**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 on 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 a topic of much academic discourse and policymaking, particularly in settings intricately linked to complex social and political contexts. The Israeli educational landscape, especially on the Golan Heights, is a microcosm of the intersection of educational practices and geopolitical realities. Attitudes toward the Golan, a place administered by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War, poses a distinct set of challenges and opportunities for educational theorists and practitioners alike (Arnon, 2001; Heitner, 2016). The debate over the future of the Golan is intrinsic to residents’ daily discourse, affecting not only political perspectives but also educational practices (Shamai, 2000). Schools in this region function within the Israeli national education system, adhering to its guidelines and policies even when these cause tension and stress among educators, students, and parents (Shamai, 2000; Lamm, 2000). That the Golan is neither a disputed area in Israel today nor ever part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Sulimani & Kletter, 2022; Mason, 2022) makes the need to study it all the more evident from the perspective of CIs in Israeli society.

The residents of the Golan Heights inhabit a complex socio-political landscape that profoundly affects their daily lives and collective future. They express divided opinions on the region’s ultimate sovereignty (Arnon, 2001; Kipnis, 2020), most advocating for national protests against any potential Israeli withdrawal but a minority open to relinquishing the territory for various reasons. Although the Golan is not part of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, disagreements about its future reflect broader complexities both in Israel—where the Golan is seen as an integral part of the Jewish homeland—and internationally, where it has been a focal point in the regional conflict between Israel and Syria and the subject of international scrutiny (Sulimani & Kletter, 2022; Heitner, 2016).

Schools on the Golan, as part of the national system, must conform to the government‘s position even when such a stance stresses educators, students, and parents (Lamm, 2000). This institutional tension is a microcosm of conflicts that may arise in ideologically driven societies, particularly when local and national interests diverge. We approach this from a unique dual perspective, examining the teaching of CIs within this challenging framework, thereby contributing to a diverse body of literature on the subject (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Pollak et al., 2018). CIs taught in schools range from political issues to societal events such as 9/11, war, human cloning, and teaching about homosexuality in sex- and health- education curricula (Steiner, 2017; Toledo et al., ,2015). We expand this view 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, 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; Nowakowski et al., 1985; Rawls, 1971; Sparrow 2021).

Below we employ a dual perspective to explore how CIs are taught in a democratic education system within a region inherently affected by CIs. 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). 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.

We begin with an overview of CI teaching goals and practices. The Methods section describes the approach toward collecting and analyzing the archival material. The Results follow in several subsections. The practice of addressing CIs in schools in the Golan during a period of uncertainty is analyzed in the Discussion.

**Importance of the research topic:**

This case study on education-system activity on the Golan as a disputed region at a time of uncertainty connects pedagogical discussion with the broader political implications of addressing this topic. Previous studies on teaching CIs generally referred to impacts on civic perceptions and “training” future citizens in a democratic system. Here we show how the avoidance tactics used may indicate weaknesses in educators’ professional resilience or in society’s resilience as a democracy and its ability to deal with CIs. The avoidance in question emerges from a clear and active ideological position in the region. Education on the Golan emanates from a regional leadership and a communitarian approach that seeks to reinforce a specific position about the region and not to address the controversy or its legitimacy per se.

# Literature Review

## Objectives of Teaching CIs

Differentiating between political and ideological education is foundational in teaching CIs (Lamm, 2000; Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). From this perspective, viewing the classroom as a microcosm of the surrounding society (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), the education system and its classroom representatives, the teachers, should address CIs by acting as mediators and educators. Complex and multi-layered challenges arise in teaching CIs (Hand & Levinson (2012); they shape teachers’ choices and the ways they address the multiple demands raised by the educational materials and the issues that surface in class and society.

Political consciousness and ideological consciousness are distinct concepts based on early American political thought (Nelson, 2018). Lamm (2000) sees them as opposites; in the former, political content is used to cultivate students’ skills. Moreover, political education promotes critical thinking skills and civic awareness (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013), including the ability to form independent opinions on political questions. In ideological education, teachers use political content to communicate a position that they consider politically acceptable and respond to prevailing public opinion, which is biased by emotions, not predicated on independent thinking, and susceptible to being carried away by leaders’ rhetoric (Burkstrand-Reid et al., 2011).

