



Teaching to discuss controversial public issues in fragile times: Approaches of Israeli civics teacher educators

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Opportunities for developing teachers' knowledge is a key aspect of teacher education.
- Discussions of controversial public issues (CPI) is an important aspect of civics teacher preparation.
- The Israeli teacher educators interviewed presented four approaches.
- Alternative goals of civics teacher education were prioritized over discussions of CPI.
- Discussion should be seen as an educational goal, and not just a pedagogical method.

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ABSTRACT

Civics teachers play a critical role in maintaining classroom environments that encourage discussions of controversial public issues. Thus, preparing new teachers to consider the role of such discussions is crucial. Building on theories of teacher knowledge development, this study explores how Israeli civics teacher-educators conceptualize discussions as part of their courses. The findings present four approaches that include: discussion as a pedagogical practice; discussion as a means for reflection; discussion as a way to bring the curriculum to life; and discussion as a vehicle that represents disciplinary content. Based on these findings, the role of discussion as an educational goal, not just a secondary means, will be argued.

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1. Introduction

The scholarly discourse surrounding the topic of discussion of controversial public issues (CPI) as part of social studies lessons emphasizes the importance of creating classroom environments enabling an open discussion and exchange of views regarding burning political issues (Avery, Levy, & Simmons, 2013; Hess, 2002; Hess & McAvoy, 2014). This argument is rooted in the fundamental understanding of democratic civic education as a process in which the political, social, and economic debates must be made present (Parker, 2008), emphasizing the “citizenship rationale for discussion competence” (Parker & Hess, 2001, p. 287).

However, several studies point to the phenomenon of avoiding classroom discussions of CPI (Ho, Alviar-Martin, & Leviste, 2014;

Misco, 2011). In such cases, teachers deliberately avert specific issues due to both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. This reality illuminates the crucial stage of preparing new civics teachers, enabling them to reflect on the role of discussion of CPI as part of their professional development. Thus, the central research questions that guided this study were how nine Israeli civics teacher-educators relate to the topic of discussions of CPI as part of their courses? And if they enable or limit student-teachers' opportunities to relate to discussions of CPI as part of their professional preparation?

The main findings point to four approaches presented by the participants, each emphasizing a different rationalization and conceptualization of discussion of CPI as part of the civics teacher education process. These include discussion as a pedagogical practice; discussion as a means for reflection; discussion as a way to bring the curriculum to life; and discussion as a vehicle that represents disciplinary content. These four approaches highlight how teacher-educators think about discussions of CPI while situated

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within the broader context of developing their students' pedagogical content knowledge, pointing to the varying aims of such discussions as part of their courses.

Analyzing these findings helped in constructing a new theoretical model of discussion of CPI, situated on a theoretical axis ranging between viewing discussions as an educational goal, to seeing them as a pedagogical means. This classification led to the identification of a common theme across the cases, pointing to how key elements of these civics teacher education courses were prioritized over the discussions of CPI, framing such discussions as secondary in their importance. In fact, while relating to the current fragile social and political reality in Israel, all participants conceived discussions of CPI as a threat rather than an opportunity, limiting the role of such discussions to a teaching method. In this manner, the findings contribute to our understanding of how discussions are perceived in the current social and political atmosphere.

After presenting the theoretical frameworks and methodological considerations of this study, I will detail the four approaches that emerged, exposing the participants' reasoning. Afterward, I will highlight possible explanations to this reality as presented by the participants, pointing mainly to the culture of fear that dominates those engaged in the field of teaching civics in Israel today. Alternatively, in response to these findings and the classification that emerged from them, I will argue the need to relate to discussions of CPI as part of the civics teacher education process as a worthy educational goal standing on its own merit.

1.1. Background: civics teacher education in Israel

Teacher education in Israel takes place in specific colleges of education as well as in research universities, across the four streams of the Israeli educational system.¹ Historically, institutions of teacher education were founded before the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and were seen as part of the nation-building mission of the Zionist movement. With the founding of the state, it took responsibility for public education, including teacher education programs that were divided between the elementary levels that took place in teachers' seminars, and secondary levels at the universities.

In 2006, the Israeli Council for Higher Education endorsed the recommendations of the Ariav committee (Ariav, 2006), which aimed to establish clear goals and standardization of teacher education programs. The committee's report emphasized the need to integrate different core elements of teacher training, stressing the importance of teaching skills needed in order to teach, and foundational academic knowledge and research skills. Thus, programs aimed at secondary teachers, which in most cases run for two years, require 24 weekly hours that include six-nine hours of teaching practice. Following this approach, the report framed the content of such programs, combining didactic-theoretical and foundational academic courses (at least four weekly hours); courses on teaching methods and practices (at least four weekly hours); educational research literacy (at least two weekly hours); as well as teaching practicums (between six-nine weekly hours) in which the student-teachers experience hands-on teaching in the field, while being mentored by experienced teachers.

Preparation of civics teachers is even more ambiguous in this regard, as presented, for example surrounding the controversies that dominate discussions of the teaching of civics in recent years (Cohen, 2017). On the one hand, the firing of the professional supervisor of civics in the Ministry of Education (Nesher, 2012) and

the public controversy surrounding the firing of a teacher who exposed his political views (Grave-Lazi, 2015) both reflect an intimidating reality. On the other hand, based on a publication by the Israel Ministry of Education (2016), teachers are officially encouraged to voice their views regarding public issues. Thus, Israel makes for a curious case to question the goals and merits of discussions of CPI as implemented in such a fragile environment.

