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

**The Case of the Golan Heights**

# Abstract

This study examines teaching approaches toward the discussion of controversial issues (CIs) in schools in the Golan Heights. Focusing on educational materials used from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s—a particularly turbulent period in the region‘s status as part of Israel—the study explores circumvention strategies employed to avoid engagement with the CI. It is found that these methods not only compromise fundamental democratic values such as pluralism but also thwart the enrichment of the public discourse. The ramifications may obstruct the development of democratic participation and civic consciousness among future citizens.

# Keywords

Teaching controversial issues, controversial area, avoidance, Golan Heights

# Introduction

Teaching controversial issues (CIs) in schools is an area of significant academic and policymaking interest, especially in socially and politically intricate settings like the Israeli educational system in the Golan Heights. This region, under Israeli administration since the 1967 Six-Day War, exemplifies the intersection of educational practices and geopolitical realities. The ongoing debate over the future of the Golan is deeply embedded in its residents' daily discourse, influencing political viewpoints and educational approaches (Shamai, 2000; Arnon, 2001; Heitner, 2016). Although the Golan Heights is not a disputed area in Israel nor a part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today, its status introduces unique challenges for studying CIs from a historical perspective (Sulimani & Kletter, 2022; Mason, 2022).

The residents of the Golan Heights are situated in a complex socio-political landscape, shaping their collective future and everyday lives. When the opportunity arose for the peace process with Syria Opinions on the region’s sovereignty are divided, with most advocating for national protests against potential Israeli withdrawal, while a minority were open to relinquishing the territory for peace process (Arnon, 2001; Kipnis, 2020). the debates surrounding the Golan's future mirror broader complexities within Israel—where it is seen as an integral part of the Jewish homeland—and in the international sphere, where it is a focal point in the regional conflict between Israel and Syria (Sulimani & Kletter, 2022; Heitner, 2016).

Schools in the Golan operate within the Israeli national education system, adhering to its guidelines and policies, often leading to tensions among educators, students, and parents (Shamai, 2000; Lamm, 2000). This institutional tension exemplifies the conflicts that can arise in ideologically driven societies, particularly when local and national interests diverge. Our study adopts a dual perspective, examining the teaching of CIs in this challenging environment and contributing to a diverse body of literature on the subject (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Pollak et al., 2018). We extend this discussion by analyzing educational texts in various disciplines and curricular units that address the Golan but are not explicitly framed in the context of the dispute (~~Mason, 2022~~).

The positioning of schools on the Golan within both a regional system and a national one creates two central challenges. First, as a regional education system serving community settlements, its methods for addressing the issue tend to reflect a community-based worldview that involves a series of educational agencies beginning with the nuclear and extended family and culminating with communities and schools (e.g., Arthur & Baily, 2000). This continuum lies at the core of the communitarian concept, which finds an effect of all these circles on those at the center of the educational process, the students. A second aspect of the communitarian approach is that education reflects community members’ ethos and common good (Hartef, 2007; Sparrow 2021).

We employ a dual perspective to explore how CIs are taught in a democratic education system within a region inherently affected by CIs. ). We followed teaching challenge by Diana Hess: “…CI in curriculum is the connection between learning how to deliberate CI, especially those that focus on public problem, and participating effectively in a democratic society” (2008, p. 124). We adopt Jerry Wellington‘s (2017) definition of a CI as subject matter that necessarily involves value judgment toward disputes that cannot be settled merely through facts, evidence, or experiments. We also consider the region itself “controversial” due to its distinct identity, reflecting interactions among groups of residents in different political contexts (Vujadinović & Šabić, 2017; Osler, 2011). Our overarching aim is to identify and analyze gaps between educational policy and practice by using teaching CIs on the Golan as a case study. While the Israel Ministry of Education underscores the importance of teaching CIs as part of democratic education, gaps between official policy and actual classroom practices remain a critical concern (Israel Ministry of Education and Culture, 1985; Kremnitzer, 1996; Kogahinoff, 2020). By probing this divergence, we hope to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the complexities and challenges of teaching CIs in sensitive socio-geopolitical contexts by offering a comprehensive framework that may inform educational practices in all ideologically-based societies grappling with similar democratic challenges.

