



High school teachers' attitudes and reported behaviors towards controversial issues



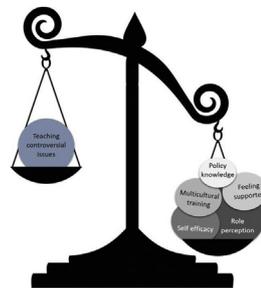
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HIGHLIGHTS

- 30% of teachers know the official policy regarding political discussions in class.
- Teachers who feel supported conduct more discussions of controversial topics.
- Teachers' who view civic education as part of their role report more discussions.
- Teachers' self-efficacy predict more discussions in class.
- Teachers who undergo multicultural training discuss controversial topics more.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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1. Introduction

School is the ideal location for students to develop their ability to cope with controversial topics and to expose them to the democratic process (Parker, 2012; Tannebaum, 2013). However, teachers are faced with a multitude of dilemmas when introducing controversial topics in the classroom despite its importance. Oulton, Day, Dillon, and Grace (2004) suggested that teachers felt ill-equipped to present such topics in the classroom and that the pedagogy for doing that is in itself controversial. Moore (2012) has

shown that many teachers hesitate to discuss controversial topics, and several studies have shown that such discussions are seldom held (Nystrand, Gamoran, & Carbonaro, 1998; Rossi, 2006). Bekerman (2016) pointed to teachers' status within the sociopolitical context, e.g., Israeli teachers' lack of agency within the context of the nation state. The difficulty teachers face around controversial topics is an important issue for teacher training worldwide and particularly in Israel. In this study, we explored high school teachers' attitudes about conducting class discussions on the relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel. This study may afford an opportunity to examine the factors that are associated with teachers' willingness to engage in such discussions in the Israeli context, and to draw general conclusions regarding teacher training and practices.

1.1. Handling controversial issues in the classroom

In the context of the classroom, a controversial issue is one that relates to phenomena on which social opinions are divided, whereby different groups in society offer distinct interpretations and solutions (Lieb, 1998). In this context, there has been extensive research about the importance of discussions of Controversial Political Issues (CPI) in the classroom. Research has shown that discussions of CPI promote democratic values (Hess, 2009), content

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comprehension (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), interest in politics (McAvoy & Hess, 2013), tolerance for minorities (Bekerman & Cohen, 2017) and active citizenship (Lemish, 2003; Lin, Lawrence, Snow, & Taylor, 2016).

Nonetheless, teachers find it difficult to discuss CPI, and the more current the topic, the more difficult it is, because it is difficult to anticipate the outcomes of such a discussion and because students are bound to come up with various interpretations and prejudices (Barton & McCully, 2007). Kelly (1986) presented four types of perceptions regarding teachers' role in handling controversial issues in the classroom to demonstrate: 1. Complete neutrality – teachers make sure not to touch on sensitive topics during class discussions; 2. Partial neutrality – the teacher presents all sides without indicating his or her own attitude; 3. Total one-sidedness – the teacher presents a specific attitude on the topic as if it were the single and only truth (which usually reflects the teacher's own opinion on the matter), without holding a discussion or providing room for contradictory opinions; 4. Partial one-sidedness – the teacher presents the students with numerous viewpoints, while clarifying and elaborating his or her own attitude. The study by Lieb (1998) reviewed the advantages and disadvantages of each of these approaches and determined that no single one could be considered better than the other. Rather, the author claimed that the best option should be determined taking into consideration the specific students in the class and the specific issue of controversy.

Kohlberg (1984), in addition to his renowned work on children's moral development, focused on the issue of moral education in general and on the importance of civic studies in particular. He argued that education, and especially civic studies, constitutes an important means for nurturing people's moral development. Systematic intervention by the teacher, in the form of open discussions of moral dilemmas, is likely to promote the moral development of students. Kohlberg (1976) addressed the subject of the American Constitution in civics classes in the US. He considered the Constitution a moral document in the post-conventional stage, because it dealt with the existence of inalienable basic and universal rights. Kohlberg's student, Blatt (1969), studied the use of class discussions of hypothetical moral issues as an educational instrument for moral development. His main finding was that students who participated in classroom discussions on various dilemmas demonstrated advanced thinking skills and advanced moral development in comparison with students who did not. These findings coincide with Tannebaum (2013) and Parker (2012) recommendations to use civics studies, and specifically discussions of dilemmas, to promote students' civic awareness and prepare them for a democratic life.