1.2. Literature review

A central theoretical lens that guided this study and that will frame the following review of the literature is the distinction between aims and means as part of educational processes. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) warned of the use of limited aims that are "fixed and rigid ... divorced from the means by which it is to be reached" (p. 110). Thus he presented the concept of "truly general aims" that offer "a wider and more flexible observation of means" (p. 109). Regarding teacher education, and building on the work of Maxine Greene (1978), Zeichner (2012) warned of an educational reality in which student-teachers are mainly taught teaching skills, that emphasize "a narrow technical focus" (p. 380). In contrast, he offered to highlight the educational goals while grounding "teachers' technical competence in an understanding of the historical, cultural, political, economic, and social contexts in which their work is embedded" (p. 380).

Following, I will detail the main areas of research that influenced the exploration of the topic of discussion of CPI as part of teacher education, presenting the distinction between aims and means as it manifests in the ongoing discourses. First, I will display the field of teacher education and particularly the place of teachers' knowledge in light of the elements taught as part of such a process. I will then narrow the presentation to the topic of discussions of CPI as part of the preparation of civics teachers.

1.3. Teacher education and teachers' knowledge

A critical question that dominates the contemporary discourse of teacher education relates to a gap that exists between what teacher education programs teach and what is needed for actual classroom teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006; European Commission, 2012). The field of teacher knowledge offers a theoretical lens to better examine this gap. In general, teacher knowledge may be seen as the knowledge teachers draw upon as part of their professional practice as teachers (Racelis, 2017). Following Shulman's (2004) assumption that teaching is "the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced and frightening activity that our species ever invented" (p. 504), such knowledge, and particularly the development of such knowledge as part of teacher education programs, is nuanced, multivocal and overlapping. Whereas the initial core definitions of teacher knowledge related to the fundamentals of teaching – the subject matters domains and pedagogical practices, over the years, the definitions expanded to more societal and context related elements such as multiculturalism and global issues (Ben-Peretz, 2011).

Considering this field of teacher knowledge while concerning the distinction between aims and means helps in identifying different approaches towards teacher education. One approach is grounded in the view presented for example by Hiebert and Morris (2012) who defined teaching as "the methods used to interact with students about content" (p. 92), thus emphasizing the means of classroom instruction. Similarly, Ball and Forzani (2009) claimed that practice should be seen as the center of the teacher preparation process, referring to "close and detailed attention to the work of teaching and the development of ways to train people to do that work effectively" (p. 497). Therefore, they saw the role of teacher

¹ These include the following streams: Jewish-secular, Jewish-religious, Arab, and Jewish-ultra orthodox. For more on this see: Blass and Shavit (2017).

education “to help teachers learn to enact these tasks skillfully” (p. 497). Based on this approach, they offered a practice-based theoretical framework that emphasizes knowledge derived from practice itself, as well as tasks and activities. Implementing such a framework, they claimed, emphasizes opportunities given to pre-service student-teachers to actively play out the work of teaching. Latest years have shown a rise in teacher education-related programs based on this approach, such as the Teaching Works program situated in the University of Michigan, that wishes to promote what they coin as “high-leverage instructional practices” (“*Teaching Works, About,*” 2018).

Reacting to such claims and programs, Zeichner (2012) represents an alternative point of view, emphasizing the aims of education as the crucial element of pre-service teachers’ knowledge. He pointed to the dangers of focusing teacher education on core instructional means, explaining that such an approach narrows the role of teachers to that of technicians, who can implement teaching strategies, but that do not necessarily hold coherent educational visions. While summarizing research on teacher education and offering venues for future research, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2009) argued the need to understand what components of teacher education programs influence students’ lives and not just determine which techniques “win.” Thus they stress the importance of relating to the objectives and aims of education, as connected to social conditions and contexts, and not teaching practices alone. For example, relating to the topic of subject-matter knowledge, they reviewed studies that show that most student-teachers hold “mechanical” understanding of the topics they will teach, explaining that “they know rules to follow, but cannot explain the rationale behind the rules” (p. 14).

1.4. Civics teacher education and discussion of CPI

Whereas the general field of teacher education is quite convoluted, due to such conflicting views regarding what elements should be emphasized in the preparation of future teachers, the education of teachers aimed to teach socially and politically loaded subject-matters, such as civics, also suffers from wide disagreement (Barton, 2012). An essential guiding assumption in this regard is that the goal of teaching such subject-matters is not just the transmission of a specific academic discipline but rather the development of competent democratic citizens (Darling-Hammond, Bransford, & LePage, 2005; Thornton, 2005). Therefore, it is widely agreed upon that the preparation of civics teachers cannot be limited to tasks related to transmission of academic knowledge alone but should include elements that will lead to the development of students’ abilities to be active citizens in a democratic society (Zorwick & Wade, 2016). Adler (2008) related to this connection between the aims and means of this field, stressing how “a clear focus on facilitating an understanding of citizenship and appropriate pedagogies can make a difference in preservice teachers’ attitudes and beliefs” (p. 335).

How to teach to lead classroom discussions of CPI, defined by Hess (2002) as “unresolved questions of public policy that spark significant disagreement,” is considered an essential element of civics pre-service teacher education (Allen, 2003; Butts, 2001; Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004; John J.; Patrick & Vontz, 2001). Examining the role of discussion as an inherent part of the civic education process, details vital aspects such as helping students understand how knowledge is constructed and how particular views are marginalized, how to engage students in current events, how to develop empathy, and how to create a more informed citizen.

Several studies focused on defining social and political questions as an essential stage in the development of student-teachers

(Fluckiger & Wetig, 2002; Silva & Mason, 2003), emphasizing how contemporary social and political debates should stand at the heart of discussions of CPI (Barr, Barth, & Shermis, 1977; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Alternatively, other studies positioned core teaching practices at the heart of this process (Avery, 2003), associating such discussions with topics such as learning how to facilitate classroom discussions, critical examinations of resources, and student-centered teaching methods that emphasize the role of the students as active citizens (Thornton, 2005).