This study aims to understand educational approaches toward CIs specific to the Golan Heights from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. It asks what messages are conveyed in educational materials, mainly worksheets, concerning Israel’s uncertain sovereignty over the region. It also examines the characteristics of CI teaching, i.e., the practices that educators on the Golan used to address or avoid CIs related to Israel’s sovereignty there.

This study is significant as it connects pedagogical discussions with broader political implications, addressing the avoidance tactics in teaching CIs and their impact on educators' professional resilience and society's democratic resilience. By focusing on the Golan Heights, we highlight the role of regional leadership and the communitarian approach in reinforcing specific positions about the region, thereby shedding light on the complexities of addressing controversy and legitimacy in education. That highly relevant today in Israeli society.

## Objectives of Teaching CIs

Political and ideological consciousness are separate entities rooted in early modern political thought (Nelson, 2018). Differentiating between political and ideological education is foundational in instructing Contemporary Issues (CIs) (Lamm, 2000; Sætra, 2021). Political education, as Lamm (2000) notes, is about fostering critical thinking and civic awareness in students. This includes forming independent political opinions (Sætra, 2021). Ideological education, however, leans towards imparting a certain political stance influenced by public opinion and emotional biases and is vulnerable to leaders’ rhetoric (Burkstrand-Reid et al., 2011). Classrooms, viewed as societal microcosms (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), require educators to act as mediators in addressing CIs. This approach presents multifaceted challenges influenced by the curriculum content and societal issues (Levinson, 2006).

Political education teaches students political systems, critical thinking, and civic engagement. It provides a balanced view of political ideologies without promoting any one ideology (Hess, 2008). Ideological education promotes a specific set of beliefs and values by presenting a preferred view, using biased curriculum materials, and reinforcing a specific ideology through activities and discussions. The key difference is that political education emphasizes critical thinking and open debate, while ideological education aims to align individuals with particular ideas (Levinson, 2006).

Teaching controversial subjects is important for cultivating active citizenry and democratic values. In Western democracies, it encourages critical thinking and reflection (Cohen, 2020). However, in younger democracies like Israel, the challenges of discussing controversial issues may differ due to the lack of common ground and institutional stability (Pollak et. al., 2018). Israeli civics teacher-educators conceptualize discussions in four approaches: as a pedagogical practice, as a means for reflection, as a way to bring the curriculum to life, and as a vehicle that represents disciplinary content (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2021). While the curriculum in Israeli primary schools addresses controversial content, it is designed to inculcate a shared national ethos and, therefore, avoids controversy (Gindi & Erlich-Ron, 2021). Teachers and students, however, engage with controversial issues in practice in and after schools (Levinson, 2006).

Teaching Cis, despite its challenges, offers numerous benefits for students, educators, and society (Martinelle et al., 2022; Kolluri, 2017). These benefits include cultivating democratic values, as teaching Cis aids in developing democratic citizenship (~~Hess, 2005;~~ Hess, 2008), fostering democratic values, and providing intellectual tools for critical thinking and informed democratic participation (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Additionally, it significantly enhances students’ communication skills (Kello, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013), promoting articulate expression, active listening, and reasoned discourse. Teaching CIs also leads to the development of social sensitivity, as students learn to appreciate the complexity of social issues and develop inclusive attitudes (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019; Harel, Maoz & Halperin, 2020).

However, teaching CIs also presents considerable challenges. Educators often grapple with political and legal issues, facing challenges from political pressures, legal considerations, and parental objections, which can impede the effective implementation of the curriculum and discourage discussions around CIs (Vujadinović & Šabić, 2017). Another goal in teaching CIs is achieving a broad social consensus, often reflecting and amplifying existing power dynamics, potentially marginalizing minority viewpoints (Garrett, 2020; ; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Moreover, creating a pluralistic public space in the classroom while incorporating diverse viewpoints remains challenging for educators (Hess, 2008; McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021; Wansink et al., 2018).

