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# Pre-service teacher attitudes towards discussing terrorism in English as an Additional Language (EAL) classrooms: citizenship, democratic practices, and the discussion of controversial issues

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**Abstract**
This paper reports on interviews exploring pre-service English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of controversial issues in EAL classrooms. The paper examines how teachers perceive the role of the teacher in fostering EAL students' democratic understandings, skills, and dispositions, and whether these perceptions lead teachers to consider including controversial topics such as terrorism for discussion in EAL. Pre-service teachers report that they perceive the discussion of controversial topics to be beneficial in both breaking down stereotypes and misrepresentations and in developing students' knowledge and skills as active citizens, in agreement with a body of international research that recommends the discussion of controversial issues as a fundamental democratic practice. However, analysis suggests that despite this positive attitude towards the discussion of controversial topics, many pre-service teachers often defer the decision to include such topics to external authorities over concerns related to negative professional consequences and sensitivity to student well-being.

**Keywords** Citizenship · Controversy · Discussion · Democracy · English as an Additional Language (EAL) · Terrorism

## Introduction

> … a couple of students started asking me questions about ISIS: "What do you think, sir?" "Do you think they're powerful?" Faced with the question, 'Do I or don't I talk about this?' and, 'If so, how do I go about that?' I erred on the

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> side of thinking that we should talk about this … So we had a discussion about the sorts of power ISIS has. Within a couple of minutes my mentor teacher was telling me to sort of cut the conversation and move on.

These comments are from one of the authors of this article, made while undertaking professional experience as a pre-service teacher in an English as an Additional Language (EAL) classroom in a state secondary school in suburban Melbourne. The conversation highlights the author's concern with the place of controversial topics in EAL classrooms and schools. Following the events described, the author spoke with colleagues and peers, and found a lack of consensus as to whether controversial topics such as terrorism should be addressed in EAL classrooms. In part, this uncertainty about the place of controversial topics in the EAL classrooms may be related to the lack of explicit curricula guidance specifying the content of EAL study. However, it may also reflect broader anxiety on the part of teachers about raising and engaging with potentially dangerous conversations in schools (Hess 2009). This anxiety may be further intensified when working with EAL students who are characterised by their linguistic and cultural diversity (Parker 2011). In light of these concerns, this paper reports on interviews we conducted with pre-service teachers to explore their attitudes towards teaching controversial topics with EAL students, finding that while teachers see value in addressing controversial topics with their students, in many cases the pressures of school curriculum, policy, administration and student sensitivities lead them to avoid taking responsibility for such discussions.

## The politics of English language learning and teaching

English language learning programs provide vital support for students for whom English is an additional language or dialect. In Australia, EAL provisions in the Australian Curriculum respond to the country's significant linguistic and cultural diversity by providing support to teachers in assisting students to develop the language skills required to access the curriculum and communicate effectively in English. The overall curricular aims for EAL learners are extended from the English curriculum and are thus the same as for all students, with the study of English in the Australian Curriculum positioned as central to creating 'confident communicators, imaginative thinkers and informed citizens' (ACARA n.d.). This notion of informed citizenship forms a key component of the policy framework underpinning the Australia Curriculum, as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008), which includes the goal that all young Australians become what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have termed "participatory citizens".

The strength of the association between English language proficiency and active and informed Australian citizenship has been brought into sharper focus in recent debates about language testing for citizenship. In 2017, the Australian Government proposed and then introduced legislation to parliament to implement an English language test requiring applicants to demonstrate competency in English prior to being eligible to sit the existing citizenship test (which is conducted in English). Though

subsequently rejected, this association of Australian citizenship with English proficiency, and thus the study of English, is typically uncontroversial. As Starkey (2007, p. 57) observes, language education for citizenship characteristically associates citizenship exclusively with nationality, identifying 'languages with nations and imagined, politically constructed national cultures,' and thus misunderstanding the complexity of citizenship in globalised and increasingly multicultural polities that demand 'multiple identities and wider loyalties.'

