/personal projects during lockdowns (artefact analysis). The interview questions were negotiated with the participants and revolved around their experiences during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns and their return to school after these periods. Our concern about the uses of safety emerged during the data collection process. After interviewing a few teacher participants, the recurrence of this concept was very clear (in some interviews, the term was used more than 20 times) and the importance given to this concept during COVID times became obvious. Nine teachers out of a total of 19 teachers interviewed as part of the larger research project used the term "safe" in their interviews. Among the students' narratives, however, the term was not so popular. It was only used by eight students out of a total of 45 student participants and most of their references pointed to their schools' and/or teachers' uses of the term. These unexpected findings triggered a more detailed analysis of the uses of safety by the participants.

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed in full, and participants were asked for feedback on the transcriptions. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which began with an initial coding process that differentiated between explicit/semantic and implicit/latent codes to explore both dimensions of the taken-for-granted concept of "safety". This initial coding led to a process of identifying shared patterns across the data set. The following three themes were identified: 1) curriculum for comfort; 2) schools as bubbles; and 3) dangerous participation. This process was conducted with the help of NVivo software. To make sense of the relationship between the themes, we draw from the work of Apple and Beane's (2007) model of democratic education explained above.

Ethical considerations in this research were carefully contemplated before the fieldwork began. This research has the ethical approval of The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Ref. UAHPEC2816). Pseudonyms are used to ensure the participants' anonymity.

Findings

A curriculum for comfort

As mentioned earlier, the term “safe” emerged in the interviews of nine teachers. They used this word to talk about their experiences as educators during lockdowns and in their return to school. The term “safe”, however, adopted different meanings in these interviews. Sometimes it referred to concerns about COVID-19 transmission and children's health, which caused a lot of anxiety among teachers. As one of them explained to us:

When essential workers' children came back, that first time, we only had 10 [students]. But that was really quite nerve wracking at first, to make sure we were keeping them safe. We had two teachers working with them, making sure we were keeping them physically distanced. That was really challenging.

Most of the time, however, teacher use of the term “safety” integrated both concerns about COVID-19 infection and student mental health. The following quote is well representative of such interconnection and how teachers were sensitive to these needs and adapted their teaching accordingly, designing a curriculum that made students feel “more comfortable”:

And so it was really hard to try and keep the social distancing [...] because you can't keep 20 kids from not like being next to each other. And so I tried to do like a lot of art. And a lot of ... we did try to do like with our reading, relating it to back to them and, you know, making them feel a bit more comfortable, safe. And I tried to do like a wellbeing unit, I wanted them to write poems and do some artwork that reflected their emotions.

The focus on student wellbeing was not unique to this teacher. Most educators interviewed recognised that this became their pedagogical priority during COVID-19 over other traditional academic goals, which were present but in a secondary role. As one of them expressed:

I found that, yes, reading, writing, maths, those core curriculum subjects that we're always, always thinking about, they occurred. But my priority was making sure the kids were safe and happy and enjoy[ing] and expressing themselves.

The words “happy”, “comfortable”, “self-expression”, etc. were recurrent in these interviews when talking about safety: “we really put their well-being at first so made sure that they were, you know, happy and safe”, “in response to a disaster, that’s what you do, you know, you’d make children feel comfortable, safe and secure at school”, etc. All these quotes hinted at a curriculum designed to entertain and make students feel better. An illustrative example of this could be seen in the following quote:

When we came back [to school after lockdown], I wanted school to be a safe space, to be fun. I didn’t want it to be overly regulated, overly scheduled. So I changed my planning completely so, for example, for those first few weeks back in Level 2, a lot of my planning looked like art, dance ... Like, I would put something for dance, and then leave space for whatever we needed to, whatever the kids felt like doing.

Such entertainment often implied distracting students from the anxious times lived outside of the classroom. Indeed, none of the teachers made any reference to discussing social issues happening at the moment, such as the protests against lockdowns or the increasing inequalities, in their classrooms. When they were asked if they talked to their students about the COVID-19 pandemic on their return to school, some recognised that they did not because their students were already saturated with the topic. In the words of one of these teachers:

I think we were all so fed up, so overwhelmed with COVID that I felt they [students] needed some fresh air, doing something different, building relationships ... It was really beautiful to see them enjoying each other’s company, you know?