Furthermore, several studies pointed to the troubling fact that graduates of teacher education programs do not necessarily hold a strong understanding of how to incorporate democratic oriented teaching means and practices in their classrooms. When used, discussions of CPI were mainly viewed as a pedagogical means toward the development of active citizenry, but not as a way to promote the goal of cultivating critical and justice-oriented approaches (Tannebaum, 2017).

Parker and Hess (2001) also related to this theoretical distinction between aims and means, by proposing a dichotomy between teaching with/for discussion, stating that:

Teaching with discussion is to use discussion as an instructional strategy to help students more richly understand the text at hand or to make a decision about the issue at hand. Teaching for discussion has discussion itself as the subject matter – its worth, purposes, types, and procedures – in which case discussion is not an instructional strategy but a curricular outcome (p. 274).

They pointed to a critical aspect they encountered as part of their experiences preparing new teachers, in which student-teachers engaged in discussions as active participants, but were not necessarily able to plan and orchestrate such discussions as future teachers. As they admitted, their student-teachers had “no idea how to translate the participatory experience into teaching know-how” (p. 280). They thus concluded that “teachers and teacher educators not only need to strive to teach with discussion, using it as an engaging instructional activity ... they need also to teach discussion itself – its worth, purposes, types, and procedures” (p. 286).

In sum, this review exposes the crucial role of teacher education programs in developing student-teachers’ ability to reflect on specific aims, while practicing the implementation of particular teaching methods that are linked to them. The democratic model and type of citizen that the teacher-educators aspire to influence both the aims and the means that are taught as part of the teacher preparation process. Following this understanding that the very nature of democratic citizenship influences how discussions of CPI are perceived as a pedagogical practice exposes an essential factor that is missing from the discourse, that of the role of the contemporary social and political contexts. The quality of a state’s democratic atmosphere is linked to how democratic citizenship is taught and, subsequently, how new civics teachers are trained. Thus, Israeli democracy, which is fragile in its current nature (Freedom House, 2019), offers a timely opportunity to examine such questions.

Building on these ideas, and particularly on the theoretical distinction between educational aims and means, this study explored how nine Israeli civics teacher-educators conceptualized and framed the topic of discussions of CPI as part of their courses. Whereas the findings present different approaches to this topic, offering student-teachers various opportunities for professional development, an overarching theme identified by all participants was the presentation of discussions mainly as a technical teaching method, aimed at attaining other educational goals. Thus, the study of these cases contributes to our understanding of how in certain social and political circumstances, teacher-educators limit genuine opportunities to explore and reflect on substantive aspects of

Table 1
Participants' details.

Participant number	Participant name (pseudonym)	Educational stream	Courses taught
1.	Avi	Jewish Secular	Civics Didactics
2.	Tamar	Jewish Secular	Civics Methods
3.	Joseph	Jewish Secular	Civics Didactics
4.	Gideon	Jewish Secular	Civics Methods
5.	Rachel	Jewish Secular	Civics Didactics
6.	Ora	Jewish Secular	Civics Methods
7.	Ira	Jewish Secular	Civics Didactics
8.	Adam	Jewish Religious	Civics Didactics + Methods
9.	Rebeca	Jewish Religious	Civics Didactics

widespread political deliberation as a central goal of civics student-teachers' professional development. As will be shown and discussed, such limitations influence the very type of citizens and model of democracy promoted, and thus their importance.

2. Methodology

To answer the study's main research questions that focused on the approaches of nine Israeli civics teacher-educators towards discussions of CPI, the traditions of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) and semi-structured thematic interviews were chosen. Textual analysis of the respective courses' syllabi was also conducted in order to add additional layers of data. Such an approach enabled the exploration of the participants' perceptions and intentions when framing their students' experiences while studying their course.

2.1. Contexts and participants

The research population included teacher-educators who work in academic programs aimed at preparing high school civics teachers in Israel. After approaching all teacher-educators who teach the didactic and methods civics courses from the 12 institutions that offer such programs, nine individuals from six institutions agreed to participate.²

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Data was gathered over six months, between July–December 2016, and was mainly based on semi-structured interviews with the teacher-educators. To ensure the generation of meaningful insights based on this data, I developed in advance research protocols, focusing on the participants' goals and visions of teacher education, and how they achieve these goals as part of their courses.³ Specific questions relating to the topic of discussion of CPI were also included. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.⁴

Following Creswell's (2013) model of spiral data analysis, I used a four-stage process to analyze the data for content and themes and to generate theoretical insights. First, I transcribed the teacher interviews and the results of the document analysis. After organizing the data, I read the transcriptions in an attempt to immerse myself in the details. In the second stage, I raised general questions and comments based on the initial themes identified. In the third stage, using the Atlas. ti software, I supplied categories for coding based

on the generated data as well as memos that represented my reflections. I then conducted multiple rounds of coding and recoding to refine the codes. In the fourth stage of the analysis, I interpreted the data based on the themes that emerged from the coding process while reflecting on the theories that guided this study.⁵

2.3. Positionality

It is essential to address the fact that I am a secular Ashkenazi Jew of European origin who identifies mainly with the humanistic Jewish culture as it has developed in the Israeli context. This culture represents the combination of the modern western school of thought with Jewish nationalism. Also, it is essential to mention that I am a teacher-educator that deals with these questions and issues. How to teach discussions of CPI is a topic I deal with in my own courses.