Critical approaches to language learning have long advocated for the need to understand the language classroom as both a product of, and productive of, broader society (Pennycook 2001). In stressing the importance of language to citizenship and social participation, English language teachers have been regarded as socio-cultural 'gatekeepers' (Gee 1994). Nevertheless, as a discipline, English language teaching has tended to be framed as apolitical, characterised by often benign views of teaching English language skills framed around technical and functional discussions of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment within 'a traditional blinkered stance which, eschewing political, social and historical questions to focus narrowly on pedagogical technique, has portrayed ELT … as ideologically neutral at the very least, and at best as ideologically and instrumentally beneficial' (Pegrum 2004, p. 9). In Australia this stance of English as natural, neutral, and beneficial (Pennycook 1995) might be read in the ways the EAL curriculum resources advise teachers within a 'technical view of effective teaching' (Allard et al. 2014 p. 427) that positions English proficiency as necessary for social integration and economic participation but fails to attend to the power of writing, speaking, and listening in English in democratic society. As Apple (2014) argues:

> The value of writing, speaking, and listening should not be seen as access to "refined culture" or to "life skills" for our allotted (by whom?) places in the paid and unpaid labor market, but as a crucial means to gain power and control over our entire lives. (p. 45)

The explicit identification of English language with the performance of Australian citizenship is arguably an effect of broader society that impacts directly on the lives of students and teachers in EAL classrooms. A question then arises for teachers: in a complex contemporary educational context that makes 'decision-making, professional practice and leadership seem difficult' (Seddon 2015, p. 529), how can diverse EAL students be supported to use English to become active and informed democratic citizens?

## The case for discussing controversial topics in the EAL classroom

There is a powerful case to be made that all students can benefit from the discussion of controversial topics, centred on notions of democratic citizenship education. In this paper we conceptualise controversial topics per Dearden's (1981) suggestion that 'a matter is controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason' (p. 38). Similarly, Hand (2008) argues that:

> to teach something as controversial is to present it as a matter on which different views are or could be held, and to expound those different views as impartially as possible … teaching something as controversial is properly contrasted with teaching it as settled or resolved. (p. 1)

Hess (2009) notes that who decides what is controversial in schools and classrooms remains a crucial question, with educators playing a central role in determining whether a topic is discussed as open or closed, or indeed whether it is discussed at all. Hess (2009), then, describes a 'controversial issue' as one that is approached as an 'open question' provoking discussion, debate, and disagreement.

Osler and Starkey (2005, p. 154) argue that 'education for citizenship *should be* [emphasis added] a space where political claims can be debated and controversies examined rather than avoided.' Osler and Starkey, drawing on the work of John Dewey, write that:

> Democratic dialogue in schools is an opportunity for all concerned to examine their values and their behaviours and to be responsive to the perspectives of others. Dewey's vision is of a cosmopolitan democracy in which the horizons of all members are constantly extended by opportunities to learn from those from other backgrounds. (2005, p. 141).

Fulfilling Dewey's vision, write Osler and Starkey, 'will require teachers to engage with controversial issues' (2005, p. 141). Apple (2014) argues that placing classroom deliberation of serious public controversies at the centre of student and teacher interactions 'can be employed in powerful ways to build thoughtful and democratic citizens' (p. 191). Similarly, Kahne et al. (2013) contend that the open and informed discussion of societal issues may promote civic engagement and the intention to engage in active political activity by normalising the conflictual nature of political engagement, fostering the construction of moral and civic understandings, and increasing student interest and engagement with issues. Campbell (2008) agrees that it is through the discussion and debate of political issues that students are likely to be introduced to how the political process works including 'fundamental democratic principles and practices' (p. 440). Likewise, Hess (2009) claims that:

> the purposeful inclusion of controversial political issues in the school curriculum, done wisely and well, illustrates a core component of a functioning democratic community, while building the understandings, skills, and dispositions that young people need to live in and to improve such a community. (p. 5)

Focussing on the role of discussion, Hess (2009) sees the discussion of controversial topics as central to a 'form of civic education that purposely teaches young people how to *do* democracy' (p. 15). According to Hess (2009), the discussion of controversial topics can contribute to the building of political tolerance through exposure to opposing views, and produce better informed individuals through the deliberation of new ideas and different perspectives. Hess and Gatti (2010), writing in the context of higher education, state that:

> Classrooms are rich sites for the discussion of controversial issues in large part because the students who populate them bring with them a diversity of perspectives, ideologies, and experiences. Classrooms can and should be places where students build deep knowledge about important controversies facing the body politic and where they learn how to talk and disagree about political controversies in ways that are inclusive and productive. (p. 19)

Further, Hess (2009) argues, 'the listening *and* talking that constitute discussion physically represent a core goal of democracy; self-governance among equals' (2009, p. 15). The discussion of controversial issues thus has two aims: the development of the listening and talking skills that constitute democratic discussion and the development of knowledge about the issues themselves. If English language proficiency and EAL are to be linked with informed and participatory citizenship, then it is here that we find some guidance on what writing, speaking, and listening in English are to be used *for*: the discussion of controversial topics as a fundamental democratic practice.

