**Teaching Controversial Issues in a Disputed Region:**

**The Case of the Golan Heights**

**Abstract**

This study examines the teaching of controversial issues in the Golan Heights, an area where Israel’s sovereignty has been the subject of debate within Israeli society and internationally. The study analyzes educational materials that were used in schools in the Golan Heights during a period of particular uncertainty regarding the region’s future as part of the State of Israel (from the mid-1990s through the early 2000s). The research took a broad perspective by looking at all study disciplines when examining the avoidance methods used in this educational system. The analysis revealed how avoidance techniques evolved into a new practice of actively avoiding the controversial issue. This practice is reflected in the nature of the message, the approach used to transmit the message, and the degree of the sense of belonging with the disputed region. Actively avoiding controversial issues may impede the development of democratic and civic consciousness.

## Keywords

Teaching controversial issues, Controversial area, Avoidance, Golan Heights

**Introduction**

Since Israel occupied the Golan Heights in June 1967, the region’s political future has been the subject of debate among the Israeli public and in the international sphere. This causes insecurity among the region’s residents regarding their personal future and that of the region, which fluctuates in degree of intensity, depending on political developments (Arnon, 2001). The Persian Gulf War in 1991 led to increased political changes and international pressure, and tension remained high until 2019, when then-President of the United States Donald Trump signed a presidential order recognizing Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights (Heitner, 2016).

The debate over the Golan’s future has been an intrinsic part of daily discourse among the area’s residents. For them, this is a deeply personal and communal crisis, touching on their uncertainty regarding their future and that of their families, and undermining their feeling of belonging to the State of Israel and the national collective (Arnon, 2001). There is a difference of opinion between the majority of residents, who advocated a nationwide public and political protest against the State’s potential withdrawal from the Golan, and a minority who said they would be willing to withdraw from the area for practical or ideological reasons (Kipnis, 2020).

This conflict affects the schools, which function within the national education system and therefore cannot contradict the government’s position, even when this position was subjecting the region’s residents – including educators, students and their parents – to personal and communal stresses. Similar situations may arise in any ideologically-based society in which there is a conflict between a local arena and the national arena, causing tension between the educational institutions’ local role and their role as part of a national system. This tension is not only functional, but is related to how the State defines the education system and the nature of the relationship between the local region and the State (Lamm, 2000).

The current research took a dual perspective, in which controversial issues (CI) are taught in the framework of a democratic educational system within a region that is affected by the controversy, and where educators, students, and their parents are personally and emotionally affected by the issue. Most previous research literature on teaching CI, whether conducted in Israel (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017) or in other countries (McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Pollak et al., 2018), looked at relevant disciplines such as citizenship studies, and found a dichotomy between addressing the CI or avoiding it. The current study takes an expanded view by analyzing educational texts from a wide range of disciplines and curricular units that addressed the Golan Heights, but were not specifically framed in the context of the dispute. The selected texts were taught from the mid-1980s through the present day.

For the purpose of this study, we adopted several definitions. The first is a definition of a controversial region, which may be an entire country or a region within it, and is characterized by a distinctive identity reflecting the interactions among individuals or groups living in it, involving economic, political, and cultural contexts (Vujadinović, & Šabić, 2017). We use Jerry Wellington’s (1986) definition of a controversial issue (CI), which necessarily involves a value judgment, so the dispute cannot be settled through facts, evidence, or experiments alone, and which is perceived as important by a number a large number of people.

The Israel Ministry of Education has adopted the position that teaching CI to students of all ages is an essential and necessary part of educating for democracy (Israel Ministry of Education and Culture, 1985). This was reinforced by a report by the Kremnitzer Committee (2013) and a subsequent circular issued by the Director General of the Israel Ministry of Education (2016). However, a wide gap remains between the law and actual practice. The legitimacy of addressing CI in Israel’s national educational system has stirred up altercations, both in the past (Sagy, 1988) and currently (Hoffman, 2020; Kogahinoff, 2020).