Moreover, I too find myself occasionally avoiding this topic whatsoever due to my fear that it will raise tensions that might be counterproductive in the dynamics of my class. Due to my personal stance regarding the current state of Israeli democracy, and my professional involvement in this topic, I am aware of the impact of my interpretations of the data obtained. Thus the importance I see in following a clear and coherent research procedure as a way to offer theoretical clarity.

3. Results

The main finding of this study points to four approaches presented by the participants, highlighting different rationalizations and conceptualizations of how to incorporate discussions of CPI as part of civics teacher education programs. To follow is a detailed systematic description of these approaches, highlighting their general rationale, primary goals, and how such goals are implemented in the lessons. An initial quantitative examination of the distribution of the four approaches among the participants as represented by the amount of related codes mentioned (total number of codes = 430),⁶ do not necessarily indicate a reality in which each participant represented a clear sole approach. Instead, all participants elaborated on several key elements that reflected the four different approaches, resulting in the identification of two dominant approaches and two secondary ones. Thus, this presentation is not an attempt to mirror a clear-cut reality in which each participant represents a particular approach. Rather, these approaches should be perceived as theoretical constructs used intermittently by all participants across the cases.

First, the central goals of these approaches will be stated.

1. Discussion as a Pedagogical Practice – teaching the skills of how to lead classroom discussions in order to promote political participation
2. Discussion as a Means for Reflection – using discussions as a means of personal and professional self-reflection in light of identity issues
3. Discussion as a Way to Bring the Curriculum to Life – framing discussions as a way to demonstrate the curriculum content and making it relevant for students' lives
4. Discussion as a Vehicle that Represents Disciplinary Content – promoting academic literacy by clarifying key academic terms through discussions

² See Table 1 – Participants' details.

³ See Appendix A - Interview protocol.

⁴ All interviews were conducted in Hebrew. The excerpts to appear herein were translated by the author.

⁵ See Appendix B - Sample List of Codes and Categories for Data Analysis and Appendix C - Sample Quotes Compiled Under Code "Classroom Management."

⁶ See Table 2 - Distribution of the four approaches among the participants as represented by the number of related codes mentioned.

Table 2

The distribution of the four approaches among the participants as represented by the number of related codes mentioned.

Participant number	Participant name (pseudonym)	Discussion as a Pedagogical Practice	Discussion as a Means for Reflection	Discussion as a Way to Bring the Curriculum to Life	Discussion as a Vehicle that Represents Disciplinary Content
1.	Avi	34	5	12	30
2.	Tamar	25	10	6	20
3.	Joseph	21	11	9	19
4.	Gideon	12	5	8	8
5.	Rachel	13	4	7	14
6.	Ora	17	7	5	15
7.	Ira	15	13	5	12
8.	Adam	16	3	6	10
9.	Rebeca	10	5	6	12
Total		163	63	64	140

3.1. Discussion as a pedagogical practice

Rationale. As could be expected, general teaching skills and skills affiliated to the teaching of civics were a dominant aspect of the teacher education rationale as presented by the participants. Codes relating to this approach appeared 163 times (37.91%) throughout the data analysis. Following this general approach, discussions of CPI were seen as a crucial pedagogical practice. The rationale behind this pedagogical choice lay on the assumption that teaching such skills will promote active political participation. Rachel, for example, clearly identified this thought, stating that “the democratic discourse is a discourse that enables discussion” and by Joseph who clarified that “the meaning of civics is that you can talk about anything.” When relating, for example, to conflicting views that may be voiced in the classroom, Adam explained that “besides racist views, I am willing to hear anything as part of the discussions in my lessons ... it is part of the freedom of speech, that is why we are here”. Thus, as explained by Ira, “holding class discussion is a good simulation of what they will need to do in their future classrooms as teachers.” All these excerpts point to the question of how to lead classroom discussion as a justification of this approach.

Goals. Emphasizing this practical aspect of how to teach to lead discussions, Rebecca explained that “I am afraid that my student-teachers will not be able to teach their students how to take part in public conversations due to the conflicting political views, so I offer tools: how to build a lesson plan, using technology in teaching, etc.. Adam also related to this practical aspect, stating that “I think that the main focus of the course should be on supplying teaching skills that will enable my student-teachers to work well in the future.” His syllabus detailed a list of such skills, explicitly linked to the civics subject-matter. Among others, these included the skills of “teaching with current events, teaching controversial issues, and active citizenship.” Rachel also voiced this approach, explaining that “to enable a discussion, I mainly teach them skills ... I want them to be able to teach a lesson that will not explode; that is why I see an importance in teaching pedagogical skills”. Thus, the main goal of this approach is the presentation of such skills, which are seen as crucial to lead classroom discussions.

Implementation. As part of her reflection, Tamar made a clear distinction between the skill-based and content-based aspects of her course, as she explained, “the core of my course is to give my students pedagogical instruments. Of course, there is the goal of developing a civic language and encouraging active citizenship, regular things, but the main thing for me is pedagogy”. Ora also made such a distinction, focusing specifically on the aspect of classroom management. As she explained: “Citizenship issues do not trouble them; they [student-teachers] are afraid of classroom interruptions. That is why I must admit, the topic of classroom management takes up a lot more of my time than citizenship

issues”. Relating directly to discussions of CPI, she further explained that “I emphasize how to teach classroom discussions ... They need to learn how to open such controversial topics and issues”. Similarly, Joseph explained that he “deals with the topic of how to teach controversial issues - how to deal with conflicting views and what to do when students start yelling in class.” Thus, based on these quotes, this approach offers to distinguish between content and practice, and emphasize the latter, as expressed by Ora, who explained that “the issue of discussing controversial issues is not about the issues themselves, but rather how to lead the discussion. It is not the ‘what’ but rather the ‘how’”. Based on this approach, the practice of such skills is the key element to be implemented in the course.