While the pedagogical approach poses various challenges in teaching CIs, much evidence suggests that it brings numerous benefits to students, educators, and society (Martinelle et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2021; Kolluri, 2017):

Cultivating democratic values—there is robust evidence that teaching CIs abets the development of democratic citizenship (Hess, 2005; Hess, 2008; Parker, 2003), fostering a consciousness of democratic values and imparting intellectual tools for critical thinking and informed participation in democratic processes (McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Developing communication skills—classroom discussion of CIs can significantly enhance students’ interpersonal communication skills (Kello, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013) by requiring students to articulate their positions cogently, listen actively, and engage in reasoned discourse, essential skills for effective communication.

Developing social sensitivity—CIs often bring conflicting values and intense emotions to the fore (Claire & Holden, 2007). By discussing them, students may appreciate the complexity of social issues and develop social sensitivity and inclusive attitudes.

Teaching CIs also poses challenges:

Navigating political and legal obstacles—teachers often face challenges from political pressures, legal considerations, and parental objections when teaching CIs (Shreffler, 2020), possibly impeding effective implementation of the curriculum and discouraging educators from broaching CIs.

Achieving broad consensus—one goal in teaching CIs is to reach a broad social consensus. This effort, however, often reflects and amplifies existing power dynamics and may marginalize minority viewpoints (Hess, 2008; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Creating a pluralistic public space—while CIs may serve as a platform for open discussion, educators face the challenging task of maintaining classroom unity and consensus while incorporating diverse viewpoints (Hess, 2008; McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021; Wansink et al., 2018).

Despite these inherent challenges, teaching CIs in class plays a critical role in developing students’ cognitive, communicative, and social skills. While educators need to beware 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 CIs in educational settings is a complex endeavor influenced by multiple factors such as the socio-political environment, teacher characteristics, and institutional variables. Understanding these nuances is critical for educational stakeholders who strive for a balanced curriculum that fosters critical thinking without exacerbating divisions.

Teacher Attitudes and Pedagogical Competence

Central to teaching CIs is the teacher’s agreement about what constitutes a CI. Teachers who personally identify with subject matter are generally more willing to have it discussed in class (Council of Europe, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013), especially if it figures actively in the public discourse or if the teacher has personal involvement or stakes in it (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). However, a delicate balance must be maintained to uphold pedagogical objectivity. Teachers must aim to present CI-related materials without bias and cleanse the learning experience of their personal beliefs (Kello, 2016). This is easier said than done; it often relies on the teacher’s level of preparation and familiarity with the topic (Cohen, 2018).

Support Systems and Institutional Climate

Teachers do not operate in a vacuum; they are part of larger educational institutions and communities. To address CIs freely, they need a supportive school administration and a conducive school climate (Cohen, 2018; Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017). Stress management also plays a role; teachers who perceive they have a strong institutional and familial support network are generally more resilient with tackling stressful discussions (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017).

Individual Traits and Community Perceptions

Personality traits and propensity to risk are also predictors of teachers’ likelihood of engaging in potentially contentious debates (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Externalities such as community and parental attitudes complicate the matter by setting implicit limits on classroom discourse (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; Hahn, 2012). The degree of CI relevance to students’ lives may influence a teacher in deciding to discuss it, suggesting a need to align CIs with students’ immediate social contexts for effective engagement (Kelly, 1986; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

In Israel, classroom-management concerns often outweigh the perceived benefits of discussing CIs, particularly in subjects like civics and social studies (Halperin, 2016). Administrative support and a secure environment for staff may mitigate these fears (Cohen, 2018).

The multifaceted challenge in teaching CIs entails an approach that harmonizes various individual, institutional, and societal factors in order to foster an environment that encourages critical thinking and civic engagement without losing sight of the multiple sensitivities and complexities that come into play. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, providing evidence-based strategies for educators who wish to navigate this complex pedagogical terrain.