1.2. Teachers' sense of self-efficacy and cultural competence

In most Western countries, students increasingly come from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and teachers still come from relatively homogeneous backgrounds; hence, the gap between teachers and students seems to be ever-increasing (Denslow, 2000). Teachers who work with heterogeneous populations encounter various challenges, which oblige them to contend with educational, social, and psychological issues. It has been shown that teachers lack the knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to successfully cope with such challenges (Horenczyk & Tatar, 2003). Moreover, even in cases when professionals work with a younger generation from a similar non-Western background, they can expect to encounter conflict, due to the fact that their professional training is itself rooted in Western culture (Zuaby, 2015).

Cultural competence is part of teachers' self-efficacy and has been explored in several studies (e.g., Siwatu, 2007). For example, in a study of 34 pre-service teachers, Siwatu (2011) found that their

culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy appraisals were lower when they were exposed to a more multicultural urban school than when they were exposed to a suburban school. Teachers who participated in multicultural service learning (MSL) in Canada, Australia, Singapore and Israel, exhibited higher awareness of cultural bias, understanding of social inequality and more commitment to teach diverse students (Chang, Anagnostopoulos, & Omae, 2011).

In an ideal world, teachers would have the opportunity in the course of their training to develop awareness of their unique and personal cultural perspective and of the principles that guide their expectations, beliefs, and behaviors (Denslow, 2000). Teachers would be able to acquire cultural competence, i.e., the ability to function in a multicultural environment and to communicate with people whose backgrounds were different from their own. This competence would improve with experience, as individuals encounter more people from various backgrounds and acquire knowledge about the history and culture of different minority groups. In contrast to the ideal, the reality of teacher training is that in many cases, pre-service teachers are not sufficiently exposed to people from various backgrounds and cultures, nor are they trained in the course of their studies to work in a multicultural environment (Chisholm, 1994). Teacher's self-efficacy and cultural competence are also related to teachers' role perception which will be reviewed next.

1.3. Teachers' role perception

Professional identity is defined as a sense of belonging and identification with one's profession. Teachers' professional identity is determined not only by their own perceptions, but also by the way others perceive the profession (Tickle, 1999). Both pre-service and in-service teachers' role perceptions undergo shifts and changes in the course of their professional development (Kozminsky & Klavir, 2010). Teachers' professional beliefs and worldviews are pivotal to their role perception, and have a major effect on the scope of their professional work (Kozminsky & Klavir, 2010).

The discussion of the concept of teachers' professional identity and the attempt to define its components has led many researchers to conclude that, rather than a single identity, professional identity is a complex construct, composed of various sub-identities (Bates, Swennen, & Jones, 2014). Role perception in the field of education is anchored in a particular time and place. The ongoing professional identity construction process is driven by changes in teachers' knowledge, the accumulation of professional experience, and by the constant and dynamic encounter between their ideals, knowledge, and experiences (Laron & Shkedi, 2006).

The numerous policy changes and educational reforms, to which teachers in the 21st century are exposed, create ongoing shifts in educators' role perception. These shifts have a detrimental effect on their commitment to teaching and on various emotional aspects, such as their degree of motivation, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and sense of inner and personal coherence (Kozminsky & Klavir, 2010).

The present study examines teachers' handling of controversial issues within the context of Israeli society and the Israeli-Arab conflict. While we argue that this example has implications to the challenges teachers face in any country, we will now explore some unique features of the Israeli context.

1.4. The socio-political context and related teachers' practices in Israel

Israeli society is composed of nationally and socially competing

groups, a fact that leads to a multiplicity of agendas, ideals, and values (Paul-Binyamin & Reingold, 2014). The three major social divisions in Israel are the national, ethnic, and religious divides, and the issue of social pluralism is relevant to each. A prominent division in Israeli society is between Jews and Arabs, which involves differences of identity reflecting basic disparities regarding each group's sense of belonging. A detailed sociohistorical-political background on the Israeli society is not within the scope of this paper and the reader may find it in many sources (e.g., Bekerman & Cohen, 2017).

1.4.1. Jewish-Arab pluralism in Israeli society

The concept of liberal pluralism suggests a social reality wherein various groups live side-by-side, sharing a sense of cultural equality. This model encourages the development of ethnic niches and the preservation of cultural minorities, whose members are considered equal citizens of the state (Kymlicka & Opalski, 2002). Over time, differences between Jews and Arabs have had an impact on the minority group's social status and on its attitude towards the majority (Smootha, 2013).