Hence, teaching CIs is critical in developing students’ cognitive, communicative, and social skills despite these inherent challenges. While educators must be cognizant of the legal and political implications, empirical evidence suggests that the benefits, especially in fostering democratic values and critical thinking, outweigh the difficulties.

## Teaching CIs: A Multifaceted Challenge

Teaching Contemporary Issues (CIs) in educational settings is complex and influenced by various factors, including the socio-political environment, teacher characteristics, and institutional variables. Educational stakeholders must comprehend these intricacies to achieve a curriculum that encourages critical thinking while avoiding exacerbating societal divisions.

At the heart of teaching CIs is the teacher's perception of what constitutes a CI. Teachers who personally resonate with the subject matter are more inclined to discuss it in the classroom (Council of Europe, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013), mainly if it's prevalent in public discourse or if they have a personal stake in it (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). However, maintaining pedagogical objectivity is essential. Teachers must present CI-related content impartially, ensuring their personal beliefs do not color the educational experience (Kello, 2016). Achieving this balance depends mainly on the teacher's preparation and familiarity with the topic (Cohen, 2020).

The role of support systems and the institutional climate is also pivotal. Teachers are part of broader educational communities and require the backing of school administrations and a supportive school climate to address CIs effectively (Cohen, 2020; Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017). Additionally, stress management is crucial; teachers with solid institutional and familial support networks are more resilient in handling stressful discussions (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017).

Individual personality traits and the willingness to engage in contentious debates are significant predictors of a teacher's likelihood to tackle CIs (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). External factors like community and parental attitudes further complicate this by setting implicit limits on classroom discourse (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017). The relevance of CIs to students' lives may also guide teachers in their decision-making, suggesting the importance of aligning CIs with students' immediate social contexts for effective engagement (Kelly, 1986; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Teachers often avoid teaching controversial subjects in the classroom due to concerns about student reactions, accusations of pushing a political agenda, and a lack of knowledge or skills to navigate complex issues (Pollak et. al., 2018~~2~~). Schools must operate under strict procedures that ensure the educational goals and the student's safety (Garrett, 2020). Teachers often adhere to conservative conceptions and fear criticism for deviating from prevailing ideas and practices (Iglesias et. al., 2017). When students may resist analyzing social inequality and other controversial topics by rejecting other logic, Teachers can help students overcome this resistance by raising awareness of norms and their impact on sociological understanding (Sætra, 2021).

In Israel, concerns over classroom management often surpass the perceived benefits of discussing CIs, especially in subjects like civics and social studies (Harel, Maoz & Halperin, 2020). However, administrative support and a secure environment for staff can alleviate these apprehensions (Cohen, 2020).

## Practices for Addressing CI

Teachers use various strategies to handle CIs in the classroom. Some approaches include avoidance, denial of controversy, provocation, representing/considering various perspectives, and eliciting empathy (Flensner, 2020). CIs often arise unexpectedly in the classroom and are rarely addressed beyond the mandatory curriculum (Sætra, 2021). Teachers may avoid discussing CIs due to concerns about student reactions, accusations of pushing a political agenda, and insufficient knowledge or skills to navigate complex issues (Pollak et. al., 2018). However, debates and discussions of CIs have been shown to impact students' critical thinking skills and democratic commitments positively (Badri, 2016). Teachers need to be aware of the importance of the political dimension of education, teacher vulnerability, and the role of the teacher in addressing controversial issues.

The strategies utilized by educators to address CIs in the classroom can be Widely categorized into three primary approaches: overt teaching, direct avoidance, and indirect avoidance. Each of these approaches possesses distinct characteristics, subtypes, and underlying justifications, and their implementation can significantly influence student engagement in critical thinking and discourse.

The methods that by which educators use to address controversial issues (CIs) in the classroom may can be broadly sorted categorized into three primary approaches: overt openly teaching CI, direct avoidance, and indirect avoidance. Each These strategies have its own ve unique characteristics, subtypes, and underlying rationales. Importantly, they can either facilitate or inhibit student engagement in critical thinking and discourse.