3.2. Discussion as a means for reflection

Rationale. A second general approach which codes appeared 63 times (14.65%) as part of the analysis, stressed the importance of student-teachers conducting processes of personal and professional self-reflection, mainly emphasizing tools and strategies such as discussions that enable such a process. Rebecca clearly explained this approach, stating that:

Life is a dilemma; there is no one truth. So we cannot discuss without understanding the truth of the other side of the argument. I want them to understand that each side is based on a world view, I want then to understand the values of their own world view

In this regard, Joseph explained the importance of the personal connection, stating that “civics needs to be connected to current events and the students’ worldview, not to things that happened 100 years ago, that is not interesting to them”. In other words, this approach assumes that by having discussions as part of the course, student-teachers may better reflect on their own views.

Goals. Avi elaborated on the goals of this approach, stressing on how dealing with political issues in class helps in developing his students’ personalities. As he explained, “I work with my students on how to turn their personal political views into something deeper and wider ... I will deconstruct their views in order to enable more flexibility”.

Adam also related to this aspect of self-reflection, situating discussions of CPI to this goal:

I always deal with the question of what is it that we are doing here as teachers; I want them to be responsive and reflective. I can connect it to more theoretical issues like thinking skills, or how to write a test or issues of racism.

Thus, developing student-teachers' abilities to think about their own thinking, regardless of the content, is seen as the primary goal. Even sensitive political burning issues such as racism are seen as a way to spark processes of self-reflection.

Implementation. In order to achieve such goals, the participants mentioned several teaching practices that they apply in their courses. Gideon, for example, described how:

One thing I tend to do in every class meeting is to start with an open question ... that way, the meetings are open, I do not just teach a fixed list of things like the flag, the national anthem, etc. and then have a test ... this enables the creation of personal meaning – with a myriad of answers and opinions.

Rebecca also portrayed a class activity she leads toward this goal while highlighting student-teachers' personal views on social and political issues:

In one of my lessons, I present them different scales – right-wing views and left-wing views, and then conservative views and views that demand change, and then I add economic views – welfare vs. free market. I then ask them to position themselves on these scales, and they see that they have various views and different positions on these scales.

Both examples stress the importance of creating opportunities for student-teachers to position themselves in light of various views regarding political issues.

3.3. Discussion as a way to bring the curriculum to life

Rationale. A third general dominant goal that was referred to 64 times (14.88%) was making the national civics curriculum framework and content standards familiar to the student-teachers. Thus, discussions of CPI, and particularly current events were seen as a way to demonstrate this curriculum and bring it to life. As explained by Gideon, who stated that “current events need to be connected to the content we teach, and help students find the contents' meanings.” Rebecca stated that “the curriculum is my anchor because reality bursts into the classroom every morning before we even start.” Avi also described how “when I do have discussions with them in class, and controversial public issues come up, like the status of the Israeli Arab citizens, for example, I always refer back to what appears in the official curriculum.” Ora expanded this approach, explaining how current events supplement the official textbooks, as she explained “the new textbook does not really relate to the burning issues of the Israeli society today. These are topics that should be opened to a true value-based discussion in class, the future of the occupied territories, for example”. Thus, even in such cases in which the participants voiced different views regarding the curriculum content, they shared the approach that when relating to CPI it should be in light of what appears, and does not appear, in the curriculum.

Goals. Thus, the main goal of holding discussions of CPI, based on this approach, is to make the curriculum standards comprehensible. Adam, for example, explained that he wants his students “to know the subject matter fully. I want them to be able to frame current events about the curriculum.” He further elaborated on the importance of the national curriculum, explaining that:

The unique aspect of this subject matter is that the teacher needs to have a very good acquaintance with the subject area, he needs to follow current events, and know-how to frame such events about the topics being taught. So it is the connection

between the curriculum, current events, and the dynamics with the students.

Similarly, one of the course's goals stated in Joseph's syllabus was “to learn how to deal with current events in tandem with the subject matters required knowledge base.” In these cases, discussions of CPI are seen as a way to create student-teachers' acquaintance with the curriculum.

Implementation. Relating to this approach, Tamar referred to discussions of CPI, explaining that “I deal a lot with the curriculum. We analyze it, look for topics and themes that repeat themselves, look for which topics could be explosive ... I want them to have a deep understanding of the curriculum”. She added that “I ask my students to review the official national curriculum and find controversial topics. We then think together on how to deal with such issues in class.” So, when relating to explosive topics and controversial issues, Tamar is bounded by the official curriculum. Ora also expressed this approach, stating that:

I encourage my students to make use of current events. In almost every lesson, I will relate to newspaper articles, and show how they relate to the curriculum ... civics is a language, and there is the use of specific terms. By talking about current events, I teach them these essential civic terms.

Actively engaging with the curriculum is seen therefore as the leading pedagogical approach, forging connections between current events and the existing standards.

3.4. Discussion as a vehicle representing disciplinary content

Rationale. A final identified dominant approach that appeared 140 times (32.56%) emphasized the will to transmit, through discussions of CPI, foundational academic content, seen as essential for future civics teachers. Rebecca elaborated on the importance of this approach, explaining that:

I find it essential to use academic terms because such terms help my student-teachers conceptualize the world. In fact, what I am telling them is that all of their political views are rooted in philosophical worldviews that somebody already organized for them.

Ira also reflected this approach, relating to his students:

[They] have a problem in humanistic literacy – knowledge of foundational texts, the ability to analyze texts, knowledge of theoretical terms, knowledge of different philosophical schools of thought ... they do not have any ability to deal with the big questions that the civics subject matter invites ... So even if my students divide themselves ideologically between left and right, the fact that they create a dialog in my class is the real value, not the positions that they present as part of this or that discussion.