This article first presents an overview of the teaching goals and practices of teaching CI. The Methods section describes the approach of collecting the archival material and analyzing it. The Results are presented in several subsections. The Discussion focuses on the analysis of the practice of addressing CI in schools in the Golan during the period of uncertainty.

**Literature Review**

**Objectives of Teaching Controversial Issues**

The teaching of a given CI does not depend on the number of people who support each side, but rather whether it is relevant to the local population’s values, priorities, and social or personal interests (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Taking this perspective, the classroom becomes a microcosm of the surrounding society, and therefore it is incumbent upon the education system and the teachers, as its representatives in the classrooms, to address CI by acting as mediators and educators. Hand and Levinson (2012) argued that there are complex and multi-layered challenges involved in teaching CI, and these shape teachers’ choices and the ways they address the multiple demands presented in the educational materials and the issues that are raised in the classroom and in society.

When teaching CI, it is important to distinguish between political education and ideological education. Lamm (2000) claimed that political education is the opposite of ideological education, because in the former, political content is used as a means to cultivate students’ skills, including their ability to form their own opinions regarding political questions, whereas in the latter, teachers use political content to impart to their students the position they see as politically acceptable. This distinction makes it possible to examine the teaching of CI as part of political education. Some researchers have noted that political education is necessary for educating future citizens, whereas ideological education should be limited to areas of social consensus (see for example, Badri, 2015; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

**Cultivating Democratic Values**. There has been extensive research on the teaching of CI as a means for cultivating democratic values and identification with the democratic system. Hess (2005) asserted that developing a high level of political consciousness requires, among other things, guided exposure to and confrontation with CI in the classroom. The education system, alongside other socialization agents, impacts perceptions of democracy and democratic values (Hess, 2008; Parker, 2003). Moreover, the classroom provides a platform where teachers can conduct a reasoned discussion, with open questions, about political policies and fundamental social values (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). This approach presents teachers with the complex challenge of coping with the tension between education and democracy, and between education and national or hegemonic values (Badri, 2015).

**Achieving Broad Consensus.** According to another approach, the goal of teaching and discussing CI in the classroom is to achieve a broad consensus that reflects and strengthens existing societal power relations. This can intensify polarization. When the discussion emphasizes messages and values shared by the dominant group (such as patriotism), this increases the likelihood that they will be internalized (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). However, accepting the position held by the dominant group in the classroom may marginalize other groups (Hess, 2008).

**Creating a Pluralistic Public Space.** Addressing CI may also be used as a means for creating a pluralistic public space in which differing perspectives may be openly discussed. Discussing CI enables students to identify polarizing positions and agree that a variety of opinions exist, which opens up the possibility for creating bridges between them. However, in many educational systems, the staff members are expected to create unity and consensus while simultaneously including diversity; this is a challenge, due to the inherent tension between these goals (Hess, 2008; McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021; Wansink et al., 2018).

**Developing Communication Skills**. Discussing CI also gives students opportunities to practice presenting various positions and arguments, which contributes to developing their interpersonal communication skills. Open discussions in which students must argue for and against various positions, offer reasons and explanations, and above all listen to others, can build skills that are useful in all areas of adult life (Kello, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

**Developing social sensitivity**. Discussing CI has the potential to develop students’ social sensitivity. It has been argued that it is appropriate to discuss CI in the classroom, not only because they are topics of interest, but more importantly because they involve complex and conflicting values, opinions, priorities, and interests, and bring up intense emotions (Claire & Holden, 2007). The representation of a wide range of opinions in the classroom enables students to develop social sensitivity and inclusive attitudes.