Overt teaching of CIs involves explicitly integrating these issues into the curriculum, typically in subjects such as history, social sciences, and citizenship education (Cassar et al., 2021). This approach is evident in two main forms: proactive teaching, where educators intentionally design lessons around a CI to promote critical and constructive discourse among students, and reactive teaching, which involves responding to spontaneous classroom events, like a student's prejudicial remark, with immediate educational intervention (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). The primary goal of open teaching is to equip students with the cognitive and emotional tools necessary to examine a CI critically from multiple perspectives.

Direct avoidance is characterized by educators consciously choosing not to discuss or teach a CI to prevent divisive situations in the classroom or the community (Hess, 2008; Levinson, 2006). An example of this is the avoidance of discussing the Holocaust in European classrooms to prevent potential Holocaust denial issues among students and their families (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019; Bowen & Kisida, 2020). While this method may reduce risks, it also deprives students of engaging in in-depth dialogue and developing critical thinking skills.

Indirect avoidance, a more complex form of avoidance, takes inspiration from Barad’s “diffraction pattern” concept (Barad, 2003). This approach is subdivided into three specific types, each based on a different rationale: (1) Reflective avoidance involves educators presenting subject matter in a manner that conforms to prevailing social or community viewpoints, avoiding alternative perspectives (Cassar et al., 2021). For instance, a classroom discussion might acknowledge a territorial dispute but not delve into the various stakeholders’ arguments. (2) Governmental avoidance is where teachers stick to a government-endorsed narrative about the CI, often without sufficient preparation for a comprehensive discussion, thereby stifling in-depth class debates to avoid potential conflicts (Hess, 2008). (3) Experiential avoidance sees teachers using pedagogical methods like role-playing to emphasize similarities rather than differences, structuring CI discussions to entertain multiple viewpoints but refraining from pushing towards definitive conclusions.

This theoretical framework leans more towards political education's objectives, which aim to develop critical thinking skills rather than propagating a rigid doctrine. This perspective is crucial in analyzing how educators navigate the complexities of teaching CIs, particularly in contexts like the Golan Heights, where political and social intricacies are deeply intertwined.

# Methods

This study investigates the educational approaches towards controversial issues (CIs) in the Golan Heights from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. The research question examined the key messages and teaching strategies in the Golan Heights’ educational materials regarding Israel's sovereignty and how these reflect educators' approaches to CIs. The purpose is to gain insight into the methods employed in a politically sensitive context.

The Research Approach

Our historical approach links pedagogical practices to broader social and historical phenomena within a contemporary context (Moore, 2010). We chose worksheets for analysis given their availability, widespread use in class, and ability to encapsulate a variety of topics (Burkstrand-Reid et al., 2011). We base ourselves on Dror (2021), who investigated archive learning materials in an Israeli high school as a basis for understanding the school’s policies and the Zeitgeist.

# Data Collection

Reviewing archived educational materials taught from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, we analyzed 90 learning tasks distributed as worksheets during lessons in five selected schools. 75% was produced by the Ministry of Education; most messages in this content were neutral. The other 25% was written by educators from Golan Regional Council schools at the Golan Pedagogic Center. Some materials were assigned in lessons that did not necessitate reference to a location (in this case, the Golan Heights), such as English classes. Others were used in teaching subjects of regional relevance, such as geography, science, and environmental studies.

The research environment comprised the Golan Regional Council and the Katzrin Local Council, which operate independently of each other but do collaborate. There are eight elementary schools in these two areas: four belonging to the State Religious education system, three in the general (secular) State education system, and one combining both. The councils share four high schools, two secular and two religious. The Golan Regional Council also has a “democratic school” (one in which students manage their educational processes) for grades 1–12.

A purposive sample of five schools, varying in geographic location, demographic characteristics, and educational philosophies, was selected. In all, the majority of the student population was Jewish.