Nevertheless, there are many barriers to the inclusion of controversial political issues in classrooms. Prominent among these are perceptions of constraints imposed by mandated curriculum or syllabus (Duckworth 2014; Yamashita 2006; Misco and Patterson 2007; Ho et al. 2014), feelings of inadequate topic knowledge (Yamashita 2006; Misco and Patterson 2007), self-censorship out of a desire not to offend or appear biased (Heybach 2014; Misco and Patterson 2007), and the fear of potential repercussions including job loss (Ho et al. 2014; Misco and Patterson 2007). Duckworth (2014) argues that at least the barrier of curriculum constraints can be regarded as political inasmuch as it reduces the teacher's role to the mere implementation of an external curriculum. Furthermore, Parker (2011) points to the fact that many teachers feel inadequately equipped to constructively incorporate politically charged topics in classrooms, a feeling that is intensified where these classrooms include diverse students, as is necessarily the case in EAL (Bickmore 2005; Parker 2011; Yamashita 2006). Such effects echo Auerbach's (1995) contention that delivering a mandated curriculum while suppressing students' interests and questions renders a teacher a mere 'agent of the dominant ideology' (p. 15), becoming all the more concerning given Yamashita's (2006) finding that students are aware of teacher self-censorship and attempts at political correctness, but nonetheless crave frank and sophisticated discussions of controversial topics. Gerulek (2012), echoing the centrality of debate and discussion to democratic life, makes the powerful case that:

> events that shape our history and our politics are integral to the way in which people live their lives; potentially removing these debates from classrooms minimizes the way in which individuals are able to address substantive pressing issues that are relevant in society (p. 114).

While Gerulek (2012) acknowledges the moral complexity of arriving at a reasoned stance on any issue, she argues that closing down discussion is antithetical to democratic principles, and that 'the critical element is that one must first be allowed to enter into the debate' (p. 70).

Our study, premised on the assumption that EAL teachers can support diverse students to become active and informed democratic citizens through participation in the discussion and debate of controversial issues, explores teachers' ambivalences towards enacting this concern to support EAL students. Our research question, then, is: what are the tensions and contradictions involved in discussing terrorism as a controversial issue with students in the EAL classroom?

## The study: Attitudes towards teaching about terrorism in EAL

The data presented in this article derive from a study of six pre-service teacher education students in an EAL specific unit at an Australian university. While this is a small sample size, the data are useful in indicating the presence, if not prevalence, of particular attitudes towards addressing controversial topics in the EAL classroom. All the participants were multilingual, speaking English and at least one other language, including Cantonese, Japanese, French, Italian, German, Mandarin, Esperanto, Turkish, and Spanish. Five of the participants were Australian citizens and one was an international student from China. Two were male and four were female. While none of the participants identified with a religious tradition, the five Australian participants did come from a range of cultural backgrounds, including Japanese, Italian and French, with one born overseas. All five Australian participants completed the majority of their schooling in Australia and could be characterised as relatively privileged. One of the participants openly identified as queer.

All participated in one semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interview lasting approximately 60 min. The interviews were conducted by the first author who was not known to the participants. Pre-service teachers were selected as participants in line with Lortie's (1975) suggestion that pre-service teacher's dispositions remain a powerful socialising influence even after initial teacher education. Given the lack of focus on controversial topics and democratic practices in EAL initial teacher education, we focussed on pre-service teachers attitudes towards teaching controversial topics in EAL as a predictor of their likelihood of including or addressing such topics in EAL classrooms.