**Factors Influencing Teachers Addressing Controversial Issues**

Cultural and educational hegemony impacts the teaching of CI. The interests of the dominant political and cultural forces in the social environment and community in which the educational institution operates can impact the discussion of various issues. In addition to external factors that contribute to the complexity of teaching CI, the teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and professional perceptions also influence their decisions regarding whether or not to address CI, and if so, how to do it. These factors include:

* the degree to which the teacher identifies and agrees with the definition of a given issue as being controversial (Council of Europe, 2016; Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; Halperin, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013);
* the level of public activity relevant to the issue in question, and the teacher’s personal involvement in it (McAvoy & Hess, 2013);
* the teacher’s pedagogical ability to objectively teach materials pertaining to the CI and to be detached from his or her personal views (Kello, 2016);
* the teacher’s degree of preparation and familiarity with the issue, which strengthens his or her confidence to dealing with potential conflicts in the classroom related to the CI, and the ability to lead a discussion based on facts (Cohen, 2018);
* the teacher’s degree of stability versus vulnerability to stress in addressing the issue, and support from the school administration and the teacher’s family, which strengthens their resistance to stress (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017);
* the teacher’s personality, particularly the tendency to initiate and take risks versus the tendency to avoid risks (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; Halperin, 2016; Kelly, 1986; McAvoy & Hess, 2013);
* the teacher’s perception of the administration’s position regarding discussing the issue (Hahn, 2012; McAvoy & Hess, 2013);
* the teacher’s perception regarding attitudes in the local community, especially those of students’ parents, regarding discussing CI in the classroom (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; Halperin, 2016);
* the degree to which the issue is relevant to students’ lives (Kelly, 1986; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Studies that examined the prevailing behaviors among teachers in Israel found that teachers worry about their personal safety and therefore tend to minimize addressing CI, even in civics and social studies classes, and instead focus on classroom management (Halperin, 2016). Comprehensive research on safety nets for teachers found that conditions for freely addressing CI include support from the administration and a school climate that creates a sense of security for the staff (Cohen, 2018). These studies point to an additional complication regarding this educational practice in Israel.

**Practices for Addressing CI**

The literature differentiates between three main approaches to addressing CI. The first is openly and candidly teaching about CI using available educational materials. The second is direct avoidance of the issues for ethical or personal reasons. Third is indirect avoidance; that is, avoiding the issues in practice, but without articulating that this is being done.

**Openly Teaching CI.** In this practice, CI is addressed as explicit curricular content, for example, in citizenship, history, and social science classes (Cassar et al., 2021). This can be done by intentionally focusing on the CI during a lesson. Alternately, CI may come up spontaneously, such as when the teacher responds to a student who says something perceived as unacceptable (expressing prejudices, stereotypes, discrimination, etc.).

**Direct Avoidance.** The practice of directly avoiding CI occurs primarily when there are significant ideological or cultural differences in opinion regarding the issue, and when there is a risk of exacerbating these differences among groups in general society or within the school community (Hess, 2008). For example, teachers in Europe may avoid addressing the Holocaust (Shoah) so as not to give students a platform to express denial of this historic event (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019) or out of fear of the reactions of the students and their parents (Halperin, 2016).

**Indirect Avoidance.** There are several types of indirect avoidance. Type 1 refers to when the issue is discussed but the controversy about it is hidden, reinforcing the position that is assumed to be a common denominator. This may be done, for example, by looking for common ground or “smoothing over rough edges” in a discussion, such as dealing with the difficulties faced by families and children during war. Type 2 involves adopting the government’s official position and presenting the issue accordingly. The teacher may initiate discussion of an issue because it is in the curriculum, but without prior preparation for it, and without considering the consequences. This may result in having to abruptly end discussion of the CI or other issues that arise in order to avoid conflict or confrontation in the class. Type 3 involves emphasizing commonalities over differences. This can be done, for example, by asking the students to try to experience the feelings of the other side in classroom role-playing exercises, or by opening a topic for discussion, including various interpretations and meanings, but without reaching conclusions. These indirect avoidance practices can be used to expand the circle of discussion from the classroom to the community, enabling the teacher to avoiding taking sole and direct responsibility for the discussion, and instead sharing responsibility for it with students’ parents and the community (Barad, 2003).