[Table 1 about here]

# Data Analysis

To decode the educational materials, we performed a qualitative content analysis. Relevant units, especially those on uncertainty or CIs, were marked and subsequently categorized (Hodder, 2000). Student worksheets were coded to organize ideas of meaning (McKibben et. al.,2020). We aimed to discern the types of messages—explicit, implicit, or absent—that the worksheets conveyed. Quantitative assessments, made by calculating the frequency of code words, yielded estimates of the prominence of particular perspectives or topics (Burnard, 1996).

In presenting the findings, we adopted a two-tiered approach: The first tier involves the basic framework, comprised of metadata such as title, author, target audience, and subject in which the material was taught. In the second tier, focusing on explicit or implicit messages emanating from the materials, we categorized the tone (positive, negative, neutral) and the lexicon used relating to the Golan and its geopolitical status, including ideologically loaded terms. 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 its retention by Israel; negative or critical messages questioned this connection. Analyzing the content of these materials, we investigated the topics taught, their emphases, and the explicit messages conveyed by means such as the name used to refer to the area (e.g., northeastern Israel, Golan Heights, or “our home”), its borders, geopolitical concepts (e.g., the Green Line), and words with ideological meaning (e.g., pioneers, Hebrew terms for settlements within and over the Green Line, Zionism, periphery). This enabled us to analyze the teaching of CIs on the Golan during a period of uncertainty from a contemporary perspective.

# Results

The analysis of the study materials for teaching CI in the Golan Heights revealed three main categories: the focus of the study materials dealt with the Golan as a space and a home; The wording of the messages in the study materials will obscure disputes; And yes, the messages regarding the Golan were mostly positive.

~~Here we present our findings.~~ 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 by subjects that deal specifically with the geographic region and those in which the region is incidental to the lesson.

[Table 2 about here]

Most of the materials analyzed (64%) directly addressed the Golan (Table 2). Most assignments were given in subjects that involved studying the region and were developed for elementary schools. Younger students learned about the region in “Homeland” classes, in which they became familiar with their area of residence, or in social studies classes. In high school, the Golan was taught in geography class and research assignments. Many learning tasks in other disciplines (36%) also related indirectly to the Golan as a CI.

An example of materials that directly address this subject is a geography booklet prepared by the pedagogical center in the Golan township Hispin to commemorate the community’s sixteenth anniversary. Designed to teach about the Golan’s physical attributes and distinctive landscapes through maps, it asks students to explain the strategic importance of the Golan in light of ongoing security issues (Hispin Pedagogic Center, 1983).

An example of an indirect reference to the CI appears in a brochure written by kindergarten teachers at the Katzrin Pedagogic Center. 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. A visit to the archaeological site and the Golan Archeological Museum is suggested (Katzrin Pedagogic Center, 1987) but no explicit link to contemporaneous Jewish settlement on the Golan is given; that is, the presence of the modern settlement is not credited for the ability to visit the excavated ancient synagogue.

Table 3 presents messages that emphasize the CI and obscure the controversy by presenting Israel’s sovereignty over the region as a matter of national consensus. Most of the study materials analyzed identify the Golan as part of Israel and a matter of broad and neutral public consensus, unlike more controversial aspects of national security.

A wide range of materials highlight the Golan–Israel connection. For example, maps used by grades 4–5 to teach regional geography are titled “My Golan” (Bnei Yehuda School, 1988) and study units for history classes present stories and recollections of the post-1967 pioneers of modern Golan settlements (Golan Settlements Committee, 1998). In one lesson, students and their parents are asked to suggest images of the Golan that could be portrayed on an Israeli postage stamp (Katzrin Pedagogic Center, 1989).

The messages in the analyzed materials aim to strengthen students’ identification and emotional connection with a home whose future is in doubt. They portray the Jewish presence and Israeli sovereignty on the Golan as having symbolic meaning that must be protected and supreme practical importance for Israel’s security (~~Sagy~~, 1998; Arnon, 2001).

[Table 3 about here]

Table 4 shows the distribution of positive, negative (critical), and neutral messages about the future of the Golan as part of Israel that the materials convey. Many give multiple or mixed messages. Most of the materials send a positive message about the Golan as part of Israel. Negative/critical messages are in the minority.