Scholars differ in their interpretation of the extent of pluralism in Israel. A survey conducted by Ali and Inbar (2011) found that the majority of Arab citizens in Israel (approximately 82%) were interested in assimilating into the social, economic, and political life in the State of Israel. A research conducted within two teacher training programs in Israel found that Jewish students were more ethnocentric and more reluctant to adopt the multicultural approach than Arab students (Shamai & Paul-Binyamin, 2004). In contrast, some researchers (e.g., Halabi, 2005) have claimed that the relationship between Jews and Arabs is on a collision course as evidenced by the cycles of escalating violence. Those who oppose the *Israelization* process (a term coined by Smootha [2013] to refer to the politicization and assimilation of Arab citizens in the State of Israel) describe a process of *Palestinization*, i.e., a distancing from the Israeli identity and the strengthening of ties with the Palestinian population in the occupied territories. Smootha (2010) research has been criticized by Arab researchers, who claim that it reflects an attempt to rationalize reality in order to perpetuate it (Bishara, 1996).

1.4.2. Jewish-Arab pluralism in the context of education

Civic education in democratic countries is intended to inculcate the notion of a shared citizenry, which is capable of functioning as a single unit despite ethnic, national, and socioeconomic differences (Tannebaum, 2013). Yogev (2001) presents two approaches to pluralistic education: a pluralistic multicultural approach and a particularistic multicultural one. The focus of the first approach is on conveying information to students of all of the various social groups, so as to enhance their knowledge of and help them to develop a sense of empathy towards others. In contrast, the focus of the latter approach is on the notion that the social divides cannot be bridged through educating for multiculturalism. This is because multicultural values ignore the social power structure, which gives preference to the majority over the minority (Reingold, 2005). According to the particularistic multicultural approach, the curriculum inherently reflects the tendencies of the majority, which is why particularistic educational frameworks are preferred, addressing the needs of each group based on its particular cultural preferences.

According to Yogev (2001), the policy in Israel follows the particularistic multicultural approach; however, this approach only deepens the social divides. Studies by Lev Ari and Laron (2008) support this claim. These authors demonstrated that the sectorial approach to education and teacher training in Israel cause each sector to be familiar only with its own culture, and opportunities for exposure to other cultures are extremely rare. Teacher-

education departments in colleges and universities in Israel do not emphasize educating teachers towards a pluralistic future (Paul-Binyamin & Reingold, 2014). The aforementioned authors have suggested that including courses on cultural identity as part of a teacher-education program could alter pre-service teachers' attitudes towards multicultural education (Lev Ari & Laron, 2008; Paul-Binyamin & Reingold, 2014).

Ichilov (2003) investigated the issue of civic studies in high schools in the Jewish and Arab sectors in Israel, and found that Arab teachers tried to focus on neutral subjects and avoided touching on civic issues or Israeli symbols. The author concluded that, given the framework in which civic studies are currently conducted in Israeli schools, inculcating the notion of shared citizenship through civic studies is unlikely. Agbaria and Mustafa (2011) claimed that the Ministry of Education has placed civic knowledge within the frame of the Zionist narrative and does not allow for an expanded democratic dialogue, which in turn makes it difficult to create a civic culture that acknowledges the identities of and differences between Jewish and Arab citizens.

1.4.3. The Israeli education system

The Israeli education system is divided into separate streams, maintaining homogeneity in each one. As a result, for the most part, Jews study separately from Arabs, secular Jews study apart from religious Jews and even Ultra-Orthodox Jews study separately from religious Jews. The establishment of the national education system in Israel involved a depoliticizing process, which was characterized by an emphasis on common and unifying aspects, and thus avoided discussion of any controversial issues (Ichilov, 2003). As part of this depoliticizing process, teachers were called upon to avoid expressing personal opinions. Clause 19 in the National Education Law states that teachers are prohibited from participating in political demonstrations (Ungar & Vurgan, 2010). Nevertheless, according to the Ministry of Education's Director-General's Code of Bylaws, teachers are allowed to moderately express a political opinion, as long as this is done in the framework of a controlled class discussion on political issues, intended to promote political awareness, and as long as the educator presents other relevant opinions as legitimate and relevant (Gutel, 2015).

In the year 2000, Israel participated in an international study on the teaching of civics. Participants in this study were high school students in Jewish and Arab schools and their civics teachers. One of the questions addressed to the teachers was about expressing a personal opinion in class (i.e., during formal teaching). Findings indicated that teachers expressed their support for such behavior in a restrained manner. In general, teachers' attitudes towards teaching civics to students were found to be very conservative, in the sense that the topics they considered most important were those that were already included in the official curriculum. Thus, the depoliticizing of the education system resulted in a sterilized teaching of the civics program that emphasized abstract principles, while avoiding any discussion of current-day sociopolitical problems (Ichilov, 2000).