In these cases, the justification of discussions of CPI is framed in light of the will to teach student-teacher new academic terms and content.

Goals. In Rachel's course syllabus, one goal was defined as “students will clarify the values and principles of the terms Jewish and democratic, and the tensions between them, while relating to current events.” Ira also related to this goal, explaining that “I bring philosophical texts to class in order to better understand current practical political issues.” As he further explained, “Just having a discussion is empty rhetoric of slogans. It does not work,” stressing

Table 3
Findings summary: Four approaches to discussing CPI as part of civics teacher education.

	Discussion as a Pedagogical Practice	Discussion as a Means for Reflection	Discussion as a Way to Bring the Curriculum to Life	Discussion as a Vehicle that Represents Disciplinary Content
Rationale	Classroom discussion as a mode of promoting democratic political participation	The importance of professional and personal self-reflection as part of the teaching profession	The centrality of the national civics curriculum framework and content standards	The view of foundational academic content as an essential aspect of teachers professionalism
Goals	Teach student-teachers the skills of how to lead classroom discussions	Deepen student-teachers understanding of their political views	Make the curriculum standards comprehensible through discussions	Transmit academic knowledge and terms with the use of discussion
Implementation	Presentation of pedagogical instruments	Discussion of open questions, positionality activities	Analysis of current events in light of the curriculum	Discussion of topics that enable the understanding of key terms

the need for more in-depth academic knowledge. In other words, in these cases, CPI are seen as a pedagogical tool used in order to achieve the goal of enhancing student-teacher's academic literacy.

Implementation. As an example of relating to discussions of CPI as a way to promote student-teachers' academic literacy, Rachel described how:

I start the first meeting of my course by writing on the board 'The national homeland of the Jewish people and a home for all its citizens.' I then tell my students that we need to teach these terms most neutrally

In this manner, the presentation of the definition of the state, a topic that potentially raises controversial discussions and debates, was framed as a means to learn neutral academic terms.

Similarly, Rebeca also related to academic knowledge as neutral, enabling her to discuss such terms without raising controversy. As she explained:

My students have a problem with the word "liberal," for example, because it is a word that has a specific ideological tone to it, and it belongs to a particular political base. So what I do is talk to them about the term "human rights" as a general topic. That way, they cannot say that it is a topic that belongs to this group or another.

In these cases, the sterile ways in which CPI are presented and framed as part of the courses mitigate their potential tensions.

In sum, relating to the study's main research questions, four main viewpoints toward discussions of CPI as part of civics teacher education were presented.⁷ A common overarching theme that dominated these approaches was the prioritization of key teacher education elements over the discussions of CPI. Such discussions were framed as secondary in their importance, mainly conceptualized as a pedagogic tool to promote teaching skills, self-reflection, understanding of the curriculum, and academic literacy. In fact, all the participants conceived discussions CPI as a threat rather than an opportunity, limiting the role of such discussions to a teaching method alone. This view of discussions as a teaching strategy, to be used as a means to attain broader educational aims, limited its role in sustaining and strengthening democratic ideals. Before elaborating on this point, following, I will first present several findings that may explain this reality.

3.5. Explanations

In an attempt to understand the four approaches that emerged from this study, in which civics teacher-educators limited their student-teachers' opportunities to develop discussions of CPI as a goal standing on its own merit, I probed for particular aspects that may explain this reality. Two of such explanations were identified: the political atmosphere and professional loyalty.

The Israeli political atmosphere. Foremost, several participants mentioned the general toxic atmosphere of the political discourse in Israel today. Joseph, for example, bluntly explained that "most civics teachers I know are afraid to touch on controversial issues." When I asked Tamar, for example, how she characterizes political discussions in Israel today, she sighed and said:

Oy ... it's tragic, very hard. The willingness to be open to opinions that are different than yours is close to 0%. People whose voice critical views are perceived as enemies of the state. I admit, I too am tired and do not want to hear about it anymore because it is hard, it feels like I am getting stabbed.

To the same question, Ira responded by saying:

Very bad. It feels like there is no real reason to hold political conversations anymore. You agree with the people you agree with, and there is nothing to talk about with the people that you do not agree with. It feels like people stopped thinking, stopped using their common sense. It is us versus them.

Joseph also related to this reality, stating that "the public political discourse in Israel today is superficial, its violent and it is very much not accepting." In other words, the current fragile reality in Israel, which is dominated by a conflictual atmosphere, led the teacher-educators to shed away from discussions of CPI, seeing them as a pedagogical choice that would interfere rather than foster their student-teachers' professional development.

Relating to the broader educational context, Avi mentioned the fact that the civics subject-matter, as related to in the public discourse, is also controversial, stating that "our subject-matter is constantly the center of public controversy." When I asked how he deals with this reality, he explained that he chooses "to concentrate on what I see as the core – the teaching practices that are implemented in the classroom. So I am less interested in this topic or that topic, I am interested in what the teacher does in class". The teaching of civics itself was thus seen by him as a controversial issue, resulting in his fear to inflame such controversy in his teaching.

Professional Loyalty. Another explanation that was identified relates to the feeling of professional loyalty towards the ministry of

⁷ See Table 3 - Findings summary: Four approaches to discussing CPI as part of civics teacher education.

education, and towards the state in general. Several participants voiced their concern that critical discussions of the political reality may harm such loyalty, seen by them as a crucial element of the student-teachers' training. The following exchange with Adam demonstrated this approach:

Interviewer: Is criticism part of your lessons?

Adam: You cannot always be critical of a system in which you act, there are cases when you need to swallow the criticism, and there are cases when it should be heard.