The introduction to a booklet about the city of Katzrin, written for use in history classes, offers a passionate case in point: “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). Thus the renewal and establishment of modern settlement on the Golan is lauded and Israel’s historical right to the land is stressed. The booklet also presents neutral messages, such as matter-of-fact and objective language in a broad overview of archaeological findings at the site, including a mosque and a church in addition to the synagogue—possibly because the author views the present time and the establishment of Israel as the most significant aspect.

Another positive and emotional message of local pride appears in materials about the Golan for fourth grade: “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, plants and animals, and the relics from the past” (Bnei Yehuda School, 1988, p. 4).

[Table 4 about here]

To summarize and analyze the findings, we sorted the selected materials into three categories: approach, degree of belonging, and nature of the message. The approach category differentiates between direct and indirect references to the CI of the Golan. The degree-of-belonging category involves two aspects. One distinguishes messages that represent the Golan as an area of disputed sovereignty from those that assign it to Israel indisputably. The second refers to Golan residents’ sense of regional belonging. The nature-of-messages category sorts statements about the Golan being part of Israel into positive, critical, or neutral. These categories yield an overall picture of intense and varied ways of addressing the Golan CI in the selected schools.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the categories regarding educational practices in five schools in the Golan Heights during uncertainty about its future. The analysis underscores three categories: degree of belonging, nature of the message, and approach.

[Figure 1 about here]

The results reveal how the materials primarily emphasized identification with the Golan as part of Israel while avoiding direct reference to the controversy surrounding its disputed status. In interpreting these findings, the aim is to understand the historical context that shaped the schools’ avoidance of CIs without making absolute claims about consequences based solely on textual evidence.

# Discussion

The discussion is based on the underlying meanings of teaching practices in schools on the Golan at a time of uncertainty about its future. The 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 of differing opinions; and
* developing students’ communication skills and social sensitivity.

It was found in the analysis that the selected schools seldom directly addressed the Golan CI during the review period but paid considerable attention to the region’s heritage and history. When the Golan CI was directly addressed, this usually occurred in citizenship, history, and social science classes. In other subjects, it was addressed only indirectly and limitedly. The avoidance of the CI may be traced to teachers’ reluctance to clearly and coherently ask what kind of democracy they wish to create in the classroom and the education system (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). This thwarted discussion about the region’s future and was avoided and the price students may have paid, as future citizens.

The public messages 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 by limiting their exposure to open debate about the controversy. In our analysis of teaching practices as to whether they directly or indirectly addressed the Golan, we found that the controversy about the region was usually avoided, apparently because it triggered strong emotions and might endanger social and democratic solidarity, even though it would have strengthened students’ democratic participation skills. Thus, teachers forwent an opportunity to guide students along the path to becoming citizens who could deal with complex concepts.

Rather than prompting discussion or critique through open questions, the materials used phrases that developed students’ sense of local identity and affiliation with the Golan. Avoidance of the controversy over the region’s future and using materials and tasks to send specific messages suggest that ideological education was taking place. Selecting curricular materials that strengthened local identity promoted an educational perspective that obviated discussion of the possibility of a forced withdrawal from the Golan Heights. This may be seen as a preference among Golan educators for ideological education that strengthens identity, sense of belonging, and consensus, ultimately serving the interests of the region’s dominant group, which sees the Golan as part of Israel. The choice of the local education system to avoid the CI may be seen as undermining democratic education and instilling a hidden ideology. It also, however, allowed the system to create a safe space and avert the danger of social schisms among Golan residents or between them and the rest of the Israeli population (Heitner, 2016).

