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

**The Case of the Golan Heights**

# Abstract

This study examines the teaching approaches to discussing contentious issues within the schools of the Golan Heights. Focusing on educational materials utilized from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s—a particularly turbulent period concerning the region's status as part of the Israeli state—the study explores strategies of circumvention employed to avoid engagement with controversial issues. The findings elucidate that these avoidance methods not only compromise fundamental democratic values, such as pluralism but also prevent enriching public discourse. The ramifications of such avoidance may obstruct the development of democratic participation and civic consciousness among future citizens.

# Keywords

Teaching controversial issues, Controversial area, Avoidance, Golan Heights

# Introduction

The teaching of controversial issues (CIs) within educational systems is a relevant subject of much academic discourse and policy-making, particularly in settings that are intricately linked to complex social and political contexts. The Israeli educational landscape, especially in the Golan Heights, is a microcosm for exploring how educational practices intersect with geopolitical realities. At the time, the attitude towards the Golan Heights under Israeli administration since the Six Day War in 1967, presented 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 Heights were an intrinsic part of daily discourse among residents, affecting not only political perspectives but also educational practices (Shamai, 2000). Schools in this regional 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). The Golan is not a disputed area in Israel today, nor was it ever part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Sulimani & Kletter, 2022; Mason, 2022). this situation makes the study more evident from the perspective of ICs inside Israeli society.

The residents in the Golan Heights presented a complex socio-political landscape, profoundly affecting the daily lives and communal futures of its residents, who expressed divided opinions on the region's sovereignty (Arnon, 2001; Kipnis, 2020). While the majority advocated for national protests against potential Israeli withdrawal, a minority were open to relinquishing the territory for various reasons. Although the Golan was not part of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict the Golan futures division reflected broader complexities, both within Israel—where the Golan was seen as an integral part of the Jewish homeland—and internationally, where it was a focal point in the regional conflict between Israel and Syria and subject to international scrutiny (Sulimani & Kletter, 2022; Heitner, 2016).

Educational institutions in the Golan operated under the Israeli national system, mandating alignment with the government's position even when such a stance stressed educators, students, and parents (Lamm, 2000). This institutional tension was a microcosm of conflicts that could arise in ideologically driven societies, particularly when local and national interests diverged. The research took a unique dual-perspective approach, examining the teaching of controversial issues (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). Examples of controversial subjects taught in schools can range from political issues to societal events, such as September 11, war, human cloning, and the teaching of homosexuality in sexual health education curricula (Steiner, 2017; Toledo et al., ,2015). The current study takes an expanded view by analyzing educational texts from various disciplines and curricular units that addressed the Golan Heights but were not explicitly framed in the context of the dispute (Mason, 2022).

The educational system in the Golan struggles with the challenge of being simultaneously a regional system and part of the national system. This raises two central points.

The first is that as a regional educational system serving community settlements, its methods for addressing the issue tend to reflect a community-based worldview. This communal approach involves a series of educational agencies, beginning with the nuclear and extended family, through the communities and the educational institutions (see, for example, Arthur, 2000). This continuum is at the core of the communitarian concept, according to which these various circles all affect the students, who are at the center of the educational process. A second aspect of the communitarian approach is that values education reflects community members’ ethos, and their common good (see Hartef 2007; Nowakowski et. al, 1985; Rawls 1971; Sparrow, 2021).

In this research, we employ a dual perspective to explore how CIs are taught in a democratic educational system within a region inherently affected by such issues. For this study, we adopt Jerry Wellington's (2017) definition of a CI as a subject matter that necessarily involves a value judgment, with disputes that cannot be settled merely through facts, evidence, or experiments. Additionally, we consider the region a "controversial region," characterized by its distinct identity reflecting the interactions among various groups residing within the area with different political contexts (Vujadinović, & Šabić, 2017, pp.). The overarching aim is to identify and analyze the gaps between educational policy and practice, using the teaching of CIs in the Golan Heights 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).

The objective is to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the complexities and challenges of teaching CIs in sensitive socio-geopolitical contexts. By so doing, this study aims to offer a comprehensive framework that can inform educational practices not only in Israel but in other ideologically-based societies grappling with similar democratic challenges.

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 of analyzing the practice of addressing CI in schools in the Golan during the period of uncertainty.