Following this line of thought, when asked directly about the discussion of CPI, he explained that "we have to remember that we cannot act against the system that we are a part of. My students need to understand that there are cases in which they will need to be critical but other cases when they need to swallow their pride". Rebeca also voiced an approach that emphasized teachers' loyalty to the system and its goals, explaining that "I am loyal to the goals of the subject-matter, and I want my students to be the best teachers in system. I do not want them to make big revolutions, that is not the point".

Ora expressed this view as well, making the explicit connection between the fear that some of her students expressed, and the need to be loyal. As she detailed:

The trauma of Adam Verta⁸ Influences everyone, and I do not need to ignore it. My students ask me about it a lot – is it ok to expose their personal political opinions? Since we are talking about novice teachers, I think that they must understand how to enter the system, they should read the guidelines of the general manager of the Ministry of Education and that will solve their problem.

In these cases, the participants showed a sense of loyalty toward the state and towards the ministry of education. They saw discussions of CPI as a disrupting element that could harm such loyalty, and thus they limited its place as part of the student-teachers' preparation process.

Thus, in sum, a central claim that emerges from these findings is that the participants rationalized and conceptualized discussions of CPI as a threat rather than as an opportunity. They conceived such discussions as a problem that must be contained, leading them to adopt approaches that emphasized the role of discussions as an educational means alone. Following, I will elaborate on the limitations of such an approach, illuminating the alternative view that points to the potential role of discussions of CPI as a democratic educational goal.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The participants in this study presented four different approaches to discussions of CPI as part of civics teacher education. As demonstrated in the findings, they framed such discussions as a teaching method, aimed at achieving the various goals of developing teaching skills, self-reflection, acquaintance with the curriculum, and academic literacy. Thus, these findings contribute to our understanding of how in such a fragile social and political reality, discussions of CPI are rationalized and conceptualized by teacher-educators as secondary to other alternative goals.

This reality points to these findings' harsh implications regarding the field of democratic civic education in Israel today.

Discussions of CPI should stand at the heart of this educational process, due to their ability to ignite authentic exchanges of ideas, force students to formulate their own opinions and offer a hands-on experience of tolerating alternative views. The overall message that was conveyed by the teacher-educators who participated in this study was that such aspirations are subordinate to other key elements of the teacher preparation process. Thus, in the near future, when the student-teachers who studied these courses will become acting teachers, they will not necessarily see the importance of conducting such discussions in their classrooms.

Therefore, as a result of this study, I wish to offer a counter view, stressing the importance of relating to the vital role of discussions of CPI as a key goal of civics teacher education. The theoretical distinction between seeing discussions as an educational goal vs. viewing it as a teaching method, helps in understanding the reality that emerged from this study. Whereas scholars such as [Parker and Hess \(2001\)](#) perceived discussion as a central course objective, the current findings offer the opposite point of view, a reality in which discussions of CPI were mainly seen as a teaching method alone.

This analysis of the data obtained from these empirical cases led to a theoretical exploration of the normative roles of discussions of CPI as part of civics teacher education courses. The main guiding question to be considered as part of this exploration is how to perceive such discussions? Answers to this question may be situated on a theoretical axis, ranging between the option of viewing discussions as an educational goal, to the second option of seeing them as a pedagogical means.⁹

The first option of viewing discussions as an educational goal will present discussions as a hallmark of the civic education process, highlighting the value of holding discussions of CPI as a core element of the democratic process. This option will stress the substantive aspects such as exposure of students to multiple alternative views, and the exchange between them while accepting the rule of law, and developing personal opinions. The second option of perceiving discussions as a pedagogical means will view discussions as a teaching method, emphasizing the transmission of practical traits, such as lesson planning, pedagogical aspects, and assessment schemes.

Combining these two options, as situated in the center of this theoretical axis, presents discussions as an essential educational goal while emphasizing its pedagogical aspects. In such cases, students are exposed to multiple alternative views while emphasizing how an exchange can be created between them. Thus, content and method combine, creating a genuine opportunity to foster an exchange of views, thus contributing to the creation of a democratic atmosphere in class.

To demonstrate the merit of this theoretical model, the four approaches that emerged from this study may now be better understood in light of the second option of viewing discussions of CPI as a pedagogical means.¹⁰ Following the first approach, how to lead classroom discussions was perceived as a skill that the teacher-educators wished to teach their student-teachers; The second approach wished to help student-teachers practice the traits of self-reflection, developing their personal characteristics; Regarding the third approach, discussions were mainly seen as a means toward better understanding the civics curriculum content; and in light of the fourth approach of academic literacy, discussions were presented as a way to demonstrate vital academic terms.

To complete this example, we may now articulate how the

⁹ See [Fig. 1](#) – The normative roles of discussions of CPI as part of civics teacher education courses.

¹⁰ See [Table 4](#) – Four approaches of discussions of CPI based on the theoretical models.

⁸ The teacher who was fired as mentioned above, see: [Grave-Lazi \(2015\)](#).

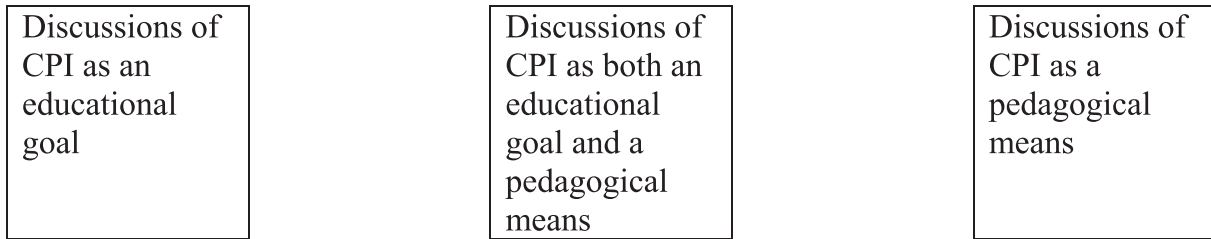


Fig. 1. The normative roles of discussions of CPI as part of civics teacher education courses.