The study units that directly address the CI generally took a uniform stance on the hegemonic perspective in the region, seeing the Golan as an inseparable part of Israel. Political positions that advocated negotiations over the region‘s future were not presented. Only students in middle and high school were exposed to the Syrian side of the story, and even then on a limited scale. For example, little attention was given to the escape to Syria of tens of thousands of people from villages throughout the Golan when Israel occupied the area (Kipnis, 2020). The region’s geopolitical complexity was presented not as a dispute but as a given. The Arab population (Druze and Muslim) that inhabited the Golan when it was part of Syria, up to June 1967, was referenced only in demographic statistics about the area and not as a basis for discussion of current political issues.

Our textual analysis did not examine schools’ principals and teachers’ actual behavior at the school level. Nevertheless, their choice of materials from the curricular corpus implies reluctance to confront the CI and avoidance of the issue in their daily conduct in class. The effort to avoid the conflict recalls other studies from Israel and elsewhere that detected teachers’ tendency to avoid CIs in class due to fear of students’ reactions or provoking confrontations with them (Cohen, 2020; Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; Harel, Maoz & Halperin, 2020; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

In the case at hand, avoidance seemed to alleviate the difficulties that administrators of State schools faced given the expectation that they should adhere to the official state position while avoiding positions that clash with prevailing regional opinion. Given this quandary, teachers in these schools used materials that reflected the dominant ideological position in the region and skirted the controversy itself. Their considerations were not only pedagogical; essentially, the widespread practice in these schools of an active yet indirect avoidance strategy left the controversy outside the classroom walls. However, it was intensely present in students’ and teachers’ lives. Teachers on the Golan avoided triggering discomfort in the community that might affect the classroom experience by using tactics that Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) suggest—avoiding internal debate among residents of the Golan while presenting neutrality toward the Ministry of Education.

This case study is situated within literature on teachers avoiding CIs and potential conflicts (Cohen, 2020; Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; Harel, Maoz & Halperin, 2020; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). We found that teaching CIs is a crucial aspect of education, primarily in developing students’ critical thinking skills, empathy, and understanding different perspectives. Teaching controversial issues can be difficult for teachers, especially in deep-seated political or cultural disputes. Previous research discussed various factors that impact teachers in addressing CIs, the goals of this type of teaching, and the practices used.

In this case study, use of the communitarian approach was reflected in connections between the education system and the regional leadership and in ways the education system served the Golan community. The education system avoided direct engagement in politics and kept the CI out of the curriculum. By so doing, it reflected the hegemonic perspective toward the Golan issue through ideological education that strengthens the sense of regional belonging and pride in this region’s special place as part of Israel (emphasizing building a cohesive “Golan community” and strong identification with individual community settlements). The communitarian approach, based on a series of concentric circles, was manifested in the division of labor between communities and schools. The education system strove to create a secure and safe space that made no direct reference to the regional dispute and avoided the highly emotional atmosphere surrounding it. Its thinking was that since controversy

This avoidance, however, was not neutral. The system maintained a policy that supported students who missed school because they were participating in protests or demonstrations against an Israeli withdrawal from the Golan. Moreover, since the regional education system is part of the national system, its avoidance of the issue had political significance. By refraining from explicitly taking a position on the controversy or upholding the region’s hegemonic opinion that opposed that of the state, the system maintained a secure position vis-à-vis state institutions (Osler, 2011). The regional leadership emphasized the crucial importance of the Golan for the nation and the microcosmic representation of the Golan population relative to Israeli society at large. It also, however, positioned itself as a branch of the state. Thus, it was able to receive financial support from the state, manifested in additional educational psychologists and educators who remained on the Golan even after the political situation stabilized. Subsequently, it received state financial support and autonomy to implement regional educational programs that, although given consensual titles such as environmental or innovative education, promoted the creation of a united Golan community and strengthened students’ sense of regional belonging.

The avoidance of the CI in the Golan schools likely stemmed from reluctance to introduce conflict into the classroom and a desire to maintain social cohesion during a turbulent period. This approach, however, The double prevention of the schools from discussing controversial issues in a controversial area left outside the classroom the possibility to discuss political issues openly and in a respectful environment and thus actually chose to introduce ideology into the school space. And may have compromised broader goals of democratic education, such as developing critical thinking skills.