Others explained that, while they didn’t explicitly address the topic in the classroom, they provided opportunities for the students to express their feelings and tried to help them navigate the challenging times. An example of an activity built to help students express their emotions and consider strategies to make them feel better can be seen in the following quote of one of these teachers, who read a story to her Year 6 class that sparked a conversation around COVID-related emotions. As she explained:

I got them [students] to kind of think about: ‘What do you do when you feel a little bit overwhelmed or anxious?’ Like, ‘How do you feel better? What’s something you do?’ And then they talk to their peers about the things that they

do to make them feel better. And then they are: ‘Does anyone want to share ...? And so they shared and then we had a bit of a classroom discussion about different ways to help us and things like that.

Schools as bubbles

The metaphor of “schools as bubbles” refers to the isolation of its members from the outside world; it is based on the presumption that its members—children, in particular—need to be protected from the risks of the outside world. In the previous section, we have seen how safety was used in contexts where the disconnection of children from the pandemic—both in its health and social dimensions—was seen as a desirable aspiration and how teachers adapted their teaching practice to work towards this horizon on their return to school after lockdowns. In this section, we will focus on another use of the term “safe” by some of the teachers interviewed, which refers to the isolation of students from their families. This use of “safety” was justified because families, during the peak of the pandemic, were often seen as a source of anxiety. The following quote from one of these teachers was particularly representative of this:

I think after that first lockdown, schools were really thinking about social emotional learning, that the common phrase that I heard from teachers was like it was starting the year again. So at the beginning of every school year, we don’t launch into maths on the first day, at the beginning of the school year, every teacher will take that time to build that classroom community [...] for recreating, or creating that positive, safe, secure classroom environment. Because there were children coming back who were anxious, or they were coming from mums who were anxious. So, after that first lockdown, a lot of schools didn’t let parents take them into the classroom. They had to stay at the gate. I heard a lot of teachers say, actually, they thought it was a good thing. Yeah. Because then mum wasn’t coming in with mum’s anxieties, and having these tense frowny conversations with the teacher ... Children were just coming in altogether and, you know, as a teacher, if you’ve got that sort of, calming sort of welcoming focus on wellbeing then they’re going to feel safe.

Again, this quote shows how the creation of a safe learning environment for the sake of student wellbeing became a priority for these teachers, which in some cases implied the students’ isolation from the outside world, including their parents. With a feeling of guilt, one of these teachers problematised this

tension while recognising the sense of relief that granted them, teachers, by keeping parents out of the school. In her interview, both the stressful nature of the unprecedented times and the complexities of family–school relationships could be observed. As she explained to us:

In Level 2 when everyone could come back in, we kept our parents out. And, that was really interesting for us cos actually, it was bliss. The children developed huge resilience and just walking into the school gates and waving goodbye and it shocked us how much we liked not having parents at the school. Um, but that's not us, you know, they're all back in now and it's lovely and they are part of their children's education and need to be but, that was sort of challenging mentally. Oh, okay, we don't actually like having them here. Well we do, but yeah, [it implies] just lots, lots of challenges, yeah.

For one of the teachers, however, safety during lockdown implied staying connected with the families and making sure that they had their basic material needs covered (food security). The following quote also reveals how the curriculum (“teaching and learning was there where it could be”) is kept aside from this connection:

We are really aware that many of our families are living, you know, on the poverty line, basically [...] Before we went into full lockdown, Level 4 lockdown, we actually got as much food together as we possibly could and got that out to families. However, we could really, and we did that throughout the lockdown as much as we could [...] So yes, teaching and learning was there where it could be. But actually the focus for us was on keeping our families sort of feeling safe and connected to the school and like someone had their backs, really that was sort of where we were at.

Dangerous participation

As explained above, the term “safe” was not particularly present in the interviews with the students. Only eight senior students, out of a total of 45 student participants, used the word. As with the teacher participants, some students made use of this word to express concerns about their health and/or those surrounding them. As one of them explained to us:

I wore a mask when going shopping, even though it wasn't compulsory. I mean, it did get compulsory, but it wasn't originally. Just for the safety of like others

more than myself. Because, you know, I don't really care if I get sick, but for the people who actually needed to be there.

