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*Educating the children of returning foreign fighters:
fear as the antithesis of inclusive education*

This is the Accepted version of the following publication

MacDonald, Fiona and Smith, Debra (2019) Educating the children of returning foreign fighters: fear as the antithesis of inclusive education. International Journal of Inclusive Education. ISSN 1360-3116

The publisher's official version can be found at
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603116.2019.1707305>
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/40140/>

Educating the Children of Returning Foreign Fighters: Fear as the antithesis of inclusive education

Abstract

The emergence and subsequent decline of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria provides new challenges for Western governments facing the return of foreign fighters and their families to home soil. This article focuses on the children of returned foreign fighters and more specifically on the international responsibility to provide all children, particularly those most vulnerable and in need, with an education. A critical discourse analysis of public debates surrounding the return of the children of Australian foreign fighters illustrates the tension that exist between the rights of children, citizenship, and a nation's capacity to overcome a culture of fear. We argue that we are currently witnessing the emergence of a new type of human being (Arendt 1996); a particularly insidious and dangerous form of 'child citizen refugee'. The paper employs fear as a symptom of modern life (Bauman 2006) and Arendt's (1996) poignant lesson of exclusion and persecution to investigate why the children of returning foreign fighters may be denied the right to an inclusive education. We argue that fear is the antithesis of inclusive education and highlight how ill-equipped we are to overcome the ubiquity of fear to engage in an ethical project of educational inclusion for these children (Allan 2005; Slee 2011).

Keywords: socially inclusive education, dangerous refugees, foreign fighters, children, citizenship

Introduction

Abhorrent pictures of the nine-year-old Australian boy Abdullah Sharrouf holding aloft the severed head of a Syrian government soldier prompted then Prime Minister Tony Abbott to declare that if Australian children committed a crime they would be prosecuted in the same way as other juvenile offenders (Today online, May 27, 2015).

The emergence and subsequent decline of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)¹ presents new challenges for Western nations as they are increasingly required to deal with the prospect of returning foreign fighters and their families from Syria and Iraq. At the end of 2016, reports emerged that foreign fighters and their families were planning to return to Western nations, including Australia, having previously left to join the conflict. Authorities began to plan for their return, inviting government officials from education, health, police, family and community services to workshop this emerging problem (*The Australian*, September 21, 2016). At the same time, public debates focused on the risk these citizens might pose, including the children who had been taken to the conflict by their parents. While their status as children was acknowledged in these debates, the potential security risk they posed nullified a genuine commitment to their reintegration and education. The absence of any acknowledgement of victimhood was striking, and the tension this dilemma posed for political leaders palpable.

The language use around the children of returning foreign fighters in these debates was concerning. The rights of the children, who we describe as victims in the ISIS conflict, were becoming obscured by a deeply entrenched discourse of fear

¹ While we use the acronym ISIS, ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), Daesh (the Arabic acronym), or IS (Islamic State) are also commonly used to refer to the group.

surrounding refugees and asylum seekers, the fear of the ‘invincibility of evil’ (Bauman 2006, 67) and a ‘fear that projects us from the present into the future’ (Ahmed 2014, 65). Furthermore, the debates appeared to overlook their citizenship. Emerging discourses around these children suggested that they may be constructed as what Arendt (1996) has identified as ‘a new form of human beings.’ There is a precedent here and it could be argued that history is repeating itself by allowing ‘its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted’ and creating a new ‘pariah’ (Arendt 1996, 119). Our concerns about the discourse emerging in Australia around these children, and its impact on children’s rights to reintegration and education, prompted this investigation. The principles of critical discourse analysis provided the framework to critically engage with the public debates and consider how fear is shaping discourses around the children of foreign fighters in ways that challenge the principles of inclusive education (Allan 2005; Slee 2011).

After outlining the methodology used in this analysis, this article clarifies and contextualises the concept of the foreign fighter. We introduce Allan (2005) and Slee’s (2011) philosophy of inclusive education and discuss a collective fear that has become a symptom of modern life (Ahmed 2014; Bauman 2004, 2006). We present two major themes emerging from the analysis; the melding of terrorism and refugee discourses and the emergence of a new form of dangerous and insidious Other — ‘those who are “not us”, and who in not being us, endanger what is ours. Such Others threaten to take away from what “you” have’ (Ahmed 2014, 1). Although this analysis is based on Australian debates, the themes will be familiar to other countries grappling with the same phenomenon. As such, this article seeks to contextualise a contemporary global debate and in doing so make some preliminary, if tentative, observations on the role of fear in

constructing barriers to the continuing project of inclusive education and, by extension, an insensitivity to the rights of children.