**Importance of the research topic:**

This case study on the activity of the education system in the Golan as a disputed region during a period of uncertainty connects the pedagogical discussion with the broader political implications of addressing this topic. Previous studies on teaching CI generally referred to the impacts on civic perceptions and “training” future citizens in a democratic system. here we show how using tactics of avoidance can indicate weaknesses in educators’ professional resilience, or in the society’s resilience as a democracy, and its ability to deal with controversial issues.

In the Golan, avoidance tactics were practiced. However, we ~~would like to~~ point out that this avoidance emerged from a clear and active ideological position in the region. Education ~~for democracy~~ was derived from the regional leadership and a communitarian approach, which sought to strengthen a certain position in the region, and not to address the controversy or its legitimacy per se.

# Literature Review

## Objectives of Teaching Controversial Issues

The differentiation between political and ideological education is a foundational aspect of teaching CI (Lamm, 2000; Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). Zimmerman & Robertson ( 2017) claim that from this perspective, the classroom becomes a microcosm of the surrounding society. 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 raised in the classroom and society.

Political and ideological consciousness are distinct concepts based on early American political thought (Nelson, 2018). Lamm (2000) claimed that political education is the opposite of ideological education since, in the former, political content is used to cultivate students’ skills. Political education promotes critical thinking skills and develops awareness of citizens (Fournier-Sylvester, 2013). This includes their ability to form their own opinions regarding political questions. In ideological education, teachers use political content to impart to their students the position they see as politically acceptable. To respond to the prevailing public opinion, which is biased by emotions, not on independent thinking, and which may also be carried away by the rhetoric of leaders (Burkstrand-Reid et al., 2011).

While the pedagogical approach poses various challenges in Teaching controversial issues (CI), there is substantial evidence to suggest that it brings numerous benefits to students, educators, and the broader society (Martinelle et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2021; Kolluri, 2017).

Research point on numbers of Benefits of Teaching Controversial Issues:

Cultivating Democratic Values - There is robust evidence that teaching CI contributes to the development of democratic citizenship (Hess, 2005; Hess, 2008; Parker, 2003). This pedagogical approach helps to foster a consciousness of democratic values and provides students with the intellectual tools needed for critical thinking and informed participation in democratic processes (McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Developing Communication Skills - Engaging in classroom discussions on controversial topics can significantly enhance students' interpersonal communication skills (Kello, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Such forums require students to articulate their positions cogently, listen actively, and engage in reasoned discourse, essential skills for effective communication.

Developing Social Sensitivity - Controversial issues often bring conflicting values and intense emotions to the forefront (Claire & Holden, 2007). Discussions on these subjects enable students to appreciate the complexity of social issues and to develop social sensitivity and inclusive attitudes.

There are also Challenges to Teaching Controversial Issues:

Navigating Political and Legal Obstacles - Teachers often face challenges from political pressures, legal considerations, and parental objections when teaching CI (Shreffler, 2020). These obstacles can impede the effective implementation of such a curriculum and may discourage educators from broaching controversial topics.

Achieving Broad Consensus - One of the goals of teaching CI is to reach a broad societal consensus. However, this often reflects and amplifies existing power dynamics and can lead to the marginalization of minority viewpoints (Hess, 2008; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

Creating a Pluralistic Public Space - While CI can be used as a platform for open discussion, educators face the challenging task of maintaining classroom unity and consensus while also incorporating diverse viewpoints (Hess, 2008; McAvoy & McAvoy, 2021; Wansink et al., 2018).

Teaching CIs in the classroom, despite its inherent challenges, plays a critical role in developing students' cognitive, communicative, and social skills. While educators need to be cautious of the legal and political implications, the empirical evidence suggests that the benefits, especially in fostering democratic values and critical thinking, outweigh the difficulties.

## Teaching Controversial Issues: A Multifaceted Challenge

Teaching controversial issues (CI) in educational settings is a complex endeavor influenced by multiple factors. This includes the socio-political environment, teacher characteristics, and institutional variables. Understanding these nuances is critical for educational stakeholders striving for a balanced curriculum that fosters critical thinking without exacerbating divisions.

Teacher Attitudes and Pedagogical Competence

Central to the teaching of CI is the teacher's alignment with the definition of what constitutes a controversial issue. Teachers who personally identify with the subject matter are generally more willing to engage in classroom discussions around it (Council of Europe, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). This willingness is further fueled if the issue is an active part of public discourse or if the teacher has personal involvement or stakes in the topic (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). However, a delicate balance must be maintained to uphold pedagogical objectivity. Teachers must aim to present the materials related to CI unbiasedly, avoiding the intrusion of their personal beliefs into the learning experience (Kello, 2016). This detachment is easier said than done and 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. Support from school administration and a conducive school climate are critical in enabling teachers to address CI (Cohen, 2018; Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017) freely. Stress management also plays a role; teachers who perceive they have a strong support network, both from their institution and family, are generally more resilient in tackling stressful discussions (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017).