To elicit attitudes towards teaching controversial topics in EAL classrooms, we asked pre-service teachers to consider whether they would address *terrorism* as a topic in EAL. Terrorism was chosen as an exemplar controversial topic because of the double controversy around firstly, whether an issue such as terrorism should be discussed at all in the EAL classroom; and, secondly, if discussed, whether it should be treated itself *as* a controversial issue: that is, a topic on which a range of reasonably different views could be held. In other words, we conceptualised terrorism as a controversial issue because of both the lack of consensus as to whether it should be discussed at all and whether it should be treated as a topic for legitimate discussion or a closed question (Hess 2009). Such questions are significant in an Australian context characterised by increased anti-Muslim sentiment that often conflates terrorism and violence with Islam and religious extremism (Keddie et al. 2018), pointing to a need to problematise terrorism as a concept. These concerns were also heightened in an educational policy context that increasingly positions

schools and teachers as part of a 'front line of defence against radicalisation and threats to social cohesion' (Birmingham and Keenan 2016) in the case of Australia, and that directs schools to formulate anti-radicalisation policies, identify vulnerable youth, and actively safeguard against extremism in the case of the United Kingdom's "Prevent" strategy (Bryan 2017; Davies 2016; Mayssoun and Tannock 2016). Much recent research on the role of schools and teachers in relation to terrorism has focussed on the ways anti-radicalisation/anti-terrorism policies, such as Prevent, have potentially reconstituted teachers' work in ways opposed to democratic dialogue. Coppock (2014) and Coppock and McGovern (2014), for example, explore the ways that Prevent 'contradicts and undermines the assertion that schools offer children and young people "a safe environment in which to explore controversial issues"' (p. 122) by producing an environment in which the airing of opinions, or worse, grievances becomes politically risky, especially for young Muslim students stereotyped as vulnerable to radicalisation and extremism. O'Donnell (2018) argues that this has 'implications for any student who adopts a dissenting or radical position that involves questioning, for example, fundamental British values (FBV) or British foreign policy' (p. 982). Policies such as Prevent position teachers and schools to '"prevent" and "intervene" to "take action against violent extremism"' (Mayes 2018, p. 4), employing student engagement in democratic dialogue and debate as a means to surveil and discipline students positioned as vulnerable, at-risk, and in need of intervention (Mayes 2018). In such an environment it is difficult to see how a topic like terrorism can be presented as a matter unsettled or unresolved.

Hess (2004) identifies four approaches to teaching controversial topics: denial, privilege, avoidance, and balance. Denial occurs when a teacher does not acknowledge that an issue is controversial, but rather believes that there is a 'clear right answer that student should be taught to believe' (Hess 2004, p. 259). Privilege, in contrast, involves acknowledging that an issue is controversial, but also privileges a particular perspective on the issue in teaching. Avoidance also involves the recognition of an issue as controversial, but for this reason excludes the issue from the curriculum. Hess (2004) notes two stated reasons for avoidance, firstly, teachers fearing the repercussions of including controversial issues in the curriculum, and secondly, in contrast to the privilege position, teachers acknowledging that their own strong views on a particular issue might prevent them from teaching the issue in a 'pedagogically neutral' manner (p. 260). Finally, balance involves an attempt to teach an issue without privileging any particular perspective and ensuring students have access to different perspectives. The subsequent sections draw on Hess's framework to provide a descriptive and analytic account of the pre-service views towards discussing terrorism in the EAL classroom.

## Findings and discussion

### Benefits of teaching controversial issues in EAL

All participants perceived advantages to or benefits from teaching a controversial topic such as terrorism in the EAL classroom. These benefits could be categorised

in two main ways: firstly, breaking down stereotypes and misrepresentations; and secondly, learning to be informed and active citizens.

### Developing knowledge of controversial issues

Participants identified the discussion of controversial topics as useful and important way of building students' knowledge and increasing students' understanding of topics that they would in any case know about, perhaps incorrectly, outside the classroom. In this excerpt, an Australian female undergraduate Australian pre-service teacher describes how:

> I think if I could see students perhaps talking about it outside class, like in the yard or something like that, that would be another reason I would want to talk about it, or if really big events have happened in the media perhaps that are quite shocking. … So it can be important for students to gain, I think, a deeper understanding of it rather than just what they've heard from the media as well.

Dispelling media (mis)representations was commonly cited as a benefit of discussing a topic like terrorism in the EAL classroom. Several participants expressed the view that discussing terrorism would be advantageous because it could help breakdown potentially disparaging misrepresentations—particularly of Islam and Muslims—that they felt were prevalent in media representations of terrorism and terrorist attacks. One participant, an Australian male Master of Teaching student, spoke about the conflation of terrorism with Islam in the media, arguing that the value of including the topic in the curriculum was as a way to resist what she called an 'us' and 'them' mentality, in line with Gerulek's (2012) observation that the prevalence of this "us and them" dualism oversimplifies complex issues, limiting available perspectives and discouraging debate in ways opposed to dispositions of democracy:

> The advantage, I think, is to teach it in a way that you don't create us versus them. Because unfortunately the media is so good at doing this that now it's creating people who have … a distorted view of what Islam is. For example … you ask some people, "What do you think of Islam?" and some people say, "Oh it's terrorists," "They're terrorists," or, "They … objectify women," blah, blah, blah. But it's like, well, have you actually spoken to, you know, Muslims yourself?