The goal of the current study was to investigate whether there is yet another type of avoidance of CI, namely one of **active avoidance**. That is, an issue that is not part of a broad social consensus but which has supporters in the immediate environment may be discussed in the classroom as if there is societal consensus about it; that is, as if it is not a controversial issue. This may be done without referring to educational materials, curricula, or the messages inherent in the issue. To this end, we examined what messages are transmitted through educational materials and during classes, including those in which the CI is not explicitly addressed.

**Methods**

The purpose of the current study was to contribute to the understanding of how education systems deal with CI that is characteristic of a certain time and place. To do so, we examined how schools in the Golan Heights addressed the CI about this region during a time of uncertainty about its future as part of the State of Israel. The research method included collecting and analyzing archived curricula and educational materials that were taught during the years under consideration. Analyzing archival material makes it possible to attribute meanings to social or historical phenomena within the contemporary context (Moore, 2010). According to Barad (2003), archival information provides a realistic agent that enables recognition that materials from the past are dynamic and have an influence on the present and the future.

The research was conducted in the educational systems in two areas within the Golan Heights: the Golan Regional Council and the Katzrin Local Council. These entities operate independently, but with collaborations between them. There are eight elementary schools in these two areas: four are part of the state religious (Jewish) education system, three are in the general (secular) state education system, and one integrates the religious and secular. The high schools are shared by both councils: two are secular and two are religious. In the Golan Regional Council, there is also a “democratic school” for grades 1-12. Additionally, there are several boarding schools in the regional council, but since most of their students are not residents of the Golan, these schools were not included in the study.

From among these educational institutions, we created a sample of five schools that differed from each other in terms of geographic location, characteristics of the school population, and the students’ ages. In order to focus on the CI in question, we only considered schools in which the majority of students are Jewish. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the schools.

[Table 1 about here]

We analyzed 90 learning tasks that were distributed as worksheets during lessons in the five selected schools. Many of these were created by the schools’ teaching staff. Some were assigned as part of lessons that did necessitate reference to location (in this case, the Golan Heights), such as English classes. Others were used in teaching subjects for which the region is relevant, such as geography, science, or environmental studies.

The educational materials were collected from the archives at the Shamir Research Institute, located in the Golan, and the education departments of the Golan Regional Council and Katzrin Local Council. Additional materials from more recent years were collected through personal contact with the school principals.

To answer the research question, we examined the collected educational materials and looked for units of relevant meanings. Passages in the texts that referred to uncertainty or controversial issues were marked. Analysis included sorting, coding, and data interpretation according to a method described by Corbin and Strauss (2014) for uncovering meanings and gaining insights and empirical knowledge from the documents.

First, the findings were divided into two structural subcategories: the **basic** **framework**, such as the title of the learning material, who produced it (author), the target audience (age, type of school), the year it was written, and the year it was distributed to students; and the **academic discipline** in which it was taught, such as history, geography, citizenship, homeland education, etc.

Second, in analyzing the content of these educational materials, we looked at the topics being taught, the emphases, and the explicit messages that were conveyed through means such as the name used to refer to the area, its borders, geopolitical concepts (e.g., the Green Line) and words with ideological meaning (e.g., pioneers, various Hebrew terms used to describe settlements within and beyond the Green Line, Zionism, periphery). We also looked for implicit messages such as whether the information was presented in a positive, negative (critical), or neutral tone. This enabled us to analyze the teaching of CI in the Golan during the period of uncertainty from a contemporary perspective.

**Results**

In this section, we present the findings from the examination of the study materials for the teaching of CI in the Golan Heights. Table 2 shows the results of the first stage of the analysis: the number of times various terms related to the CI occurred, and their classification according to disciplines in which lessons deal specifically with the geographic region and those in which the geographic region is incidental to the lesson.