Individual Traits and Community Perceptions

Personality traits, such as a teacher's risk-taking propensity, are also predictors of their likelihood to engage in potentially contentious debates (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Further complicating this are external factors like community and parental attitudes, which can set implicit boundaries on classroom discourse (Gindi & Ron-Erlich, 2017; Hahn, 2012). The degree of relevancy of the CI to students' lives can also influence whether the teacher decides to discuss it, suggesting a need to align CI topics with students' immediate social contexts for effective engagement (Kelly, 1986; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

In Israel, concerns over classroom management often outweigh the perceived benefits of discussing CI, particularly in subjects like civics and social studies (Halperin, 2016). Despite this, research has underscored the importance of administrative support and a secure environment for staff in encouraging CI discussions (Cohen, 2018).

Teaching controversial issues is a multifaceted challenge, requiring a harmonized approach considering various individual, institutional, and societal factors. The balancing act lies in fostering an environment that encourages critical thinking and civic engagement while also being mindful of the multiple sensitivities and complexities that come into play. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, providing evidence-based strategies for educators navigating this complex pedagogical terrain.

## Practices for Addressing CI

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

Openly Teaching CI - Open teaching aims to directly integrate CI into the curriculum, generally within subjects like history, social sciences, and citizenship education (Cassar et al., 2021). This approach takes on two primary forms:

Proactive Teaching: Educators deliberately plan lessons around a controversial topic, intending to facilitate critical and constructive discourse among students.

Reactive Teaching: Educators respond to unanticipated classroom events, such as a student's prejudicial comment, to engage in immediate educational intervention (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019).

The overarching objective of open teaching is to arm students with cognitive and emotional tools to scrutinize CI from diverse viewpoints.

Direct Avoidance - Direct avoidance manifests when educators deliberately abstain from discussing or teaching CI in order to circumvent divisive scenarios in the classroom or wider community (Hess, 2008). An example might involve European educators avoiding the subject 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 to develop critical thinking skills.

Indirect Avoidance - Indirect avoidance is a more intricate form of avoidance based on Barad's "diffraction pattern" concept (Barad, 2003). This approach is categorized into three specific types based on the rationale behind avoiding CI instruction:

Reflective Avoidance: Educators present the subject matter in a way that aligns with the prevailing societal or community viewpoints, steering clear of alternative perspectives (Halperin, 2016). This can manifest in a classroom discussion that acknowledges a territorial dispute without evaluating the arguments of various stakeholders.

Governmental Avoidance: Teachers adhere to a government-approved narrative on the CI, often without adequately preparing for an in-depth discussion. Consequently, they may prematurely conclude discussions to circumvent potential in-class conflicts (Hess, 2008).

Experiential Avoidance: Teachers employ pedagogical techniques like role-playing to emphasize commonalities over divergences (Barad, 2003). Discussions on CI are structured to allow multiple viewpoints but do not press for definitive conclusions.

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

The way to avoid teaching CI is reflected in the teaching in the class and in all names the teacher is at the forefront of the action on how to present the CI. However, the avoidance approaches allow a view of the currents that influence the teacher's teaching approach. The meaning of prevention is reflected in what students are exposed to in class. As a result of being prevented from open, comprehensive discussion that expresses complexities, students often miss out on an in-depth examination of complex issues (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019; Halperin, 2016).

# Methods

The current study aims to understand educational approaches to controversial issues (CI) specific to the Golan Heights during the mid-1980s to early 2000s. The focal point is what messages are conveyed in educational materials, mainly worksheets, concerning Israel's uncertain sovereignty over the region.

The study examines the characteristics of IC teaching over the mid-1980s to early 2000s. And What practices did educators in the Golan Heights use to address or avoid controversial issues regarding Israel’s sovereignty?

# Research approach

This historical approach allows us to link pedagogical practices with broader social and historical phenomena within the contemporary context (Moore, 2010). Worksheets were chosen for analysis due to their availability, widespread use in classrooms and their potential to encapsulate a variety of subjects (Cassell, 2018; Burkstrand-Reid et al., 2011).

נסמכנו על מחקרו של דרור

 (...), שחקר חומרי לימוד ארכיוניים בבי"ס תיכון בישראל כבסיס להבנת מדיניות של ביה"ס והלכי הרוח של תקופה.