## Practices for Addressing CI

The methods that educators use to address CIs in class may be sorted into three primary approaches: overt teaching, direct avoidance, and indirect avoidance. Each has its own characteristics, subtypes, and underlying rationales. Importantly, they can either facilitate or inhibit student engagement in critical thinking and discourse.

Openly teaching CIs—here CIs are overtly integrated into the curriculum, generally in subjects like history, social sciences, and citizenship education (Cassar et al., 2021). This approach is attested in two main forms: proactive teaching, educators deliberately planning lessons around a CI in order to facilitate critical and constructive discourse among students, and reactive teaching, responding to unanticipated classroom events such as a student’s prejudicial comment by immediate educational intervention (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). The overarching objective of open teaching is to arm students with cognitive and emotional tools for scrutiny of a CI from diverse viewpoints.

Direct avoidance—manifested when educators deliberately abstain from discussing or teaching a CI in order to circumvent divisive scenarios in class or in the community (Hess, 2008), as happens when European skirt the topic of the Holocaust to ward off potential Holocaust denial among students and their families (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019; Halperin, 2016). While direct avoidance can mitigate risks, it also denies students the chance to engage in nuanced dialogue and develop critical thinking skills.

Indirect avoidance—this more intricate form of avoidance, based on Barad‘s “diffraction pattern” concept (Barad, 2003), falls into three specific types based on the rationale invoked:

Reflective avoidance: Educators present subject matter in a way that aligns with the prevailing social or community viewpoints and skirts alternative perspectives (Halperin, 2016). This may manifest in a classroom discussion that acknowledges a territorial dispute without evaluating the various stakeholders’ arguments.

Governmental avoidance: Teachers adhere to a government-approved narrative about the CI, often without adequately preparing for in-depth discussion and, consequently, quashing discussions in order to circumvent potential in-class conflicts (Hess, 2008).

Experiential avoidance: Teachers employ pedagogical techniques like role-playing to emphasize commonalities over divergences (Barad, 2003), structuring CI discussions to allow multiple viewpoints but not pressing for definitive conclusions.

The literature makes important conceptual distinctions between political education and ideological education and highlights how these orientations manifest in teaching CIs. It is based on a theoretical perspective that aligns more with the aim of political education to build critical thinking skills rather than with imparting a fixed doctrine. This perspective informs the analysis of how educators navigate the challenges of teaching CIs related to the Golan Heights.

# Methods

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.

# 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 in view of their availability, widespread use in class, and ability to encapsulate a variety of topics (Cassell, 2018; Burkstrand-Reid et al., 2011). We base ourselves on Dror (\_\_\_), 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. Much of the material was were created by school faculty. 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 pertaining to uncertainty or CIs, were marked and subsequently categorized (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Student worksheets were coded in order to organize ideas of meaning (Uthman et al., 2011). 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 (Munjiatun et al., 2022).

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. On the second tier, focusing on explicit or implicit messages emanating from the materials, we categorized the tone (positive, negative, neutral) and the lexicon used in reference 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

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 become familiar with their area of residence, or in social-studies classes. In high school, the Golan was taught in geography class and in 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 (Arnon, 2000).

[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.

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.

Here we discuss why the CI was avoided and the price students may have paid, as future citizens, for the promotion of the region’s collective goals. 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 trace to teachers’ reluctance to ask, clearly and coherently, 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.

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 of 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 did 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 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 of provoking confrontations with them (Cohen, 2018; Gindi & Ron-Erlich; Halperin, 2016; 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.

The schools on the Golan used all three indirect-avoidance methods that scholarship has revealed (Bard, 2003; Kello, 2016; Hess, 2008): Type 1—in which the issue is discussed but the controversy is hidden, thus strengthening the local hegemonic position; Type 2—adopting the government’s official position and teaching the subject accordingly; and Type 3—emphasizing commonality and avoiding disagreements. We used the term “active avoidance” to describe the simultaneous use of all three methods in an attempt to avoid discussion. When necessary, the issue was presented in class in a way that strengthened the hegemonic position and emphasized the common ground among all involved parties.