[Table 2 about here]

As seen in Table 2, most of the analyzed educational materials (64%) directly addressed the Golan. Most of the tasks were assigned in disciplines studying the region, and were developed for elementary schools. Younger students learned about the region during “Homeland” classes designed to familiarize them with the area in which they were living, or in social studies classes. In high school, students learned about the Golan during geography and in research about the area. However, many learning tasks in other disciplines (36%) related indirectly to the Golan Heights as a CI.

An example of a lesson that directly addressed this subject was found in a geography booklet prepared by the a pedagogical center in Hispin, a township in the Golan, to commemorate the community’s sixteenth anniversary. This booklet was designed to teach students about the Golan’s physical attributes and distinctive landscapes through maps. It asks students to explain the strategic importance of the Golan Heights in light of ongoing security issues (Hispin Pedagogic Center, 1983).

An example of an indirect reference to the CI was found in a brochure written by kindergarten teachers at the pedagogic center in the city of Katzrin. It refers to the ancient village of Katzrin, with pictures of its synagogue and decorated stones, and information related to folk stories from populations that lived there. There is a suggestion in the booklet to visit the archaeological site and the Golan Archeological Museum (Katzrin Pedagogic Center, 1987, pp. 8, 11, 18-20), but it does not make an explicit link to the contemporary Jewish settlement in the Golan; that is, it does not say that visiting the excavated ancient synagogue is only possible thanks to the presence of the modern settlement.

Table 3 shows the occurrence of messages that emphasize the CI and those that obscure the controversy by presenting Israel’s sovereignty over the region as a matter of national consensus. Most of the analyzed study materials present the message that the Golan is part of the State of Israel. They tend to emphasize the geographical aspect as a broad and neutral common denominator in terms of public opinion, as opposed to the more controversial aspects of national security.

A wide range of the educational materials highlighted the connection between the Golan and the State of Israel. For example, maps used in the 4th and 5th grades to teach the geography of the region were under the title “My Golan” (Bnei Yehuda School, 1988). Study units for history classes presented stories and memories by early pioneers of the modern Golan Heights settlements (Golan Settlements Committee, 1998). One lesson asked students and their parents to suggest images of the Golan that could be portrayed on an Israeli postage stamp (Kazrin Pedagogic Center, 1989).

The analyzed educational materials transmitted messages aimed at strengthening students’ identification and emotional connection to a home whose future was in doubt. They portrayed the Jewish presence in the Golan and Israeli sovereignty over the region as having symbolic meaning that must be protected. Similarly, Shamai (2000) found that, during the dispute over whether the Golan would remain part of Israel, residents and community leaders insisted that this border region was essential to the State of Israel’s security.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 4 shows the distribution of positive, negative (critical), or neutral messages regarding the future of the Golan as part of the State of Israel that were conveyed in the educational materials. Many contain multiple or mixed messages. Of the examined educational materials, 75% were written by the Ministry of Education, and most of the messages in them were neutral. The other 25% were written by staff members at the Golan Pedagogic Center, who are educators from the Golan Regional Council schools. Neutral messages were those that dealt with basic characteristics of the region objectively, without emotional, ideological, or political references. Positive messages legitimized a connection to the Golan and it remaining part of the State of Israel. Negative or critical messages were those that questioned the connection of the Golan to the State of Israel. Most of the analyzed materials transmitted a positive message regarding the Golan as part of Israel. Negative/critical messages were in the minority.

The following example was found in the introduction to a booklet about the city of Katzrin, written for use in history classes: “Among the expanses of rubble and basalt, there arose and flourished a city, a metropolis in Israel; from this, we have renewed the Jewish settlement after 1,300 years,” (Golan Pedagogic Center, 1987, p. 4). This passionate statement refers in a positive way to the renewal and establishment of the modern settlement in the Golan, and emphasizes Israel’s historical right to the land. The same booklet also presents neutral messages. For example, the author uses matter-of-fact and objective language to give a broad overview describing archaeological findings at the site, including a mosque and a church in addition to the synagogue. This may be because the author views the present time and the establishment of the nation as the most significant aspect.