The notion of correcting understandings of terrorism and terrorists through classroom discussion was commonly cited as a benefit of including terrorism as a topic in EAL classrooms, particularly to address the "dominant discourse" that equated terrorism with Islam. The following statement illustrates a balanced approach, disputing the conflation of terrorism with Islam, but acknowledging the controversial and complex nature of the topic and reflecting on ways to ensure students are given access to different perspectives on the topic:

> Well, of course, a very sensitive, touchy topic, especially if you've got-. I mean, generally, you associate terrorism with Islam because that's just the main dis-

> course at the moment. If you've got Muslims in your class be especially careful not to look at them more than you should be. Don't lead it towards them, but distance yourself. I mean if you're looking at terrorism in a social education context, you're not just going to be looking at modern terrorism. You're going to be looking at, say, the IRA or Asia, with the Tamil Tigers and stuff, and you might also bring in questions like-you could bring the whole question of is one man's terrorist another man's … it's not a war hero, it's another one …. Help me out. Freedom fighter, that's it!

### Developing democratic practices

Most participants also agreed that the discussion of topics like terrorism would be advantageous in teaching students to engage in debate and discussion and to understand the difference between fact and opinion as fundamental democratic practices (Campbell 2008). For example, one participant, a mature-aged female Master of Teaching student, who previously worked as a lawyer, described how:

> I like to distinguish between fact and opinion and I think that's a really good exercise in any subject to teach. I'm free to hear any opinion, but then I like to drill down into what is actually fact and how we know it's fact and how we know it's reliable. So if that's the fact, how have you formed this opinion and [what is] the difference between it? Something like terrorism would be a really good way to explore that … being good citizens and being involved as a citizen involves being aware of the political agendas of the world.

Balanced approaches to including terrorism in EAL are seen here as beneficial inasmuch as they facilitate critical approaches to language and literacy that develop students' abilities to differentiate, as in this example, fact and opinion, and to talk productively about controversial issues (Hess and Gatti 2010). In this sense, the advantage of discussing a topic like terrorism in the classroom is, as one participant described, that it:

> elicits a lot of opinion very quickly. It's something people have opinions on and speak up and that's part of language and it's a part of culture. It's a part of our Australian culture. If you're teaching Australian English, you're teaching Australian culture.

What is interesting here is that the participant has conflated critical language and literacy skills with citizenship, politics, and culture, reflecting Apple's (2014) claim that the value of writing, speaking, and listening lie in their function as a means to exercise control over our lives and worlds. A balanced approach to teaching an issue like terrorism in the EAL classroom is beneficial in generating discussion, with this discussion, grounded in fact or opinion, and employing argument and rhetoric, positioned as a crucial element of participation in Australian culture: what English language is *for* in a cosmopolitan democracy. As Bickmore (2005, p. 4) notes, crucial to this participation is 'students' practice

with democratic processes and skills [including] dialogue, conflict analysis and resolution, constructive discussion of controversial issues, deliberation and decision making.'

The concept of citizenship was also raised explicitly by the undergraduate participant, who invoked the concept of a "good education." When asked to clarify, she stated:

> I guess it's … I'm very subjective. I think one that empowers you as an individual to be an active and informed citizen … I think some of the benefits … are definitely that it is important for them to know about such a controversial topic in society and for them to be able to be informed and develop their own opinions. Or if they already have opinions, I guess expand their rationale or thinking of potential things that they need to think about in considering this topic. Yeah, I guess it's important to include them in the conversation so then, like I said, towards my goal of being active and informed citizens as a goal of education.

Responses like this position EAL education as a means to developing active and informed participation as citizens through the development of knowledge about both the issues themselves and the practices of democratic discussion needed to take part in "the conversation." Although other participants did not explicitly cite active and informed citizenship as a rationale for the inclusion of controversial topics in curriculum, notions of knowing about and acting responsibly in the world were present, as in the following excerpt:

> I feel like it's very important for my students to know what people are doing, what some people are suffering from, you know, from being constrained by some power … So it's very important for students to know what is happening in this world and what kind of things we can do to change this world. To make this world become a better place to live. So terrorism is very important for them to know. If they don't know this they would be, you know, they would be … they kind of never have the chance to know what is happening in other places. They would never be compassionate of other people. They would never have, you know, build overall, I don't know how to say it … *spirit*. Yes, so it's very important to know because it's happening in this world. We are entitled to know everything happening in this world. So that's why terrorism should be taught in EAL class.