# Conclusion

The research has several key insights and recommendations. Primarily, it underscores the tendency for the convenience of the teachers and the schools to clean up the approach impact of actively avoiding controversial issues (CIs) in educational settings on the attainment of critical educational objectives. This avoidance, as observed in the Golan Heights schools during a period of uncertainty about the region's future, compromised essential goals such as cultivating democratic values, achieving broad public consensus, fostering pluralism, and developing students’ communication skills and social sensitivity. Secondly, the study highlights a tendency within the educational system to prioritize collectivist goals for the region, often at the expense of individualism and skill development. This approach, characterized by limited and indirect engagement with the Golan CIs, chiefly in citizenship, history, and social science classes, stems from teachers' reluctance to address the kind of democracy they aim to foster in their classrooms.

Practically, the educational materials used in these schools tended to foster students' local identity and affiliation with the Golan, hinting at an implicit ideological education. This method aligns with the interests of the region's dominant group and strategically avoids discussions about potentially divisive topics, such as the future of the Golan Heights. The study finds “active avoidance” that describe the simultaneous use of all three methods to avoid Cis in the Golan schools, comprising indirect avoidance of controversial topics, adherence to the government's official stance, and a focus on commonality while steering clear disagreements. This strategy reflects a desire to avoid political controversy and a non-neutral stance that aligns with the region's hegemonic opinion.

The study's conclusions are instrumental for educators and policymakers in understanding the complexities and implications of handling CIs in educational settings, especially in regions experiencing political or cultural disputes. It emphasizes the critical role of teaching CIs in developing students’ abilities to think critically, empathize, and understand diverse perspectives. Educators are encouraged to create democratic classroom spaces where multiple viewpoints on social controversies can be explored and discussed. This approach is vital for upholding democratic civic and educational principles and preparing students to engage effectively in a pluralistic society.

However, the study acknowledges its limitations, primarily its focus on the Golan Heights, which may impair the generalizability of its findings. The reliance on textual analysis and the lack of empirical verification of the current applications of teachers' avoidance strategies in the Golan context are also noted as limitations. To address these gaps, the study suggests future research extending the geographical scope to other regions in Israel or other countries. Such research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of CI avoidance and its implications. Longitudinal research is recommended to elucidate the long-term effects of CI avoidance on democratic engagement and social skills. These future studies could offer valuable insights into balancing the objectives of national identity formation, social cohesion, and principles of democratic education in varied cultural and political contexts.

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**Table 1**

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

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| School code | Grades | Student population |
| 1 | 1–8 | Secular, second- and third-generation Jewish students |
| 2 | 9–12 | Secular and modern Orthodox Jewish students |
| 3 | 1–8 | Orthodox Religious Jewish students |
| 4 | 9–12 | Orthodox and Modern Orthodox Religious Jewish students |
| 5 | 1–8 | Secular and Modern Orthodox, including children with disabilities |

**Table 2**

*Categorization of study tasks by discipline of direct and indirect references in teaching in the Golan[[1]](#footnote-1)*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Direct/indirect references** | **Subject** | **Number of learning tasks** | **Number of references to the Golan in the study tasks** |
| Direct | Geography | 30 | 12 |
|  | History | 5 | 2 |
|  | Social Studies | 9 | 4 |
|  | Homeland Studies | 6 | 3 |
|  | Research assignment regarding the area | 8 | 6 |
| **Total number of tasks directly addressing the Golan as a CI** | | **58 (64.4%)** | **27 (75%)** |
|  | | | |
| 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 (35.6%)** | **9 (25%)** |
| **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 Israel*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Content message | Number of appearances in the study materials |
| The Golan is part 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 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 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 Israel (71.4%) | NATURE OF THE MESSAGE  Most messages referring to the Golan remaining part of Israel are neutral (42.2%) or positive (40.0%); only a minority are critical (17.8%) | APPROACH  In most of the materials addressing Golan as CI, this was done mostly directly (64.4%) and less often indirectly (35.6%) |
| ⮋ | | |
| TEACHING CI  In five high schools on 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 add up to the total 90 study materials reviewed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)