Another example of a positive and emotional message expressing local pride appears in materials about the Golan prepared for 4th graders: “You are privileged to live in a part of the Land of Israel that is unique [...] because of the views of the volcano, the basalt rocks, clear streams of water, the plants and animals, and the relics from the past,” (Bnei Yehuda School, 1988, p. 4).

An example of a critical message was found in a brochure for high school students that addresses the challenges faced by Golan residents, such as difficulties in making a living, and limited commerce and health services. Discussing the day-to-day difficulties that they need to cope with can lead to disillusionment with the pioneers’ dream (Katzrin Pedagogic Center, 1993).

[Table 4 about here]

To summarize and analyze the findings, the selected educational materials addressing the Golan as a CI during the period of uncertainty were classified according to three categories: the approach, the degree of belonging, and nature of the message. The approach category differentiates between direct and indirect references to the CI regarding the Golan. The category regarding degree of belonging differentiates between messages that represent the Golan as a disputed area and those that portray it as an indisputable part of the State of Israel. The nature of the messages in the educational materials were categorized as positive, critical, or neutral in relation to the Golan being a part of the State of Israel. From these categories emerges an overall picture in which there are intense and varied ways of addressing the CI regarding the Golan in the selected schools.

**Discussion**

The categories that emerged from analysis of the study findings form the basis for a discussion of the meanings underlying teaching practices in schools in the Golan during a period of uncertainty about its future. Analysis indicates that the practice of actively avoiding the CI in classes compromised some important teaching goals such as:

* cultivating democratic values;
* achieving a broad public consensus based on understanding the CI and its consequences;
* creating a space that allows for disagreement, pluralism, and tolerance for differing opinions;
* developing students’ communication skills and social sensitivity.

This section discusses the reasons behind the practice of avoiding CI, and the price students paid for this, namely that individualism and skill development were put aside in favor of advancing collectivist goals for the region. The analysis found that these schools seldom directly addressed CI regarding the Golan during the studied time period, yet considerable attention was given to studying the region’s heritage and history.

When CI regarding the Golan were directly addressed, this usually occurred during citizenship, history, and social science classes. In other disciplines, the subject was addressed only indirectly and to a limited extent. The practice of avoiding CI can be attributed to teachers’ reluctance to ask, in a clear and coherent way, what kind of democracy they wanted to create in the classroom and the education system, as discussed by McAvoy and Hess (2013). This prevented discussion about the region’s future.

The messages from the public campaign about the Golan’s future that filtered into the schools did not explore the issue in its full complexity. This influenced the students and teachers, who were not exposed to an open debate regarding the controversy. Analysis of the teaching practices, whether they directly or indirectly addressed the Golan, found that the controversy about the region was usually avoided, apparently because it aroused strong emotions and could endanger the sense of social and democratic solidarity. Therefore, the local education system did not address the ongoing controversy, although this would have strengthened students’ skills of democratic participation. Instead, contrary Lamm’s (2000) recommendation, they avoided guiding students along the path to becoming citizens who could deal with complex concepts.

Rather than prompting discussion or critique through open questions, the educational materials used phrases that developed students’ sense of local identity and sense of affiliation with the Golan. The avoidance of the controversy regarding the region’s future and conveying certain messages through the educational materials and tasks points to an implicit ideological education. Selecting curricular materials that strengthen local identity promotes an educational perspective that did not leave room for discussing the possibility of a forced withdrawal from the Golan Heights. This can be seen a preference within the educational system in the Golan for an ideological education that strengthens identity, belonging, and consensus, ultimately serving the interests of the dominant group in the region, which viewed the Golan as part of the State of Israel. The choice in the local education system to avoid the CI can be seen as undermining democratic education and instilling a hidden ideology. At the same time, this allowed the education system to create a safe space and prevent the danger of social schisms among the Golan residents, or between the residents of the Golan and the population of the rest of the State of Israel (Lamm, 2000).