# Data Collection

Data were collected by scrutinizing archived educational materials taught from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. 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. 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. Some were assigned as part of lessons that did necessitate reference to a 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 research environment comprised the Golan Regional Council and the Katzrin Local Council within the Golan Heights. These councils operate independently but do engage in collaborations. 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. Both councils share the high schools: two are secular, and two are religious. In the Golan Regional Council, there is also a “democratic school” for grades 1-12, (a formal educational setting in which students manage their educational processes). Additionally, there are several boarding schools in the Golan and Katzrin regional councils. However, since most of their students are not residents of the Golan, these schools were not included in the study.

A purposive sample of five schools was selected, varying in geographic location, demographic characteristics, and educational philosophies. Importantly, the study only included schools where the majority of the student population was Jewish.

[Table 1 about here]

# Data Analysis

To decode the educational materials, we employed a qualitative content analysis method. Units of relevant meaning, especially those that pertain to uncertainty or controversial issues, were marked and subsequently categorized (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In addition to this, the student worksheets were subjected to coding to organize ideas of meaning (Uthman et al., 2011). We aim to discern the types of messages—explicit, implicit, or absent—that are conveyed through educational worksheets during classes. Quantitative assessments were made by calculating the frequency of code words, enabling us to evaluate 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, which consists of metadata like the title, author, target audience, and the academic discipline under which the material was taught. The second tier focuses on the messages, explicit or implicit, emanating from the materials. This involves categorizing the tone (positive, negative, neutral) and the lexicon used to refer to the Golan Heights 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 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. 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 (for example, the Northeast region of Israel, the Golan Heights or “our home”), 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). This enabled us to analyze the teaching of CI in the Golan during the period of uncertainty from a contemporary perspective.

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# 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 research regarding 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 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 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 post-1967 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 (Katzrin 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, Arnon (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. 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).

[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 the nature of the message. The approach category differentiates between direct and indirect references to the CI regarding the Golan. The category regarding the degree of belonging involves two aspects. One differentiates between messages that represent the Golan as an area whose sovereignty is disputed and those that portray it as an indisputable part of the State of Israel. The second refers to Golan residents’ sense of belonging to the region. 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 of intense and varied ways of addressing the CI regarding the Golan in the selected schools.

The results reveal how educational materials primarily emphasized identification with the Golan as part of Israel while avoiding directly addressing the controversy around its disputed status. In interpreting these findings, the aim is to understand the historical context that shaped the school's avoidance of controversial issues without making absolute claims about consequences based solely on textual evidence.

# Discussion

The meanings underlying teaching practices in schools in the Golan during a period of uncertainty regarding its future are the basis for the discussion. 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 the students as future citizens may have paid on the side in favor of promoting 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, clearly and coherently, 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 to 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. of the controversy regarding the region’s future and conveying certain specific messages through educational materials and tasks points to an implicit ideological education. Selecting curricular materials that strengthen local identity promotes an educational perspective that does not leave room for discussing the possibility of a forced withdrawal from the Golan Heights. This can be seen as a preference within the educational system in the Golan for an ideological education that strengthens identity, sense of 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 (Heitner, 2016).

The study units that did directly addressed 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 region's future was 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. For example, little attention was given to the fact that tens of thousands of people living in villages throughout the Golan fled to Syria when Israel occupied the area (Kipnis, 2020). The region’s geopolitical complexity was presented not as a dispute but as a given. The population of Arabs (Druze and Muslims) who lived in the Golan when it was part of Syria, prior to 1967 was only referred to through demographic statistics about the area. It 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 teachers’ choice of educational materials from the curriculum corpus implies the reluctance to confront the CI, implying that teachers avoided it in their daily conduct in the classroom. 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. However, it was intensely present in the lives of students and teachers. Teachers in the Golan avoided triggering discomfort in the community that could affect the classroom experience, using tactics that Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) suggested in their research. In addition to avoiding an internal debate among residents of the Golan, this practice also presented an neutral position to the Ministry of Education.

Based on researchers' definitions (Bard, 2003; Kello, 2016; Hess, 2008), the schools in the Golan used all three indirect avoidance methods: Type 1, a practice of indirect avoidance in which the issue is discussed but the dispute is hidden, thus strengthening the local hegemonic position; Type 2, which adopts the official position of the government and presents the subject accordingly; and Type 3, which emphasizes commonality and avoids disagreements. We used the term “active avoidance” to describe the simultaneous use of all three avoidance methods when dealing with CI in a time of uncertainty. Active avoidance refers to the attempt to avoid discussion. When necessary, the issue is presented during class in a way that strengthens the hegemonic position and emphasizes the common ground between all involved parties.