Depoliticization is a common practice also in the Arab education sector. After the founding of the State of Israel, Arab teachers were prohibited from dealing with any political topics that might stir nationalist feelings among their students. Until the early 1980s, they were prohibited from discussing current events or any topic considered sensitive, such as land, national identity, or the struggle for civil rights (Watad-Huri, 2008). In contrast to the Arab community's expectations that teachers would educate the younger generation to take pride in their identity based on Arab cultural and national values, the official establishment demanded that teachers suppress any tendency among students to express feelings of Arab nationalism, and instead teach in adherence to the spirit of Israeli

civics (Jabareen & Agbaria, 2014). The main finding in a study by Watad-Huri (2008) was that there is a general tendency in Arab schools to avoid discussing the Arab-Israeli conflict with students, and that Arab teachers avoid expressing their opinions on the matter. Arab teachers perceive themselves as experts in teaching a content area rather than as educators, which precludes the discussion of issues related to values and beliefs. In general, the findings of the study indicated that among teachers in the Arab sector, the choice of teaching as a profession was motivated by the perception that “there is no better option”. It is likely that this approach has affected their level of motivation and their commitment to the field of education. It is possible that because they perceive their role as “conveyors of [objective] information”, their professional identity does not include a sense of social or national mission, involvement, or belonging either to the profession or to the educational framework (Watad-Huri, 2008).

In summary, so far we have reviewed several main variables hypothesized to be associated to the discussion of controversial topics. We shall now present the research's questions and goals.

1.5. Study goals and research questions

This study was designed to examine the attitudes of high school teachers towards holding class discussions on the controversial, sociopolitical topic of Jewish-Arab relationships in Israel, and how these attitudes affect teachers' reported behaviors. The independent variables in this study included the following demographic characteristics: gender, age, years of experience, level of education, language indicating ethnic background, and professional development in multiculturalism. In addition, we measured teachers' sense of self-efficacy and cultural competence, role perception, reported sense of support from the system, attitudes towards Jewish-Arab pluralism in the context of Israeli society in general and in the context of education in particular, and knowledge of the Ministry of Education's regulations on this matter. The dependent variable in the study was teachers' reports of conducting class discussions on the subject of Jewish-Arab relations.

We raised several questions regarding the different variables and the relationships between them: How can the teachers be described in terms of the different variables measured in this study? What are the level of correlations between the dependent variables and independent scales? What is the relationship, if any, between knowledge of the Ministry of Education's policy and teachers' reported behaviors? Are there differences between Arab and Jewish teachers on the dependent and independent variables? Do teachers who undergo professional development in multiculturalism show benefits in any of the dependent or independent variables?

These questions lead the way to what is the major research question that we aimed to answer in the study: Which of the independent factors are the best predictors of teachers' reports of class discussions on the subject of Jewish-Arab relations?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Voluntary sampling was used: the questionnaire was posted online and teachers were contacted using teachers' email distribution lists containing about 60,000 teachers. 1625 usable questionnaires were received. The respondents' characteristics are displayed in Table 1. The sample was quite extraordinary in the participants' high average years of experience and average age.

Table 1
Sample characteristics (N = 1625).

Characteristic	N (%)
Gender (N = 1612)	
Men	589 (36.5)
Women	1023 (63.5)
Education (N = 1614)	
High school	6 (0.4)
BA	625 (38.7)
MA	934 (57.9)
PhD	49 (3.0)
First Language (N = 1624)	
Hebrew	1330 (81.9)
Arabic	163 (10.0)
Other	131 (8.1)
District (N = 1625)	
Central	381 (24.2)
Tel Aviv	259 (16.4)
Jerusalem	249 (15.8)
Northern	282 (17.9)
Southern	208 (13.2)
Haifa	197 (12.5)
Professional development in multiculturalism in the past 5 years (N = 1625)	
Yes	268 (16.9)
No	1315 (83.1)
Characteristic	M (SD)
Years of experience	16.4 (11.5)
Age	45.1 (10.6)

2.2. Research tools

The main research instrument was a questionnaire built to investigate the research variables and to answer the research questions. The questionnaire was influenced by existing questionnaires, in particular, Smootha's Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel (2010), and Horenczyk and Tatar (2003) teachers' attitudes toward multiculturalism questionnaire. The questionnaire was based on an exploratory study (Ron Erlich and Gindi, 2017) that was conducted using 70 participants (20 Arab-Israelis and 50 Jewish-Israelis). The questionnaire contained 12 items relating to demographic characteristics and 32 questions relating to the questionnaire's different domains. Reliability coefficients for the domains are presented in Table 2.

The teachers were also asked one informative question regarding their knowledge of the Ministry of Education guidelines regarding teachers' limitations to freedom of speech using a one-best-answer multiple choice question with 5 choices. In order to validate this question, it was correlated with a 6-point Likert-scale question that depicted the Ministry's policy falsely (“A discussion should be held only with the explicit direction of the Ministry of Education”). An independent samples *t*-test was carried out in order to investigate the nature of the difference between the mean scores of the participants who knew the Ministry's policy and those who did not on the noted question. Participants who knew the Ministry's policy had significantly lower scores ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 1.28$) than participants who did not know the Ministry's policy ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.39$); $t(1577) = 7.21$, $p < 0.001$.