Table 4
Four approaches of discussions of CPI based on the theoretical models.

Approach	Discussions of CPI as an educational goal	Discussions of CPI as a pedagogical means
Discussion as a pedagogical practice	A skill of high importance due to its ability to promote political participation	Teaching skills of how to lead classroom discussions
Discussion as a means for reflection	Help student-teachers position themselves concerning current issues	Practice the traits of self-reflection
Discussion as a way to bring the curriculum to life	Make current events part of the enacted curriculum	Better understand curriculum content
Discussion as a vehicle that represents disciplinary content	Analyze current events	Demonstrate key academic terms

different approaches may also relate to the first option of the theoretical axis, viewing discussions of CPI as an educational goal: When relating to the skills needed in order to lead classroom discussion, student-teachers should understand the importance of this activity, not just as another set of tools, but rather as the basis for cultivating an open democratic atmosphere¹¹ Student-teachers' personal development should be informed by such issues, helping them position themselves in direct relation to them¹²; Burning public issues should become part of the vibrant enacted curriculum and not just a way to demonstrate the given civic content, turning such discussions into the content itself¹³; Academic literacy should be seen not just as a goal but rather as a way to better understand media literacy, and thus improve the quality of such public discussions.¹⁴

The ongoing scholarly debates surrounding the general topic of teacher education and the specific field of preparing new social studies teachers may now also be positioned based on this theoretical model. The findings point to the dangers of the practice-based approach toward teacher education (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Hiebert & Morris, 2012), which emphasizes the means aspect and positions it as the center of the teacher preparation process. In a fragile political reality in which the democratic tenets are challenged, and discussions of CPI are reduced to a teaching method, student-teachers' opportunities to understand the goals of education (Zeichner, 2012), and their role as educators in light of such goals (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009) are limited. Also, as demonstrated, emphasizing the means aspects of discussions of CPI (Avery, 2003; Thornton, 2005) does not enable student-teachers to broadly reflect on contemporary social and political issues (Barr et al., 1977; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

A crucial aspect that is, of course, missing from this study that focused on teacher-educators' perceptions and intentions, is an examination of how the participants enact their teaching ideology in their actual lessons. Furthermore, ways in which student-teachers engage with such lessons, and the influences they may

have on their professional development as future teachers, is an important aspect that should be considered for future research.

Based on Dewey's (1916) notion that democracy should be seen as "a mode of associative living" (p. 87), the task of maintaining a healthy democratic society is a challenge that the people of Israel, and other countries worldwide, face daily. A central task of civics teachers is to create a classroom atmosphere and instill democratic qualities that will enable a genuine exchange of ideas, particularly regarding CPI. Therefore, a crucial stage of civics teacher preparation should include opportunities in which future teachers can develop their own knowledge and experiment with such teaching traits. The main finding of this study shows how in these cases, the discussions of CPI were presented as a mere teaching method due to the toxic atmosphere that characterizes political discussions in Israel today. Paraphrasing Seixas (1999), who stated that "content separated from pedagogy is an incomplete metaphor for knowledge" (p. 318), presenting discussions of CPI as a teaching method alone is an incomplete metaphor for democratic practice.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Aviv Cohen: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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Appendix A. Interview Protocol

1. What is your personal and professional background?
2. How do you define good citizenship in Israel today? What are your thoughts about the political debates in Israel?
3. What are the goals of civics teacher education? (probe for knowledge, values and behavioral goals).
4. What are your aims and goals in the course/s you teach?
5. What is the framework and structure of your course/s? How do these relate to your stated aims and goals?
6. What teaching practices do you implement in your course/s to achieve these aims and goals?

¹¹ See Gutmann and Thompson (2004).

¹² See Adler (2008).

¹³ See Cuban (1992) and Wojcik (2010).

¹⁴ See Stoddard (2009).

7. Do you relate to discussions of controversial public issues as part of your course? If so, in what manner?
8. Are there issues and topics that you consider illegitimate and/or not fitting as part of such debates in your class?

Appendix B. Sample List of Codes and Categories for Data Analysis

Code	Category
Citizenship	General
Goals of teacher education	
Classroom management	Discussion as a Pedagogical Practice
Leading classroom discussions	
Self-reflection	Discussion as a Means for Reflection
Identity	
National curriculum standards	Discussion as a Way to Bring the Curriculum to Life
The Bagrut exam	
Current events	
The civics subject-matter	Discussion as a Vehicle that Represents
Theoretical knowledge	Disciplinary Content
Literacy	

APPENDIX C. Sample Quotes Compiled Under Code "Classroom Management"

Data Source	Quote
Tamar - Syllabus	"Student-teachers will be acquainted with the principles of classroom management."
Tamar - Syllabus	"The student-teachers will be given tools on how to keep a clam class environment."
Rebeca - Syllabus	"The course will supply knowledge of what to teach and, more importantly, how to teach it and maintain the class."
Gideon - Syllabus	"As part of the course, we will acquire various methods for teaching civics while offering practical ideas for classroom management."
Ora - Interview	"The second main thing I teach them is how to manage a class. How you have a lesson plan, but then you need to manage what actually goes own in class."
Ora - Interview	"So I teach civics, but in fact, what I am doing is teaching them how to manage a class."
Avi - Interview	"It is like teaching them how to drive; I want them to finish my course and be able to be an independent driver that knows how to lead a class."

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