Methodology

Data Collection

This research is based on the analysis of media representations of children of returning foreign fighters. A systematic online search of the *Factiva* website for articles referencing the ‘children of foreign fighters’ from June 2016 to March 2018, identified seventy-five media reports, nationally and internationally. Purposive sampling (Flyvbjerg 2006) ensured that the sample addressed the emerging phenomenon and the children’s right to reintegration and education. Criteria for the sample included, relevance to the Australian context, a focused discussion on the needs of the children of foreign fighters, and the challenges the nation faced in reintegrating and educating these young Australian citizens. From this criteria, twenty media reports were identified and analysed. One media article was identified for detailed analysis, including the tracking of comments on two different online media sites. The article, ““Stop thinking with your bleeding hearts instead of your brain”: Outrage as Government says Australia will resettle and provide welfare for 70 children of dead ISIS fighters’ (*Daily Mail*, September 25, 2017) was selected. The article quoted Australia’s then Justice Minister, Michael Keenan, stating that,

The children would be given counselling and welfare, and their transitions would be closely monitored. ... Each child who returns will be individually case-managed and will receive an education. They will also be offered anonymity to distance themselves from the terror organisation.

The article also quoted Australian academic, Levi West,² posing the question that many Australians want answered,

At what age do we assess the children to be too much of a risk, given that they may have been exposed to and substantially influenced by – if not committed to an ideological framework that is going to cause an enormous problem when we bring them back here?

The original article was published on the *Daily Mail Australia*³ online site on the 25th September 2017 and was reposted on a far-right website, *Stop the Mosque in Bendigo*,⁴ on the 2nd February 2018. Analysis of the online article revealed 209 comments before the site stopped taking comments. Analysis of the article on the far-right website revealed a further 204 responses. The tables below provide as sample of the media that was analysed.

Media headlines

[Table 1 here]

Political comment reported in Australian news media

[Table 2 here]

² Academic in the field of terrorism.

³ The *Daily Mail Australia* is an online subsidiary of the British middle-market tabloid newspaper.

⁴ Stop the Mosques Australia is a Facebook site with 72,000 followers. Bendigo is a large regional Australian city. In 2015 the city became a battle ground as far-right anti-Islamic groups fought against the building of an Islamic prayer centre.

Public comment posted online⁵

[Table 3 here]

Data Analysis

There has been limited academic scholarship focusing on the children of returning foreign fighters, partly due to the recent emergence of the issue and partly due to the difficulty in accessing this population for the purposes of research (Blackbourn, Kayis and McGarrity 2018; Capone 2017; Horgan et al. 2017; Reed, Pohl and Jegerings 2017). There has been, however, considerable social and political debate, and subsequent media reporting afforded an opportunity to adopt the principles of critical discourse analysis to enable an investigation of the narratives that are shaping our response to this emerging problem (Fairclough 2013; Wodak 2011).

Critical discourse analysis ‘sees language as social practice’ and ‘considers “the context of language use” to be crucial’. It is also problem-oriented and ‘gives rise to important issues of power’ (Wodak 2011, 187). The power, to both make decisions about the fate of the children of returned foreign fighters, but also to shape public opinion towards them, seemingly lies with political leaders. Our approach was to juxtapose this with the absence of power for the children who are being spoken ‘about’ and increasingly framed as a potential security risk, caught up in the intensity of a fear that challenges our moral sensibilities (Bauman and Donskis 2013), despite the lack of agency in the decisions that have led to their predicament. The approach enabled discipline boundaries to be crossed in the investigation, allowing for different points of

⁵ Original emphasis and verbatim comments included in this paper.

entry into the analysis, from a socially inclusive education perspective to the role of emotion within discourses of violent extremism (AuthorA 2017, AuthorB 2016, 2017).