Overall, participants reported believing that controversial topics such as terrorism *should* be included in EAL curriculum to provide students with 'correct' representations of issues that constituted events in their lives and to develop the kinds of fundamental democratic practices that would position them to engage with society and culture as active and informed citizens. Participants' responses evidenced a nuanced understanding of the role of the EAL teacher that, while acknowledging the work of EAL in the development of students' linguistic skills, also recognised a broader social involvement of EAL teachers in connecting EAL students to Australian communities, culture, and society. All participants

identified a non-exclusively linguistic role for EAL teachers ranging from pastoral care and advocacy of minority students through to enabling access to new communities and navigating new moral landscapes, as shown in the following interview excerpts:

> I mean the purpose of EAL is that 30 weeks class for EAL students, for them to enter the mainstream system, mainstream English classes. So … the role of an EAL teacher is to help prepare EAL students … for the mainstream classes. To help scaffold their understanding of English and help them to reach that next level.
>
> But also I think that includes things like understanding language and culture … Also I think EAL teachers have a bit more of a pastoral role to play because they spend so much time with their students, hopefully, and are able to often understand them better perhaps than other teachers. So students often feel more comfortable coming to you with their problems.
>
> I think the EAL teacher is kind of like a bridge, you know? You bridge the international students to a new culture and a new language context. So it's quite important. An EAL teacher also delivers … the right things, such as you help the students to distinguish from right from wrong in a brand new context. In my placement, most of my student are from China. I know their background is totally different. So as a teacher, you're not only a person to teach them language, but also to help them to accommodate this new culture, and new … context.

These comments are indicative of pre-service EAL teachers who perceive themselves, students, and classrooms as existing beyond narrowly technical definitions of EAL, centred on linguistic proficiency alone. For them, rather, the classroom is a place both produced of, and productive of broader society (Pennycook 2001), with the EAL teacher playing a vital role in helping students to access a new society and culture, both through English language proficiency and through the development of fundamental democratic principles and practices.

## Avoidance of controversial issues

### Deferral to authority

However, despite acknowledging benefits of and expressing a willingness to teach about controversial topics such as terrorism, most participants were equivocal when explicitly asked if they *would* teach about terrorism in their EAL classrooms, offering only conditional agreement and deferring the decision to a higher authority. For example, these three pre-service teachers, all Australian students, remarked:

> I would teach a topic like that if it was asked of me by a school or a curriculum or probably if I was told too, I guess.
>
> If terrorism was something I'd have to tackle.

If I was put in a spot of teaching terrorism in EAL class.

Most participants noted the influence of various forms of external authority over the decision to include a topic like terrorism, including policy, curriculum, management, and school community or ethos. For example, one participant, an Australian undergraduate student, remarked that:

> I think it can be important to broach …. But I think it also needs to be done in consultation with perhaps other teachers or approval from your leader. I think you need to also consider that—what the parents may say depending on the context as well.

When asked why she considered it important to consult with school leadership or parents, she continued:

> So I think in order to cover your bases as such, I think it's important to just run it by management or whoever your head teacher is or whoever you report to, to see what they think about the issue and the importance of it. Because at the end of the day as well, I think you are restricted about what the school believes in and the school's ethos as well. So it's difficult but at the end of the day you're employed as part of that school and you need to follow what that school believes in, implements as well.
>
> If a manager or superior to me said, "That's probably not something that we would like to talk about," then of course … I wouldn't do it. You've got to cater to what they want at the end of the day because the parents and the school are employing you for a specific purpose that they already have in mind, not necessarily what your purpose is in educating people.