The study units that did directly address the CI regarding the Golan generally endorsed a uniform position representing the hegemonic perspective in the region, namely that the Golan was an inseparable part of the State of Israel. Political positions that advocated negotiations over the future of the region were not presented. Only students in middle school or high school were exposed to the Syrian side of the story, and this was limited in scope. The region’s geopolitical complexity was presented not as a dispute but as a given. The population of the Golan prior to 1967 was only referred to through demographic statistics about the area, and did not serve as a basis for discussing contemporary political issues.

This analysis of the selected texts did not examine the actual behavior of the educational staff at the school level. Nevertheless, the choice of educational materials implies the reluctance to confront the CI, implying that teachers avoided it in their daily conduct in the classroom as well. The effort to avoid this conflict recalls other studies from Israel and around the world that found that teachers tend to avoid CI in classrooms because they are afraid of students’ reactions or provoking confrontations with them (Cohen, 2018; Gindi & Ron-Erlich; Halperin, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

In this case, avoidance seemed to ease the difficulties faced by the administrators in state educational institutions, who were expected to avoid contradicting the official state position, as well as serving their desire to avoid presenting positions that contradict the prevailing opinions in the region. Given this situation, teachers in these educational institutions used educational materials that reflected the dominant ideological position in the region and avoided the controversy itself. Their considerations were not only pedagogical. Essentially, the widespread practice in these educational institutions of an active yet indirect avoidance strategy left the controversy outside the classroom walls, although it was intensely present in the lives of students and teachers. In the terms of Zimmerman and Robertson (2017), the teachers avoided triggering discomfort in the community that could affect the classroom experience. In addition to avoiding an internal debate among residents of the Golan, this practice also presented an apparently neutral position to the Ministry of Education.

According to Kello (2016), schools in the Golan utilized multiple practices of indirect avoidance: Type 1, a practice of indirect avoidance in which the issue is discussed but controversy is hidden, thus strengthening the local hegemonic position, and Type 3, which includes emphasizing commonalities over differences of opinion. We termed the simultaneous use of these two types of avoidance practices when dealing with a CI during a time of uncertainty, strengthening the hegemonic position and emphasizing commonalities, as the practice of **active avoidance**.

**Conclusion**

This article examined teaching practices in schools in the Golan during a period of uncertainty, when there was debate regarding whether the Golan would remain part of State of Israel or would be returned to Syria as part of a peace agreement. It explored teaching practices in a disputed area by analyzing a variety of educational materials taught in five schools during that time.

Three categories emerged in this analysis of how the CI was addressed in the selected educational materials: the approach, the degree of belonging, and the nature of the message. Most of the materials that directly addressed the issue presented either positive or neutral messages that emphasized the common denominator of identification with the Golan and its belonging to the State of Israel. A large number of messages pertaining to this topic appeared in the analyzed educational materials, indicating that during this time period, there was a heightened level of concern among the residents of the Golan and its educational systems regarding the region’s future. The requirement to adhere to the criteria of the state educational framework (Israel Ministry of Education, 2016) was manifested in various teaching practices that avoided the controversy, including active avoidance. This refers to avoiding making any clear statement that Israel should not withdraw from the Golan, while simultaneously expressing the desire for the area to continue to be part of the State. This convoluted attempt to find a “win-win scenario” and to simultaneously meet the required educational goals while also responding to the ideological demands of the local environment, led to use of this practice.