Adopting the principles of critical discourse analysis enabled an investigation of the tension that exists between the rights of children, citizenship, and a nation's capacity to overcome a culture of fear within the emerging discourse of children of returning foreign fighters. The analysis focused on the children's rights to reintegration and education. Analysis of language use in media reports, political comment and public response identified a new discourse emerging from the fear around the children and the potential for them to be constructed as 'a new kind of human being'. The children's highly precarious and vulnerable position was explored and Australia's capacity to engage in an ethical project of unqualified inclusive education considered.

Foreign fighters

'Foreign fighter' is a term applied to those who leave their home country to travel abroad in order to join a foreign insurgency (Malet 2013). The term is most commonly associated with the contemporary flow of people to the recent conflict zone in Syria and Iraq, particularly, but not exclusively, to join the so-called Islamic State.⁶ Globally, this conflict has led to an unprecedented mobilisation of foreign fighters (Zammit 2015), with estimates that at least 30,000 people drawn from over 100 countries have travelled to join the conflict (Chu and Braithwaite 2017). With the decline of ISIS it has been estimated that 1200 to 3000 women and children will be looking to return to European countries and other Western nations (*The National World*, February 1, 2018). The

⁶ The phenomenon of people traveling to participate in a foreign conflict is not new. The most well-known examples would include the American Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, and Mujahedeen fighting in the Soviet-Afghan conflict.

citizenship status of these women and children is precarious.

Australia has not been immune to this dilemma, and the Australian government has responded to foreign fighters by enacting laws allowing citizenship to be stripped from individuals with dual nationality if they have been members of a terrorist group or engaged in terrorism-related activity. This legislation includes the children of suspected terrorists (Capone 2017). Recent assessments of the number of Australian foreign fighters in the conflict zone have identified around 110, with a further 68-85 having been killed, 40 returned, and 219 prevented from travelling via passport cancellations.⁷ While these figures do not necessarily capture those Australians that have travelled as families (as opposed to combatants), the Australian government has confirmed that there are a further 70 children that are expected to return to Australia from the conflict zones of Syria and Iraq (*Courier Mail*, March 4, 2017). These children have either travelled with their parents or been born to Australian parents within the conflict zone (*SBS News*, May 26, 2017). Other children are also expected to be in the care of Australian men who married local women with existing children (*The Australian*, January 23, 2017).

The recent high-profile case of the orphaned children of Khaled Sharrouf illustrates many of the complexities that will need to be addressed now that ISIS has lost its territory and those who left to live under its auspices seek to return to their countries of birth. Sharrouf's children had no agency in the decision to enter ISIS territory, having been taken there as minors from Australia in 2014 by their now deceased mother. Sharrouf's five children were originally relocated to ISIS territory after he had left

⁷ Figures stated in testimony of Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Director-General Duncan Lewis at Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee Estimates Hearing, 24th October, 2017. Transcripts are available at <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au>

several months earlier to join the conflict as a fighter. During their time under ISIS, two sons were killed alongside their father and the three remaining children, along with elder daughter Zaynab's two toddlers, are living in a Syrian refugee camp. There are reports that Zaynab, who was married at 13 to another Australian ISIS fighter and is now an orphan, a widow, a mother of two, and pregnant all by the age of 17, has been indoctrinated into loyalty to ISIS (*ABC News*, April 1, April 16, 2019). The implications of the children's socialisation within violent extremism in an unprecedented conflict and foreign nation, evoke further questions around citizenship and loyalty (Connor 2007) that warrant further investigation, but are beyond the focus of this paper.

Nevertheless, under international law Australia has a responsibility to the safety and wellbeing of Australian children. The right to life, survival and to develop to their full potential is one of the four guiding principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989). Special attention has been given in international law to children and young people involved in conflict, either voluntarily or because of being taken as family members (Capone 2017). The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 2002) and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014) state that nations must commit to and provide all appropriate assistance for the rehabilitation and reintegration of children from conflict zones. The challenges child soldiers represent to home nations is addressed in this commitment, yet, the children of returning foreign fighters are creating a new dilemma,

In most contexts child soldiers are recognised as victims of an international crime rather than as perpetrators, whereas in the case of foreign children associated with ISIL the accent is placed on the threat that they represent and on the security concerns that their departures and return raise (Capone 2017, 164).