Three indices were calculated to measure the dependent variable:

The reported classroom discussions index was measured using 4 items on a 6-point Likert scale and 7 yes/no questions. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was $\alpha = 0.76$. This scale included statements such as “When a debate on relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel comes up in class, I allow students to express their feelings” (Likert scale).

The endorsed discussions index included the number of

Table 2
Questionnaire domains and reliability.

Sample item	Reliability (Cronbach alpha)	Number of items	Domain
The equality of rights of the Arab population in Israel must be protected	0.84	6	Pluralistic attitudes toward Arab-Jewish relations
It is important that Arab teachers teach in Jewish schools	0.85	6	Attitudes toward Arab-Jewish pluralism in education
Part of the teacher's role is to educate for political consciousness	0.83	7	Role perception
I have faith in the support of students' parents in case there is a complaint against me about holding a political/social discussion in class	0.78	3	Feeling supported
I have the tools and skills to manage a classroom discussion about Jews and Arabs in Israel	0.78	6	Self-efficacy to conduct discussions
When a debate on relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel comes up in class, I allow students to express their feelings	0.76	4	Reported classroom discussions

Note: all scales were measured using 6 items on a 6-point Likert scale.

behaviors that teachers indicated they performed (on a range of 0–5). This scale included statements like: "When social/political debates on the subject of Arabs-Jews come up in class, I allow different opinions but stop extreme students" (yes/no).

Reported frequency of discussions index was based on a direct question about the number of times in the past month that the teachers held class discussions about Jewish- Arab relations. The choices were: A. Never, B. Once or twice, C. 3–5 discussions, D. 6–8 discussions, E. More than 9 discussions.

Pearson correlation coefficients between the indices ranged between 0.23 and 0.41 and were statistically significant, indicating that the three indices measured similar concepts, but that each of the three had a unique meaning.

3. Results

The participants' attitude towards the overall concept of pluralism appeared to be generally positive. Considering the range of the scales (from 1 to 6 in the scale measuring Jewish-Arab pluralism as well as Pluralism in education), it seems reasonable to suggest that the mean scores of the participants demonstrated positive attitudes towards the general concept of pluralism (see Table 3). In contrast, the participants' feeling that they could trust the system in case there is a complaint regarding the discussions held in class ('feeling supported') was only modest (3.20 on a scale from 1 to 6; see Table 3). The participants exhibited high self-efficacy in conducting discussions about Jewish-Arab relations in class. This high score stood in sharp contrast to the fact that only about 30% of the participants exhibited knowledge of the Israeli Ministry of Education's policy regarding the limits of freedom of expression in the classroom. In the final index of a dependent variable, the Israeli teachers displayed a positive view of civic education as part of the teacher's role (see Table 3). However, when compared with other aspects of

Table 3
Mean scores of the participants on the questionnaire scales.

Scale	N	Mean	SD
Independent variables			
Jewish-Arab pluralism ¹	1591	4.32	1.05
Pluralism in education ¹	1595	4.44	1.09
Feeling supported ¹	1572	3.20	1.18
Self-efficacy ¹	1595	4.44	1.09
Civic education as part of the teacher's role ¹	1624	4.91	1.02
Knowledge of Ministry policy	1625	29.7% knew	70.3%
Dependent variables			
Reported classroom discussions ¹	1625	4.54	0.82
Endorsed discussions index ¹	1625	2.12	1.11
Reported frequency of discussions ²	1624	1.82	0.90

Note: ¹ Scale of 1–6; ² Scale of 1–5.

the teachers' role, boundaries and discipline were the highest rated, while civic education as part of the teacher's role was the lowest rated.

With regard to the dependent variables, the teachers appeared to be generally positive about conducting discussions on Jewish-Arab relations in the classroom ($M = 4.54$). The number of practices that teachers endorsed as well as the number of discussions they reported, were more modest (2.12 behaviors endorsed on the average on a 0–5 range; an average of 1.82 discussions held in the past month).

The correlations between the dependent variables and the independent variables are presented in Table 4. The analysis revealed that all the independent variables were significantly correlated with the dependent variables. Seeing civic education as part of the teacher's role and self-efficacy that the teacher was able to hold such discussions were most highly correlated with the dependent variables.

Knowledge of the Ministry of Education's policy was related to teachers' reported behavior around and the number of discussions about Jewish-Arab relations. Since knowledge is a dichotomous variable, it was correlated separately with the dependent variables. Teachers who knew the limitations to freedom of speech had higher reported behaviors regarding discussion in class on all variables. The results are presented in Table 5.