Yet, most of their references to safety pointed to the schools' and/or teachers' uses of the term to restrict their participation in social actions through the school. One of these examples was explained to us by a group of students from a high school in Auckland. During the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns, they were engaged in a variety of social actions against racism, and one of these actions was attending a peaceful march against interschool violence. The students wanted to get the school involved in the march but did not find such support in the name of safety. As one of these students said:

They [teachers] didn't really want to support the march. They just disregarded it because they thought it was gonna be bad and they didn't really want a bad representation for the college [...] They don't really see the movement as important. There was an incident when I was helping one of the girls put up posters. And one of the teachers asked: 'Are you sure you want to be putting those up? Is this a safe thing to be going to?'

This student explained that she wanted to talk about the march in the school assembly, but she was not allowed:

I talked to the principals here to see if I could talk about everything. And they kind of shut me down, they're like, we have some other things to talk about. But at the end of that assembly, there was more time. And that kind of upset me because it kind of showed that there was time for me to speak, they just didn't want me to.

These students also explained that someone in their group asked permission to hang posters of the march in the school, but it was denied because the march was seen as dangerous: "He had asked to put up posters and they [teachers] said no, they said it was not safe. But he put them up anyways. And that was mainly how we had first found out about the march."

Another example of how students perceived that safety was used by schools to constrain their participation in social actions came from a group of students who were part of an Auckland high school's Peer Sexuality Support Programme. As part of this group, students designed pamphlets and posters to deconstruct misconceptions about sexuality that they wanted to spread around the school in

their return after lockdown. As one of these students explained to us, however, they faced several obstacles from the school. One of the ideas the group had to make their message more attractive was printing the pamphlets within lolly bags. This initiative, however, was not approved by the school. As the student said, “We couldn’t do like the lolly bags because you can’t do anything with food because of Covid.” The school, however, did not discuss with the students any other path to raise their voices, which caused them a lot of frustration:

I made an information poster about misconceptions [about being lesbian], like the definition. And we planned to have them all up around the school. And then we were also going to hand out like little pamphlets with lolly bags. And we came back to school, they were like: ‘No, you can’t do the lollies.’ And we were like: ‘Okay, fine, we’ll do the pamphlets. We’ll keep doing the posters.’ And then, because of the date, it was when [potential new] students [for next year] were coming through the school to look at the school, and they don’t want posters up around the school at that time, they were like: ‘No, you can’t put your posters up.’ And we’re like: ‘Oh, my God, we’ve been weeks doing this.’ But we’re like: ‘Okay, we’ll do it another day.’ But it was never the right time [...] we ended up having to combine it with the health Expo, which was frustrating.

Discussion: Safety as a symptom of a deeper defeat

Last year the philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2021) wrote that “Covid-19 is a mirror that reflects back to us the crises in our society. It renders more visible the pathological symptoms that already existed before the pandemic” (p. 1). In education, one of these symptoms is concern about children’s safety, which expanded beyond COVID-19 transmission to include worries about students’ emotional fragility. During the pandemic, these concerns have been amplified, but they were already here (Powell et al., 2021; Smith, 2014) in what some have called the “affective turn” in education (Amsler, 2011; Boler, 1999). As seen in the findings above, the amplification of this symptom has led to a greater emphasis of its supposed “remedies”: comfort, isolation, and control. In this section, we will discuss the implications of these remedies for a democratic education “worthy of that name” (Apple & Beane, 2007).

The first remedy implied the creation of a curriculum focused on students’ comfort. This curriculum was triggered by teachers’ genuine concerns about their students’ wellbeing in the challenging times of COVID-19, which