Our findings suggest that fear is the mechanism driving the language used to define the children of returning foreign fighters, positioning them as a particularly dangerous and insidious form of Other, more aligned with refugee discourse than citizenship and children's rights.

Inclusive Education

Education is a fundamental right for all children and vital for enabling them to develop to their greatest potential (UN 1989). Inclusive education policy reflects a 'worldwide consensus' that education for all 'effectively means FOR ALL, particularly those who are most vulnerable and most in need' (Mayor in UNESCO 1994, iv). Policy commitment at a global level is evident yet the practical application of policy at national or state level is more complex and inclusive education is a constant struggle against 'failure and exclusion' for vulnerable students (Slee 2011, 12). Despite this, the recent Global Counterterrorism Forum (2017, 10) identified education as key to socialising returning family members,

The education system – can be critical for socialization and to reduce stigma against returnees. Education systems can instil values, skills, and tools necessary for resilient communities and individuals by shaping citizenship, including for the returning family members of FTFs.

Children of returning foreign fighters present an 'unprecedented challenge[s] for schools, child-welfare authorities and the communities in which they settle' (*The Australian*, September 21, 2016). The Sharrouf children highlight the complex policy and practical implications that nations face as citizenship and education 'have both become formally drawn into the counterterrorism agenda' (Gholami 2019, 4). While their right to education has been affirmed by Australia's political leaders, the

commitment comes with qualification.

Slee (2011) argues that inclusive education is about understanding exclusion and recognising the barriers that restrict access to education. It is about perception and the desire for change. Allan (2005, 293) contends that inclusive education is an ethical project where everyone, individuals and groups, have responsibilities. She suggests that we are all responsible for three things in this ethical project, our capacity to see inclusion as something that we do to ourselves and not just to a group of children, to be enthusiastic and open to considering new possibilities, and to be optimistic about how we are able to change. Allan (2005) argues that successful inclusion depends on how far those with responsibility allow themselves to hope, to accept their responsibilities, and to be prepared to do the work required. The ethical project, according to Slee (2011, 83) requires us all to observe the ‘underlying *telos* (goal) and set of principles to guide our choices and behaviour’.

The motivation to engage in an ethical project of inclusive education is complex, and not surprisingly, driven by constituent’s interests (Allan 2005; Ahmed 2014; Slee 2011). There are understandable fears around the potential risk these children pose to the safety of other children that must be acknowledged and addressed. One of the greatest challenges of this ethical project will be to balance the obligations to the returning children with the safety of others—students, teachers, families and communities. Yet, the unbearable ‘suspicion of an evil patiently waiting its chance’ (Bauman 2006, 70) is creating a new barrier to inclusive education. However, it must be remembered that inclusion is unconditional and does not allow for partial inclusion (Slee 2011), a qualification that is being challenged by this particular cohort of children. The association with ISIS, the distribution of confronting imagery and the children’s prominent position in propaganda, has worked to eulogize these children and young

people as martyrs to the ideology of ISIS (Horgan et al. 2017). The incalculability of the risk they pose has evoked the ‘one fear that is genuinely and hopelessly unbearable ... the fear of the invincibility of evil’ (Bauman 2006, 67).

An incalculable fear

Collective fear plays a significant role in creating social expectations and is related to our cultural values and social structures and institutions. It is also relevant to its place and time in history and fear has been described as a symptom of modern life (Ahmed 2014; Bauman 2006). In contemporary life fear manifests in many ways with anxiety about rapidly changing social institutions, climate change, unemployment and crime merging into a ‘derivative fear’ where danger exists everywhere, catastrophic and indiscriminate, striking anyone at any time with little chance of escape (Bauman 2006).

It is tempting to individualise blame for some of the comments emerging from the discourse surrounding children of returning foreign fighters. A politics of fear is dependent on a discourse of fear and it is not ‘fear’ per se that is important in social life but rather how fear is defined and realised in everyday social interaction that is important’ (Altheide 2006, 423). When fear is so pervasive, emanating from and having consequences for society, it is more than just a ‘personal infliction’ (AuthorB 2016, 61). Global economies of fear have been described as the age in which we live, ‘inflating dangers and risks not just to the individual, but to life itself’ (Ahmed 2014, 72). Ahmed (2014, 72) argues that the cultural politics of emotion, ‘dependent on relations of power’, leads to collective politics and social alliance. The fear of death motivates us to identify others as,

fearsome insofar as they threaten to take the self in. Such fantasies construct the

other as a danger not only to one's self as self, but to one's very life, to one's very existence (Ahmed 2014, 64).