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 apparently 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, apparently, 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. 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 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, may have compromised broader goals of democratic education, such as developing critical thinking skills.

# Conclusion

In this article, we examined teaching practices in schools on the Golan Heights at a time when the future of the Heights, as part of Israel or destined to return to Syria under a peace agreement, was being debated nationally. We explored teaching practices in a disputed area by analyzing a variety of educational materials taught in five schools during that time.

The analysis yielded three categories of reference to the CI in selected educational materials: approach, degree of belonging, and nature of the message. Most materials that directly addressed the issue presented either positive or neutral messages that emphasized the commonality of personal identification with the Golan and the belief that the region belongs to Israel. Many messages on the topic that appeared in the analyzed materials indicated a heightened level of concern among Golan residents and schools about the region’s future at that time. The requirement of adherence to the criteria of the state education system was manifested in various teaching practices that avoided the controversy. They included active avoidance—refraining from any clear statement that Israel should not withdraw from the Golan—while expressing the wish to retain the area as part of the state. It was this convoluted attempt to find a “win-win scenario” and attain compulsory educational goals while responding to local ideological demands that brought this practice into use.

At the personal level of the teacher, this practice was justified by teachers’ wish to avoid 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. These justifications, however, did not compensate for the consequences. In practice, teaching was impaired in terms of its ability to openly discuss a CI in the classroom and in terms of the value of educating students to become future citizens.

The findings situate this case study within the literature on teachers’ avoidance of CIs in order to circumvent potential classroom conflicts (Cohen, 2018; Gindi & Ron-Erlich; Halperin, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). We found that teaching CIs is indeed a crucial aspect of education, primarily in developing students’ critical thinking skills, empathy, and understanding of different perspectives. However, navigating controversial and sensitive issues may be challenging for teachers, especially in deep-seated political or cultural disputes. Previous research identified and clarified various factors that impact teachers in addressing CIs, the goals of this type of teaching, and the practices used.

The intricacies of such teaching draw insights from the case study of educational approaches in the Golan Heights during a period of uncertainty. We aimed to provide a thought-provoking analysis of how broader ideological conflicts and power dynamics can influence pedagogical practices. The findings reveal how avoidance of CIs may come at the expense of critical discourse, suggesting the need for educators to intentionally foster democratic spaces where multiple perspectives on complex social controversies can be aired.

This case study illuminates the complexities of teaching controversial issues linked to national identity in conflicted societies. Although openness in Israel to discussing controversial geopolitical issues in schools appears to have grown since the period reviewed, sensitivities to potentially divisive topics persist. This analysis intends to spur further reflection among Israeli educators about navigating CIs in ideologically driven educational settings while upholding principles of democratic civic education. Educators who wish to contribute to high-quality democratic education may use these insights to consider how to deal with politically and socially controversial issues in their classrooms

Our study has several limitations. Its focus on the Golan Heights region may impair generalization. It relies solely on textual analysis due to limitations of archival research. Its methodology does not empirically verify current applications of teachers’ avoidance of CIs in the context of the Golan. Future research may extend the geographical scope of the study to other countries or other regions in Israel and yield a more comprehensive view of CI avoidance.

Further studies across diverse cultural and political contexts are needed to deepen understanding of effective strategies for teaching CIs. Longitudinal research may clarify the long-term effects of CI avoidance on democratic engagement and social skills from the perspectives of students and other community stakeholders, *inter alia,* yielding a more complete picture of its educational impact. Comparative research may elucidate how educators balance objectives of national identity formation and social cohesion with principles of democratic education. By taking an initial step toward illuminating these multifaceted challenges, this case study is relevant not only in Israel but globally in ideologically contested educational spaces.

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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 MESSAGEMost messages referring to the Golan remaining part of Israel are neutral (42.2%) or positive (40.0%); only a minority are critical (17.8%) | APPROACHIn most of the materials addressing Golan as CI, this was done mostly directly (64.4%) and less often indirectly (35.6%) |
| ⮋ |
| TEACHING CIIn 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)