On the personal level of the teacher, this practice was justified by teachers’ desire not to experience personal or professional harm, especially given that they lived in small communities. At the national level, justification for this practice was based on supporting what was perceived as preferable and beneficial for the nation’s future. However, these justifications do not compensate for the consequences. In practice, teaching was impaired, both in terms of the ability to openly discuss CI in the classroom and in terms of the value of educating students to become future citizens.

This article shows that teaching CI is a crucial aspect of education. It has an impact on teaching goals, but its primary importance is in developing students’ critical thinking skills, empathy, and understanding of different perspectives. However, navigating controversial and sensitive issues can be challenging for teachers, especially when they are in the context of deep-seated political or cultural disputes. Previous research has identified and clarified the various factors that impact teachers addressing CI, the goals of this type of teaching, and the practices used. Educators who wish to contribute to high-quality democratic education can use these insights to consider how to deal with controversial political and social issues in their classroom.

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**Table 1**

### *Demographic characteristics of students in the sample, by school*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| School code | Grades | Student population |
| 1 | 1-8 | Homogenous backgroundSecond and third generation living in the region |
| 2 | 9-12 | Multicultural, including second generation of immigrants |
| 3 | 1-8 | Religious, homogenous, second and third generation in region |
| 4 | 9-12 | Religious, multicultural, including boarding school |
| 5 | 1-8 | Children from religious and nonreligious homes, including children with disabilities |

**Table 2**

*Categorization of References in the Learning Tasks that Directly or Indirectly Address Israeli Sovereignty over the Golan, by Discipline[[1]](#footnote-1)*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Direct/indirect references**  | **Study discipline** | **Number of learning tasks** | **The number of references to the Golan in the study tasks** |
| Direct | Geography | 30 | 12 |
|  | History  | 5 | 2 |
|  | Social Studies | 9 | 4 |
|  | Homeland (studies about the country in which they live) | 6 | 3 |
|  | Research space | 8 | 6 |
| **Total number of tasks directly addressing the Golan as a CI** | **58** | **27** |
|  |
| Indirect | English (as a second language) | 6 | 3 |
|  | Science | 7 | 3 |
|  | Math | 4 | 0 |
|  | Hebrew | 9 | 3 |
|  | Bible studies | 6 | 0 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Total number of tasks indirectly addressing the Golan as a CI** | **32** | **9** |
| **Total number of tasks addressing the Golan as a CI** | **90** | **36** |

*\*

**Table 3**

*Messages in the educational* *materials representing the Golan as a disputed area or an integral part of the State of Israel*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Content Message | Number of appearances in the study materials |
| The Golan is part of the State of Israel | 25 (71.4%) |
| The Golan is a region in its own right | 8 (22.9%) |
| A distinction is made between the Israeli Golan and the Syrian Golan | 2 (5.7%) |
| Total | 35 (100%) |

**Table 4**

*Positive, Negative, or Neutral Messages regarding the Golan as part of the State of Israel*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Characterization of the message in the study materials** | **Number of times the reference appeared in the source** |
| Positive | 18 (40.0%) |
| Negative (critical) | 8 (17.8%) |
| Neutral | 19 (42.2%) |
| Total | 45 (100%) |

Figure 1

*Categories that emerged in the analysis of the educational materials that dealt with the Golan as a CI during the period of uncertainty (in parentheses percentage of educational materials in which each category was expressed)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| DEGREE OF BELONGING The educational materials tended to emphasize the common denominator of identification with the State of Israel (71.4%) | NATURE OF THE MESSAGEMost of the messages referring to the Golan remaining part of Israel are neutral (42.2%) or positive (40.0%), and only a minority are critical (17.8%) | APPROACHIn most of the materials addressing the Golan as CI this was done directly (64.4%), and a minority addressed it indirectly (35.6%) |
| ⮋ |
| TEACHING CIIn five high schools in the Golan during the period of uncertainty about the region’s future  |

1. Due to categorization according to topic, not all figures in the tables will add up to the total 90 study materials reviewed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)