Nussbaum (2001, 28) noted that '[w]hat distinguishes fear from hope, fear from grief, love from hate – is not so much the identity of the object, which might not change, but the way in which the object is seen'. This suggests that if we 'see' the children as a dangerous form of Other, fear will continue to override our capacity to envisage or commit to an inclusive education for these children. If the frame in which we view these children can be changed to one of victimhood, vulnerability and potential, the response can begin to shift towards one of compassion and hope in which the imagining of the ethical project of inclusive education can take place.

Findings

Two themes that are particularly important for addressing the barriers that fear has constructed to providing an inclusive education to the children of returning foreign fighters emerged from the analysis; 1) the melding of a terrorism and refugee discourse and 2) the emergence of a new form of dangerous and insidious Other. These two themes are discussed below.

Melding terrorism and refugee discourse

Australia's discourse linking terrorism with refugees is not new. It has been perpetuated by political leaders in the post 9/11 environment. Responses to asylum seekers and refugees—MV Tampa, Stop the Boats, No Way and No Visa campaigns, as well as the 'Pacific Solution'—have been described as 'a single, virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection' (Cohen as quoted in Martin 2015, 307). In Europe, the recent

influx of refugees fleeing the conflict zones of Syria and Iraq has also become conflated with a higher likelihood of terrorism, with a poll finding that ‘in eight out of ten European nations surveyed, 50 percent of the population or more believes that incoming refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country’ (Reed, Pohl and Jegerings 2017, 8).

Responding to assumed links between refugees and terrorism, including by members of the Australian federal parliament, the Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) testified publicly that neither Australia’s immigration policy or humanitarian refugee intake has any substantiated link to an increased risk of terrorism, with the vast majority of people who have become involved being born in Australia and a very small number who had immigrated with parents at a very young age.⁸ Despite this, a defining feature of Australia’s counter-terrorism response has been to either amend or enact immigration and citizenship laws, further cementing the discourse that associates terrorism with an external threat rather than one that emerges from within Australian society (Blackbourn, Kayis and McGarrity 2018).

The rights of governments to restrict entry of non-citizens is recognised as an integral aspect of state sovereignty, however, extending these laws to restrict the re-entry of Australian citizens is fundamentally new (Blackbourn, Kayis and McGarrity 2018). This new focus on citizens means that Australians who have acted as foreign fighters are now legitimate targets for deportation or denial of entry into Australia if they are deemed to hold, or be eligible, for dual citizenship. Even harsher laws exist in the UK, where British citizens can have their citizenship revoked even if they have no

⁸ ASIO Director-General Duncan Lewis comments on relationships between terrorism and immigration at the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee Estimates Hearing on 24th October, 2017. Transcripts of hearings are available at <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au>.

other citizenship options, effectively rendering them stateless (Blackbourn, Kayis and McGarrity 2018). At the beginning of 2019, we are witnessing the implications of the new citizenship laws as the orphaned children of Khaled Sharrouf attempt to return to Australia. The enactment of citizenship laws to restrict foreign fighter re-entry has become the context in which people attempt to make sense of how to respond to children who are returning from ISIS controlled territory.

The analysis reported here demonstrated how fear was obstructing our obligation to provide an education for the Australian children of returning foreign fighters with the broader and more deeply entrenched socio-political discourse around the exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers. In commenting on the rights of the children of returning foreign fighters to an education, responses such as, ‘I thought that all people went to fight there had been stripped of their citizenship. Therefore these children are not eligible to come back here’ (Daily Telegraph) reveal how completely the fact that the children *have* been born here and *are Australian* citizens has been lost.

The analysis revealed that at times political leaders acknowledged the precarious citizenship status of the returning children of foreign fighters, with the previous Australian Prime Minister, Malcom Turnbull, saying, ‘if they are Australian citizens, of course, [they] would be able to return to Australia’. However, this was followed by the qualifying statement, ‘But under the closest possible supervision’ (Turnbull, *Business Insider*, May 8, 2017).