These statements echo Hess' (2004) findings of a general aversion to the inclusion of controversy in democratic education programs, in part stemming from the 'fear that adding controversy to the curriculum *creates* controversy, as opposed to simply teaching young people how to deal more effectively with the kinds of political controversies that exist outside of school' (p. 258). Hess (2004) notes two reasons for avoiding controversial issues: firstly, the fear of controversy about controversial issues, and secondly, teachers' concerns about the undue influence of their own views on their ability to teach in a balanced manner. For these participants, it appears that the potential consequences of incorporating controversial topics in the classroom was the more significant concern, though participants did consider their own capacity to teach their students in a balanced manner, noting that 'you don't give your own opinion, but you just showcase the fact,' and more forcefully, 'I don't think you can force your ideals of education onto other people or onto a school.' In these statements, teachers expressed the need for a 'distanced' and 'general' approach to teaching the topic, detached from teachers' personal social or emotional concerns, one that in some ways are contrary to their belief that they should play an active role in breaking down perceived bias and stereotypes in media representations.

We suggest that such avoidance, predicated on the deferral to authorities such as the school, policy, and curriculum, is a cause for concern. In a policy

environment characterised by the reconstitution of teachers' work around the prevention of terrorism, and constructed around stereotypes of terrorism located in Islamic cultural and religious practices that position young Muslim students as vulnerable and at-risk of ill-defined notions of radicalisation and extremism (Coppock 2014), such deferral can only lead to further 'silencing and marginalising students and staff who might otherwise wish to engage in the exploration of difficult questions and ideas' (O'Donnell 2016, p. 54).

Furthermore, deferral and avoidance are not inevitable, as demonstrated in this excerpt, taken from our interview with an international Master of Teaching student from China, who presented a notable counterpoint to participants' typical responses:

> Student: Teach or not teach…um…maybe the, I mean the…um…the authority, maybe my principal don't not want me to teach, the coordinator don't want me to teach.
>
> Interviewer: And in that sort of situation, how would you act? Would you listen to them? Would you do your own thing? What would be your thoughts about in that sort of situation?
>
> Student: I would negotiate with them, because this is very important to teach. If most of my students are from this territory or this area, doesn't mean that I should not teach, because you teach them, you don't want them to build any hatred. Instead, you want them to be peaceful, you want them to have the love sit in their heart. You know, you inspire them how to do this. Because if you don't teach them, they would never know. They would be discriminated by people. You want them to know that you're different from the terrorists. I want you to know and you could do a lot of things to change this situation. We are entitled to know everything happening in this world. So that's why terrorism should be taught in EAL class.

This counterpoint asserts a refusal to simply defer to authority. Instead the participant constructs the role of the teacher as an agent rather than a mere facilitator and EAL students as active citizens who are both able and entitled to engage in difficult discussions.

## Sensitivity to students' backgrounds

Most participants also identified the importance of considering student backgrounds and being sensitive to the emotional needs and past experiences of students as an important consideration in deciding to teach or not teach a topic like terrorism. In this way, some participants were keen to avoid "causing students to relive traumatic experiences," noting that "if it just ends up in an emotional turmoil you're not going to ultimately learn as much." Participants noted that as EAL teachers, their students may have come from refugee and war-affected backgrounds. As this participant, a mature-aged Master of Teaching student noted, this meant they would need to be:

> … sensitive, obviously, as to what material you might show. If you're going to show visuals, you've got to think of-. I mean the school I was at, they had some kids from some backgrounds of refugee status and coming from other war-torn parts of the world. Just be aware. But that's with a lot of your teaching. You've got to be aware that there are going to be issues that touch everyone.

Similarly, the international Master of Teaching student expressed the need not to "irritate students"—particularly on vexed political questions–and to be sensitive to students' backgrounds:

> For example, one of my classes, most of them are from China, only one student is from Japan. If I taught the Second World War I would have to be very careful … I mean, I may irritate the students. So likewise, if I teach a class of students who are from these countries … who wear a headscarf, I have to be very careful of my language. Because, for example, if I want to tell them that a lot of terrorists are Muslims, they might be irritated. "Oh why do you equate us to terrorists? Muslim and terrorist are totally different things." So I have to be careful of my language.

While such concerns are well-intentioned, and possibly warranted, our concern here is that our participants, speaking largely from the position of being well-educated, Australian-born teachers, have little embodied experience of the kinds of cultural and religious backgrounds and conditions students may have experienced, and thus potentially little insight into whether the discussion of such topics might prove beneficial or traumatic for students. We see here the risk of paternalism, grounded in a conception of the political as the preserve of adults (Coppock 2014), that, while well-intentioned, might limit young EAL students' opportunities to engage in democratic discussion of controversial topics.