As Table 6 shows, Arab teachers showed more pluralism than Jewish teachers did both in general and specifically regarding education. Arab teachers also felt they would receive more support than Jewish teachers if a complaint had been filed against them. In contrast, Jewish teachers saw civic education as part of their role more than Arab teachers did, and reported more behaviors involved in classroom discussions. Chi-square test indicated significant dependency between ethnicity and knowledge of ministry guidelines, ($\chi^2(1) = 8.86, p < 0.003$). Arab teachers were less likely to know the ministry guidelines than Jewish teachers were.

In an independent samples *t*-test (Table 7), the differences between teachers who underwent professional development in multiculturalism in the past 5 years and those who did not were statistically significant on Jewish-Arab pluralism, pluralism in education, civic education as part of the teacher's role, self-efficacy, reported classroom discussions, and the reported frequency of discussions in the past month. There was no difference between teachers who trained in multiculturalism and teachers who did not regarding their knowledge of the limits to freedom of speech ($\chi^2(1) = 1.35, p < 0.246$).

Civic education as part of the teacher's role and self-efficacy predict teacher inclination toward holding class discussions about Jewish-Arab relations in Israel. Multiple linear regressions were calculated for each of the three dependent variables. The results are presented in Table 8. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure there

Table 4
Correlations between dependent variables and independent scales.

	Jewish-Arab pluralism	Pluralism in education	Feeling supported	Self-efficacy	Civic education as part of the teacher's role
Reported classroom discussions	0.329**	0.408**	0.171**	0.547**	0.629**
Endorsed discussions index	0.167**	0.203**	0.109**	0.261**	0.321**
Reported frequency of discussions	0.143**	0.184**	0.094**	0.338**	0.284**

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 5
Means and standard deviations of the dependent variables among teachers who knew the Ministry of Education's policy regarding teachers' boundaries of freedom of speech and teachers who did not.

	Knowledge of Ministry's policy	M	SD	N	t
Reported classroom discussions	Yes	4.80	0.746	483	8.54***
	No	4.44	0.826	1142	
Endorsed discussions index	Yes	2.26	1.048	483	3.48**
	No	2.05	1.125	1142	
Reported frequency of discussions	Yes	2.01	0.907	483	5.53***
	No	1.74	0.886	1142	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 6
Comparisons between Jewish and Arab teachers on the dependent and independent variables.

Scale	Arab (N = 157–163)		Jewish (N = 1414–1461)		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Jewish-Arab pluralism	5.00	0.68	4.25	1.06	-12.36***
Pluralism in education	4.78	0.71	4.41	1.12	-5.89***
Feeling supported	3.48	1.30	3.16	1.16	-3.24**
Self-efficacy	4.34	0.90	4.31	0.94	-0.47
Civic education as part of the teacher's role	4.51	1.05	4.95	1.00	5.34***
Reported classroom discussions	4.30	0.78	4.57	0.82	3.99***
Endorsed discussions index	2.12	1.22	2.12	1.09	-0.01
Reported frequency of discussions	1.70	0.84	1.84	0.91	1.83

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 7
Comparisons between teachers who underwent professional development in multiculturalism and those who did not on the dependent and independent variables.

Scale	Trained (N = 262–268)		Did not train (N = 1273–1315)		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
Jewish-Arab pluralism	4.58	0.89	4.27	1.07	5.05***
Pluralism in education	4.71	0.93	4.39	1.11	4.97***
Feeling supported	3.32	1.17	3.18	1.17	1.83
Self-efficacy	4.51	0.94	4.26	0.93	3.88***
Civic education as part of the teacher's role	5.08	0.96	4.87	1.02	3.11**
Reported classroom discussions	4.74	0.77	4.51	0.82	4.16***
Endorsed discussions index	2.22	1.09	2.10	1.11	1.71
Reported frequency of discussions	2.00	0.97	1.78	0.88	3.61***

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

was no violation of the assumptions of normality, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Durbin–Watson coefficients to indicate independence of residuals were satisfactory for reported classroom discussions (1.92), endorsed discussions index (1.91), and reported frequency of discussions (1.93). A multiple linear regression to predict participants' reported classroom discussions index yielded a multiple R of 0.518, $p < 0.001$. Similarly, a multiple R of 0.125 was found for the 'endorsed discussions index', ($p < 0.001$), and a multiple R of 0.144 ($p < 0.001$) for 'participants' reported frequency of discussions'. The strongest predictors in all three analyses were

civic education as part of the teacher's role and self-efficacy. Regarding reported classroom discussions, pluralism in education was also a significant predictor.