When focusing on the public responses, however, the recognition of the children as Australian citizens and the obligations to the children that this entails completely disappears. The focus is almost entirely on the security risks these children potentially pose and the un-calculable risk of what they might become. Almost all responses also implicitly accepted the status of these children as ‘non-Australian’.

Whoever passed the bill to let them in should be held accountable for these kids [sic] actions when they arrive. Cause you know it's only a matter of time till these little terrorists kill our kids (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo).

No legislation has been passed to 'let them in' as the above comment assumes, rather it is the children's right to enter their home country as Australian citizens. Public comments, such as the one above, consistently construct the children as 'foreigners' or render them 'non-Australian', a kind of refugee that 'we' no longer have obligations to. Any distinction between a terrorist and a refugee becomes lost as comments such as 'settle them in their own country with their own people!!' (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo) and 'they are not Australian children, they are people who have a parent with an Australian passport' (Daily Mail Australia), reflect Australia's entrenched hostility and rejection of refugees. These children bring with them the added burden of being assumed terrorists, symbolising an un-calculable risk to our future security. The following comment is indicative of how the children are already labelled terrorists, 'no way keep these Terrorist trained kids OUT', whereas others assume they will automatically become terrorists in the future, 'some of these will (without doubt) become radicalised' (Daily Telegraph).

Mirroring Australia's entrenched discourses surrounding refugees and asylum seekers, the children's return was consistently linked to 'our' risk as opposed to the vulnerability of the children themselves. Citizens are not refugees, but in this debate there is a blurring of the boundaries that illustrates the tensions that exist between the rights of children, citizenship, and a nation's capacity to overcome a culture of fear.

A new dangerous and insidious Other

The othering of individuals or groups, Ahmed (2014) argues, takes place through emotion and is shaped by the contact we have with others. She argues that we perceive

something as beneficial or harmful by the affect it has on us. This ‘involves reading the contact we have with objects [others] in a certain way’ (Ahmed 2014, 6). Emotions ‘encourage people either to gravitate towards a sense of social proximity, or conversely, to recoil and retreat’ (AuthorB, 2016, 250). A defensive response may invoke negative emotions that work to differentiate between ‘us’ and ‘them’ because being either unable or unwilling ‘to recognize your own emotional reality in the eyes of others is part of the social mechanisms that lead to the dehumanization of the Other’ (AuthorB, 2016, 266).

Others are brought into the sphere of my or our existence as a threat. This other, who may stand for or stand by other others, *presses* against me, threatening my existence. The proximity of the other’s touch is felt as a negation (Ahmed 2014, 51).

Faced with this response, the Other becomes ‘superfluous, unnecessary, unneeded and unwanted’ (Bauman 2004, 40).

Concerns for individual and a nations’ security have invoked strong emotions in debates around the rights of children and young people displaced by, or implicated in, conflict zones (*Reuters World News*, January 8, 2018). The place of children in conflict is highly complex and the ‘issue of what constitutes voluntary engagement are enormously challenging concepts to disentangle’ (Horgan et al. 2017, 650). The position of children whose parents have both taken them to a conflict zone and then subsequently seek to return with them is unparalleled, with the return of child soldiers to their home nations the closest example (Horgan et al. 2017). Yet here, child soldiers are acknowledged as victims and individuals, not responsible for the actions of all (Capone 2017; Grossman et al. 2016). In this new phenomenon, we found that the children of foreign fighters are being collectively feared and Othered, (Capone 2017; Horgan et al. 2017), labelled as ‘could-be terrorists’ and ‘trained as executioners of innocent

victim[s]' (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo). Despite their limited agency in the decision to engage with ISIS, the children are being labelled as a 'different species'. The label of terrorist,

has become synonymous with being morally reprehensible, and therefore devoid of an essential aspect of humanness. A terrorist becomes a non-human, something to be eliminated rather than someone to listen to or negotiate with (AuthorB, 2016, 247).

There are many points of entry to the othering of these children in our analysis. Language use in these debates sees children labelled as 'them' or 'they' or worse, as 'terrorist tots' (*Courier Mail*, March 1, 2017), or 'inbreds' who should be 'left where they are' (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo). The language of childhood innocence and vulnerability, associated with children in western nations, is largely absent and the othering of these children reflect highly emotional debates around their Muslim identities and their parent's association with ISIS.