Several participants also advocated for the EAL classroom as a 'safe space,' but one allowing students to initiate discussions about their own experiences. Here, discussing terrorism in the classroom was also seen as a way of being sensitive to students from marginalised backgrounds by providing them with an opportunity to enter debates about representations of their worlds (Gerulek 2012):

> So I think openly talking about it would be okay, but for some of those marginalised students actually openly talking about it in perhaps a more objective manner can be good for them. Because they might not have necessarily the space to talk about it in other areas of their lives because they don't, they're perhaps scared to talk about it or things like that. Or for students that haven't been exposed to it, it can be an important talking point because I guess it is sort of in the media and it is talked about.

Overall, this discussion reveals that despite advocating for the value of including discussions of controversial issues in the EAL classroom, participants on the whole expressed ambivalence about taking responsibility for this inclusion, based largely on a fear of potentially negative consequences to themselves and their students.

## Concluding discussion

This article has explored the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards the notion of including discussions of controversial topics such as terrorism in Australian EAL classrooms. We found broad support for the idea of such discussions as a way of teaching students about world events outside their classrooms and preparing students for active and informed participation in Australian society. Despite this, however, we found that participants, with one notable exception, were ambivalent about including such discussions in their own classrooms, and were willing to avoid such discussions by deferring the decision to include such topics to authorities including the school, policy, principal, parents, and curriculum.

These pre-service EAL teachers demonstrated that they understood the role of the EAL to extend far beyond simply supporting the development of students' linguistic proficiency. They implicitly recognised that students' lives exceed the boundaries of the classroom and extend into global events and contemporary politics. They implicitly connected their students' development of English proficiency to concepts of citizenship, such as engaging in discussion, deliberation and debate around substantive issues that are relevant to students' own lives, and advocated for supporting students' social, cultural, and moral development as informed and active citizens of an inclusive Australia. Of significance was participants' perceptions of the teacher's role in challenging dominant or mainstream representations of diversity that were perceived to be biased, thereby positioning the EAL teacher as a critical gatekeeper and mediator between mainstream society and EAL students. For these teachers, teaching about terrorism seemed to involve approaching terrorism as an open question in which dominant discourses and media representations of terrorisms conflated with Islam needed to be examined and discussed. Also of significance was that no participants voiced an opinion that as becoming-English speakers in the process of developing English language proficiency, EAL students would be incapable of engaging in discussions of controversial topics. As Morgan and Fleming (2009) suggest, these participants viewed EAL students as 'sources of critical, participatory insights' (p. 268), demonstrating their confidence in students' capacity to engage in practices of democratic life despite their English proficiency (Youniss 2011). Useful pedagogical frameworks exist that can be used to explore social issues connected to the development of linguistic proficiency, such as Humphrey's (2010, 2016) work on the "civic domain" of adolescent literacies. Drawing on Martin's (2004) notion of "Positive Discourse Analysis", the civic domain represents a space for the discussion and debate for public issues separate from adult-led political processes. Civic literacy pedagogies support students to access and deconstruct powerful discourses as well as developing the civic literacies needed to build reasoned and persuasive arguments (Humphrey 2010).

However, what became clear from our discussions is that participants largely deferred the decision to include controversial topics to other authorities, avoiding responsibility for introducing controversy to the classroom out of fear that this may itself generate controversy (Hess 2004). Such an approach is commonplace

and understandable; including controversial topics in the EAL classroom *is* potentially controversial. As Bickmore (2005) notes:

> to teach for democratization, in the context of student diversity and globalization, requires more substantive knowledge, more skills, and more comfort with openness and uncertainty than to teach for unquestioned dominant 'common sense.' This can feel overwhelming, especially for novice teachers. Such complexity is not easy to handle, especially in the context of educational systems' social pressures and sanctions. (p. 3)

It is concerning that many pre-service teachers are already limiting their personal discretion as teachers to align with assumptions about school and institutional policies, positioning themselves as facilitators of an externally imposed curriculum that limits students' opportunities for frank engagement with controversial topics and democratic practices. What this suggests is that within the commonplace framing of English and EAL as natural, neutral, and beneficial, students are less likely to find opportunities to develop their knowledge of controversial issues and democratic skills in EAL classrooms. Likewise, the research points to the need for all teachers to carefully consider how to respond to students in a way that is critical of both their personal biases and the increasingly politicised framing of teachers' work. This knowledge is crucial if we are to equip EAL students with the fundamental democratic principles and practices they require to gain power and take control of their lives in Australia.

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