4. Discussion

Teachers around the world have to face controversial issues in the classroom. The issues may be different in different communities and may differ in intensity. The issues may be global (gender equality, consumerism) or local such as the Jewish–Arab conflict that is the focus of our study. The present research examined Israeli high school teachers' attitudes and reported behaviors towards discussion of Jewish–Arab relationships in the classroom. Teachers in Israel appear to be generally positive towards the overall concept of pluralism. This finding is not surprising given that the participants were highly educated and given the emphasis in teacher education about tolerance of diversity and multiculturalism. In this sense, the present research reiterates the gap between the declarative level of pluralism and actual behaviors. In the broader picture, studies have shown a discrepancy between teachers' knowledge and attitudes toward minorities and their actual cultural competency (e.g., Horenczyk & Tatar, 2003). Smooha (2013) presented data that suggested a disparity between Israelis' collective and communal willingness for Jews and Arabs to associate (e.g., living in the same neighborhood) on the one hand, and their individual willingness to implement such a course of action personally on the other hand. In the present research, there was a gap between participants' declarative pluralism and overall reluctance to conduct discussions about Jewish–Arab relations in the classroom. This gap

Table 8
Multiple linear regression to predict participants' reported classroom discussions index based on the different independent variables.

Predicted variable	Predictor	B	SE	β
Reported classroom discussions	Civic education as part of the teacher's role	0.306	0.018	0.382***
	Self-efficacy	0.288	0.018	0.337***
	Pluralism in education	0.106	0.024	0.143***
	Ethnicity	0.231	0.051	0.087***
	Jewish-Arab pluralism	0.053	0.024	0.069*
	Feelings supported	0.044	0.013	0.064**
	Professional development	0.038	0.039	0.018
	Knowledge	-0.040	0.033	-0.023
	$R^2 = 0.518$			
Endorsed discussions index	Civic education as part of the teacher's role	0.237	0.032	0.218***
	Self-efficacy	0.154	0.033	0.132***
	Pluralism in education	0.083	0.043	0.082
	Feelings supported	0.065	0.023	0.070**
	Knowledge	-0.050	0.060	-0.021
	Ethnicity	-0.057	0.093	-0.016
	Jewish-Arab pluralism	0.012	0.044	0.012
	Professional development	-0.020	0.072	-0.007
	$R^2 = 0.125$			
Reported frequency of discussions	Self-efficacy	0.244	0.027	0.255***
	Civic education as part of the teacher's role	0.102	0.026	0.114***
	Pluralism in education	0.067	0.035	0.081*
	Ethnicity	0.136	0.075	0.046
	Professional development	0.106	0.058	0.044
	Knowledge	0.051	0.049	0.026
	Feelings supported	0.018	0.019	0.024
	Jewish-Arab pluralism	0.008	0.036	0.009
	$R^2 = 0.144$			

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

coincides with previous research that found that teachers hesitate to discuss controversial topics in class despite their importance (Barton & McCully, 2007; Moore, 2012; Oulton et al., 2004).

Our study revealed five main factors associated with teachers' willingness to engage in discussions: the first two factors were obstacles related to the relationship between the Ministry of Education and the teachers, while the latter three were associated with teacher training, relating to teacher's role perception, self efficacy and multicultural training. When examining each obstacle, it is important to observe the differences between Jewish and Arab teachers. For example, when inspecting the differences between Jewish and Arab teachers regarding pluralism, Arab teachers are significantly more pluralistic than Jewish teachers both with regards to education and in general. This adds to the debate about pluralism within Israeli society, some of which found that Jewish Israelis are more pluralistic than Arab Israelis (Smootha, 2013) while others found the opposite (Ali & Inbar, 2011; Shamai & Paul-Binyamin, 2004). It is important to note that from a methodological perspective, different researchers define and operationalize pluralism differently. Our questionnaire was based partly on Smootha's (2010) Index of Arab-Jewish relations in Israel and the findings were different than his. This can be explained by the fact that the present study investigated teachers while Smootha's population was broader. Thus, the discrepancy can be explained by the training teachers undergo. Multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance are taught as part of the teacher training and for many Arab teachers and teacher-training colleges enable an unmediated encounter with Israeli Jews in a mostly segregated society.

The first obstacle is related to knowledge of the official policy. The study revealed that only 30% of teachers knew the Ministry of Education's policy regarding the limits of freedom of speech in the classroom. This worrying finding indicates the lack of communication between the Israeli Ministry of Education and teachers. This lack of knowledge proved to be an obstacle to discussions in class.

Teachers who knew the policy exercised more discussions, endorsed more practices, and were generally more positive toward discussing Arab-Jewish relations in class. While the literature on teachers' knowledge of official policies is scant, there is ample evidence of teachers' discontent with their relationships with officials and in particular when the policies are directed top-down (Hargreaves, 2004).