They are children that have been taught to kill us and our culture and you want them to come back to spread their hatred and false beliefs. They lost their innocence when they held up the heads of other people' (Daily Telegraph).

Comments that reflect the sentiment that, 'these are radicalised Muslim, they are indoctrinated to abhor Western society' were common place (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo). The links to terrorism and the unknown potential risk predominates any acknowledgement of their status as children. 'These little soldiers have been taught to kill Westerners' states one responder (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo). The absence of language around victimhood in these debates is particularly intriguing as the nature of these young children's engagement in the conflict zone has been largely without agency.

The statements of Australian political leaders at times also reflected a strong emotive response to these children. Then Immigration Minister, now Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton declared, ‘We’re talking about the possibility of a threat [children] emerging because of what somebody has learned in the tradecraft of terrorism overseas. Bringing that [child] back to Australia can result in the loss of many Australian lives’ (*Courier Mail*, December 11, 2017). Children are depersonalised and dehumanised, positioned as something fearsome rather than victims. If they have been taught ‘the tradecraft of terrorism overseas’ (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo) the government does have an obligation to protect the public. However, missing from this debate is a discussion of the structures, programs and resources that need to be in place to restore the well-being of these children who may have been subjected to brutalising experiences and indoctrination. Just as other child victims of various forms of abuse, these children deserve to have their victimhood recognised and responded to. Instead, disturbingly vitriolic responses from the public perpetuates a message of hostility, rejection and dehumanisation,

Once you train a dog to kill ... it’s always a killer ... the only way to stop it is to put it down ... food for thought (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo).

Many argued that the damage to these children is already done and ‘they will not fit in there [sic] mind is so full of hate you will not be able to change them’ (Stop the Mosque in Bendigo). Outrage at the possibility of these Others being educated alongside Australian children was venomous,

DON’T PUT MY GRANDBABIES AT RISK. IF ONE COMES TO THEIR SCHOOL WE WILL TAKE THEM OUT!! THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN POISONED WITH THEIR PARENTS HATE AND SAVAGE WAYS!! NO NO NO DON’T WANT THEM HERE!! (emphasis in original)

Discussion: Fear as the antithesis to inclusive education

Our analysis identified fear as the underlying driver for the way these children are being constructed as refugees and Others. Images of children from the ISIS conflict zone, like those outlined above, make it difficult to recognise them as children and to envisage how they could be reintegrated and educated alongside the innocence we associate with childhood in Western nations. The risk these fearsome children pose to life itself sits between a fear that can be anticipated and that which is unpredictable (Bauman 2006, 11). The age of these children projects our fear of the invincibility of evil into the future making the risk incalculable but nevertheless unbearable (Ahmed 2014).

In the children of returning foreign fighters we have an Other that is unknown, unfamiliar and does not present us with a ‘set of principles to guide our choices and behaviours’ (Slee 2011, 83). Our fear of the indiscriminate nature of terrorism is so great that we no longer see the ‘child’ but have created them as something ‘fearsome’ (Ahmed 2014). The analysis highlights the degree to which fear has constructed these children as a particularly dangerous and insidious form of Other. There is a distinction here ‘between us who are inside [and entitled] and them who are outside [and not]’ (Fangen 2010, 150). The strength with which our collective fear has been enabled by a deeper and more entrenched discourse of fear around refugees and terrorism and the uncalculable risk to our future security hints at how this has come about.

While the actions of children in another context may be considered the responsibility of their parents, it would appear that in a state of fear we have turned from and on these children, condemning them for the decisions of their parents, labelling them as strangers, ‘a surplus population’, maligned as the Other, as we seek to ‘secure our own survival and privileges’ (Slee 2011, 48). Fear is constructing these

children as the kind of Other that no responsibility can, or should, be extended to, absolving us of our moral sensitivities towards children (Bauman and Donskis 2013).

Australia's political leaders are not exempt from this fear. Public comment reveals them grappling with this unprecedented dilemma, between legislation that determines these children have a right to rehabilitation and education and deeply held discourses of fear of refugees. They are faced with a very real predicament: what if even one child of a returning foreign fighters perpetuates an act of terror.