In the current case study, the communitarian approach is reflected in the connections between the education system and the regional leadership, and in the ways that the education system serves the Golan community.

The education system directly avoided engaging in politics or the noted controversy in the curriculum. It adopted a practice of avoidance while expressing the hegemonic perspective in the Golan, through ideological education that strengthens the sense of belonging to the region as a whole, and pride in this region’s special place as part of the State of Israel (emphasizing building a cohesive 'Golan community', over-identification with individual community settlements). The communitarian approach, based on a series of concentric circles, is manifest in the “division of labor” between the communities and the educational institutions. The education system apparently strove to create a secure and safe space, with no direct reference to the dispute over the region and avoided the highly emotional atmosphere surrounding this issue. However, in practice, educational staff and students were intimately involved in the dispute, and the education system was affected by what was happening in the region. The alleged avoidance was based on the fact that the students were already actively involved in the dispute over the region, and therefore there was no need to bring it into the classrooms.

However, this avoidance was not neutral. The education system maintained a policy that supported students who missed school because they were participating in protests or demonstrations against Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Moreover, since the regional educational system is part of the national system, their apparent avoidance of the issue had political significance. By refraining from explicitly declaring a position on the controversy or upholding the hegemonic opinion in the region that opposed the state’s position, the regional education system maintained a secure position vis-a-vis State institutions. The regional leadership emphasized that the Golan was essential to the nation. Its diverse population reflected Israeli society as a whole, of which, the Golan is an intrinsic part. At the same time, the education system positioned itself as a branch of the state. This allowed the region to receive financial support from the State, such as additional educational psychologists and educators, who remained there even after the political situation stabilized. Subsequently, they received financial support from the State, and the autonomy to implement regional educational programs. These programs operated under agreed-upon titles such as environmental education or innovative education, but involved, other things, creating a united Golan community and strengthening the students’ sense of belonging to the region.

The current study focuses on the Golan region, which may impair generalization, and relies solely on textual analysis due to the limitations of archival material research. The methodology does not empirically verify the current applications of the teachers' avoidance of teaching controversial issues (CI) in the context of the Golan. Future research can be used to expand the geographical scope of the study to other countries or other regions in Israel and also provide a more comprehensive view of CI avoidance. In addition, longitudinal research can clarify the long-term effects of CI avoidance on democratic engagement and social skills, for example from the perspectives of students and other community stakeholders and yield a more complete picture of the educational impact.

The avoidance of controversial issues in Golan Heights schools likely stemmed from a reluctance to introduce conflict into the classroom and a desire to maintain social cohesion during a turbulent period. However, this avoidance approach may have compromised broader goals of democratic education, such as developing critical thinking skills. The findings situate this case study with the literature showing teachers often avoid controversial issues to circumvent potential classroom conflicts (Cohen, 2018; Gindi & Ron-Erlich; Halperin, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013).

In the contemporary Israeli context, there appears to be greater openness to discussing controversial geopolitical issues in schools compared to the studied period. However, sensitivities around potentially divisive topics persist. This analysis intends to spur further reflection among Israeli educators regarding navigating controversial issues in ideologically driven educational settings while upholding principles of democratic civic education. Exploring this case study illuminates the complexities of teaching controversial issues linked to national identity within conflict-affected societies.

# 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 the 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 personal identification with the Golan and also the belief that this region belongs 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 the 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 impacts teaching goals, but its primary importance is developing students’ critical thinking skills, empathy, and understanding of different perspectives. However, navigating controversial and sensitive issues can be challenging for teachers, especially in 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 classrooms.

This research highlights the intricacies of teaching controversial geopolitical issues in schools, drawing 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 avoiding controversial issues may come at the expense of critical discourse, suggesting the need for educators to intentionally foster democratic spaces where multiple perspectives can be aired regarding complex social controversies.

Further studies across diverse cultural and political contexts are needed to deepen understanding of effective strategies for teaching controversial issues. Comparative research could elucidate how educators balance objectives of national identity formation and social cohesion with principles of democratic education. This case study represents an initial step toward illuminating these multifaceted challenges 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**  | **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 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 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 Golan as CI, this was done directly (64.4%), and a minority addressed it indirectly (35.6%) |
| ⮋ |
| TEACHING CIIn five high schools in 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)