resonates with the literature on teachers' experiences of the pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand (e.g., Mutch et al., 2020 O'Toole & Simovska, 2022). The curriculum for comfort entailed leaving times and spaces for student amusement and/or self-expression in an environment that made students feel comfortable. The interviews with the teachers reveal the responsibility they felt to infuse a positive mindset in their students under any circumstances (Amsler, 2011) in the neoliberal context of what Barbara Ehrenreich (2010) called the society of *"smile or die"*. This internalised responsibility prevented the teachers from exposing students to any discomforting learning, no matter how relevant this could be for students' lives (e.g., the COVID-19 crisis, rising social inequalities). As warned by other scholars (e.g., Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019; Iversen, 2018), safety and its promises of gratification and comfort cannot resolve the inherent tensions of dealing with complex social and political issues, and it is not surprising that teachers, under the discourses of safety, rather avoid (or address very superficially) these issues in the classroom. The fact that students' emotions were located at the centre of the curriculum did not imply, however, a look into the cultural politics of such emotions (Ahmed, 2004; Zembylas, 2020), which is often forgotten in the discourses of wellbeing education (Walton, 2011). Indeed, the connection between these emotions and the social hierarchies in which students were embedded seems to have been overlooked in the classroom. Apple and Beane (2007) explained that one of the differences between democratic education and progressive pedagogies is that the former understands that caring for young people entails both being sensitive to their emotions and providing them with strategies to understand and transform the social structures they are immersed in. Finally, an important finding in relation to the curriculum for comfort is that this curriculum was prioritised over traditional disciplines (numeracy, literacy ...), without questioning their existence. As unquestioned, the "official" curriculum (Apple, 2014) made decisions for the teachers and students over what is important to be taught and learnt at school, undermining the core principle of a democratic curriculum (Beane, 1997, 2019).

The second remedy to the problem of safety provided by the teachers interviewed was the creation of bubbles that isolate children from the outside-infected world. It seems that previous aspirations to strengthen the links between schools and society for the sake of democracy (Biesta, 2011) have surrendered to the creation of "safe bubbles" where safety can supposedly be guaranteed.¹ This

isolation in the name of safety referred to the disconnection of students from both the social problems that distressed the outside world and the source of infection/danger that families represented. This remedy signals the imprint of the Rousseauian separation between the innocent world of childhood and the corrupt adult society (Romero & Luis, 2005). The problem is that, as Mathison and Ross (2022) warn, efforts to create “little worlds fit for children will not create a world fit for everyone” (p. 37). By leaving social problems outside of the classroom, the discourses of safety produce a “culture of silence” (Freire, 1993) in the name of students’ vulnerability, which constitutes *per se* a veiled form of violence because it contributes to the reproduction of the status quo (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Also, the option that schools had during COVID-19 of leaving families outside of the school—and some teachers finding such measures “bliss[ful]”—can also be seen as a sign of a neoliberal trend that was already present before the pandemic; that is, the promotion of a model of parental engagement which is more about “receiving instruction rather than participation” (Kingston, 2021, p. 59) and that removes opportunities for democratic deliberation about the form and ends of education (Lyon, 2018).

The third remedy, control, is probably the most openly oppressive version of the discourses of safety, which did not emerge in the interviews of the teachers but in the conversations with a handful of students. In these interviews, it can be seen how safety during COVID-19 has also operated as a mechanism to restrict and control student participation in the school and wider society. This is not the first time that safety discourses have been used to justify paternalistic approaches and privilege social control measures, while framing them in positive ways (Kelly, 2000; Smith, 2014; Vandenbeld Giles, 2012). As Warrington and Larkins (2019) warn, pragmatic approaches have often tended to prioritise the protection of children’s physical and psychological safety over their participatory rights. For these approaches, children’s opportunities to participate remain a non-essential “add on” (Warrington & Larkins, 2019, p. 134) that, in the exceptional times of COVID-19, can easily be avoided. This false juxtaposition between children’s protection and participatory rights prevents us from considering the latter (information, expression, and influence) as a necessary component of the former (Warrington & Larkins, 2019).

To conclude, while safety as an educational principle has been part of the New Zealand curriculum for a long time (Sullivan, 2014) and generates a powerful narrative that inspires several teachers in critical times, this symptom and its

remedies, however, signal what we would describe as a deeper defeat. This deeper defeat refers to the fading of democratic education as a horizon to work towards. Maybe we have forgotten that “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife” (Dewey, 1916, p. 139).

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Note

1. Several scholars have actually questioned the possibility of creating “safe learning environments”, highlighting the fiction that entails pretending to isolate students from broader social power dynamics (see Barrett, 2010; Boostrom, 1998; Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

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