Conclusion: New Kind of Human Beings

Arendt's poignant essay, "We Refugees", not only noted how fluid the term refugee is, reflecting the particular social circumstances and anxieties of the time, but also how fluid the concept of humanness is. In this case the persecuted are children, fearsome because they have been subjected to various levels of indoctrination and training within the Islamic State and highly visible in propaganda videos committing horrifying acts of violence (Capone 2017; Horgan et al. 2017).

The rights to education for ex-child soldiers, children and young people from war-affected zones, foreign fighters and children socialised into violent extremist movements are at odds with a culture of fear and the desire for national security and to eliminate threats to our safety (Davies 2016; Horgan et al. 2017). With the decline of ISIS and the impending return of Australia's foreign fighters fear has intensified as political leaders grapple with a commitment to children's rights within discourses around terrorism, refugees and a culture of fear that challenges our moral sensitivity towards these children.

Our analysis suggests that fear has become the antithesis to inclusive education. Analysis of the debates around the children of returning foreign fighters suggests that

we have not travelled far from Arendt's poignant lesson of exclusion and persecution. We are again creating a new kind of human being out of the weakest and most vulnerable of our citizens. The nature of a culture of fear, global discourses of terror and fear of refugees, and the incalculable fear of an evil that may be waiting for its chance suggests that these children will be labelled a new and particularly insidious and dangerous form of refugee. While they may not be interned in the concentration camps of the 20th century their exclusion may be no less hostile, defined by others' perception and social exclusion rather than barbed wire fences and remote locations (Arendt 1996; AuthorA 2017). In doing so we restrict the possibilities and opportunities for them to achieve their full potential through education and it appears that Arendt's poignant lesson will be repeated.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the valuable contribution of Dr Muhammad Iqbal and Associate Professor Julie White to this paper. We would also like to thank the reviewers for their valuable feedback which has given us the motivation to continue to examine these issues.

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Media Source	Date	Headline
Courier Mail	1 March 2017	Terrorist tots spark dilemma
Herald Sun	3 March 2017	Fears jihadis' kids will head for Australia
Business Insider	8 May 2017	Australia allows 6-year-old son of ISIS fighter to return home
The Sydney Morning Herald	24 September 2017	Security first, but welfare of IS fighters' children will be managed: government

Table 1. Australian Media Headlines: Children of Returning Foreign Fighters

Political position	Reported comment	Media source	Date
Australia's previous Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull	We will be utterly resolute in keeping Australians safe, ... All the children that are being exploited in this way, if they are Australian citizens, of course, would be able to return to Australia. But under the closest possible supervision.	Business Insider	8 May 2017
Leader of the Opposition, Bill Shorten	Also as a parent though I know that were these children to return they were going to need a lot of working through what they have seen and done.	The Australian	24 June 2017
Justice Minister, Michael Keenan	The plan (to manage the return of as many as 70 children) prioritises security but also looks at counselling, education and welfare. Our agencies will first and foremost identify and mitigate potential security risks.	The Age	25 September 2017

Table 2. Australian Political Comment: Children of Returning Foreign Fighters

Source	Comment
Daily Mail	No they have been brainwashed in the ideology religion we Australians have a right to say no no no! What about our safety! God our politicians are traitors to the Australian people who voted for them!
Stop the Mosque in Bendigo	These are radicalised Muslims they are indoctrinated to abhor western society why is the Australian tax payer paying to import hard core terrorism who is responsible say so
Stop the Mosque in Bendigo	No way keep these Terrorist trained kids OUT, are we that stupid to allow this?
Daily Mail	Hey politicians do what you get paid for ... wake up to yourselves these kids have been exposed to atrocities that can't be erased from their minds and their future behaviour is shaped by their past !!!!
Stop the Mosque in Bendigo	The rights and safety of Australians must come first
Daily Mail	Their Father and Mother chose for them to leave Australia and fight for ISIS, let them live where they have fought to see the real world.
Stop the Mosque in Bendigo	We may be sympathetic to overall concept but at the same time we all have read about young teen fighters being trained and fighting for ISIS. ... They deserve a life of peace and education but what if even one of them is beyond repair

Table 3. Public Response to, 'Stop thinking with your bleeding heart instead of your brain'