Arab teachers exhibited even less knowledge about the official policy than the Jewish teachers did. This finding is congruent with Watad-Huri (2008) research indicating that Arab teachers refrained from speaking with students about the Arab-Israeli conflict and from expressing their views on the subject. We argue that Arab teachers' perception prevents them from contemplating that the official policy may be different.

The second obstacle to teachers' engagement was their feeling that they would not be supported when in need. Jewish-Arab relationships in Israel is a volatile topic and participants exhibited only modest trust that the system would support them in case there is a complaint about a political discussion held in class. The teachers were especially distrustful of the Ministry of Education in this regard, and felt they would get more support from parents and even greater support from their principal. This means that teachers' lack of trust in the Israeli Ministry of Education overrides their pluralistic attitudes and their political consciousness. This finding related to the previously mentioned teachers' alienation from officials (Hargreaves, 2004).

The perception that civic education was part of the teacher's role was the main factor related to engagement in discussions. It was the most significant predictor of two of the three dependent variables (reported classroom discussions and endorsed discussions index). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that when compared with other aspects of the teachers' role, civic education and political awareness received the lowest ratings from the participants. This means that despite the significance placed on civic education and

political awareness by educational theorists (Oulton et al., 2004; Parker, 2012; Tannebaum, 2013) this aspect is not well-integrated into the teachers' role concept. This finding has important implications for teacher training.

Teachers' self-efficacy in conducting discussions was the other main factor that contributed to teachers' willingness to conduct discussions on controversial topics in class. Both Arab and Jewish teachers reported high self-efficacy in conducting discussions about Jewish-Arab relations in class. Moreover, self-efficacy was one of the two major factors predicting teachers reported classroom behaviors and the reported frequency of discussions. This finding is surprising and restates the gap between teachers' self-perceptions and their actual behaviors.

Finally, multiculturalism training in the past five years was associated with several benefits and more teacher engagement in discussions. Teachers who went through such training exhibited more pluralism, felt more self-efficacy, considered civic education more part of their role, and reported more discussions. This finding should be considered carefully as there may be a self-selection bias in choosing to attend such trainings. Nonetheless, it does point to the importance of such courses either as part of teacher training or as enrichment courses while working in schools.

4.1. Study limitations

The study used voluntary sampling and does not necessarily represent the teacher population in Israel. In particular, the participants' average age was 45.1 years and their average teaching experience was 16.4 years. It may be that experienced teachers are more established and confident on the one hand and perhaps less knowledgeable about multiculturalism on the other hand. It should also be noted that this research was quantitative and future qualitative research may shed more light into teachers' experience, motives for their behavior and weaknesses in teacher training.

4.2. Recommendations

Beyond this research's contribution in describing the current state of affairs, essential implications for policy and teacher training can be inferred. Teacher-training institutions should provide an arena that enables discussions of controversial issues among people of different cultures. In Israel, it is important to encourage Arab and Jewish teachers to study together both during teacher training and in professional development programs in order to enhance such discussions. It is further recommended that teacher-training institutions will integrate controversial issues skills in all disciplines. Controversial issues should be assimilated both in teacher training curriculum and in high school students' curriculum in a variety of disciplines. This continuity may enhance teachers' self-efficacy and their feeling that teacher training equips them well to face the challenge when it arises in the classroom.

It is vital to inform teachers about the Ministry of Education's policy regarding the freedom of discussions. In the particular case of Israel, it is important that teacher trainees be exposed to this knowledge during their training, and that working teachers be informed as well. It is also possible that teachers worldwide avoid controversial topics due to their lack of knowledge of guidelines regarding teachers' freedom of speech, a hypothesis that should be explored in further research. Knowing the guidelines can enhance teachers' feelings of support and willingness to practice their pluralistic attitudes.

The finding regarding teachers' feelings that they would not be supported in case of need, particularly by the Ministry of Education, can serve as a warning sign for the Israeli Ministry of Education in particular and for educational officials in general about their

relationships with teachers in the field. It is important that educational officials be perceived as clear and helpful to teachers in the field. Empowering teachers to act as civic agents has to also take into account their socio-political contexts, and provide a clear message regarding the educational commitment to democracy.

In order for teachers to become agents in shaping students' ability to cope with controversial topics and to expose students to democratic processes, teacher-training institutions would do well to emphasize civic education and political awareness and promote its importance in teachers' role concept. Teachers' educators should provide modelling and create opportunities for student teachers to engage in discussions of controversial topics during their studies. In this way, schools will become more relevant and connected to the socio-political context rather than being politically neutral and taking an avoidant stance as often happens.

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