

ARTICLE

# Teaching Borders: A Model Arising from Israeli Geography Education

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*Teaching the topic of a country's borders can be challenging. This is especially the case in Israel, where not all the state's borders are agreed: there are internal disagreements between parties on the ground and external disagreements between parts of the international community and the State of Israel. A border, the very symbol of stability and consistency, contains mixed and contradictory aspects; the borders are not always well defined and, for many people, sensitive and contentious subjects. Therefore, teachers often avoid or feel uncomfortable teaching the topic, even though they know well its importance. This study examines existing curricula and textbooks used to teach the topic in Israeli high schools, and develops a picture of teachers' perceptions of teaching the topic through qualitative research. On this basis, the paper proposes a training model that addresses both the social and emotional side of the subject and the historical and political knowledge required to teach it. The purpose of the model is to better equip and enrich teachers to take on the task while minimizing fear of encountering or provoking adverse reactions. The teacher's role is to expose students to different perspectives and positions, so students can begin to assess the problematic and complex nature of the topic in general and Israel's borders in particular.*

## Introduction

Boundaries are not always fixed in their positions and in their functioning: some boundaries that were open have been closed, and some border crossings are no longer operating or under supervision; this has been happening since September 2001 along U.S. borders, as well as more intensively in the last decade at the "edges" of the EU and in between (Popescu 2012; Scott 2010). It has also been happening in the areas surrounding Israel. A border, whose very existence is intended to express a constant and stable entity, expresses contradictory characteristics in Israel and sends out confused messages, and therefore teaching the subject is not at all simple and presents a significant challenge to teachers (Miles 2011).

In the era of globalization, the development of technologies for transfer of information, joint economic interests, international collaborations on the topics of ecology, refugees and migrant workers, terror and drugs raise the importance of teaching this subject. Studies have been published that relate to the emotional and mental side of teaching boundaries in addition to the empirical side. Siedle and Budke (2019) concluded that German students have limited understanding of boundaries and differing spatial concepts of them.

Because borders around the world have been changing their character dramatically in the 21st century (Yaar-Waisel 2018), teaching the subject becomes more complex, and

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therefore, requires teachers to teach an uncertain and controversial subject. Recently, the issue reached new levels of importance when the COVID-19 pandemic led governments around the world to tighten their borders more than ever before, including Israel (Newman 2020).

Much has been published about the borders of the State of Israel, concerning their determination and establishment and their changes over more than a century (Braver 1988, 2014; Biger 2018; Newman 2020 among others). This research literature is important for teaching the subject, but this article does not discuss border studies. Rather, this article delves into the subject of teaching about borders. The first part relates to existing curricula and textbooks. Then the paper will present what is actually happening in the teaching of the subject. Finally, the paper will present a model for improved teaching outcomes.

The purpose of this study is to raise the importance of teaching the subject and to examine the ways in which it is studied in the Israeli education system, focusing on the required curriculum and on teachers' perceptions of teaching it. Furthermore, it is hoped that a new model outlined in this paper will help better prepare teachers to teach the subject while reducing anxieties and adverse reactions.

## Research Methods

This study examines the existing curricula and textbooks used to teach the topic in Israeli middle schools and high schools. The Israeli geography curriculum is nationwide for two sectors: in Hebrew and Arabic. All curricula are published on the website of the Ministry of Education. Qualitative research conducted between 2018 and 2020 explores teachers' perceptions of teaching this topic through questionnaires and interviews with almost 50 geography teachers at more than 30 different middle and high schools, teaching students aged 15 through 18, grades 9 through 12. Seventy-five percent of the teachers who answered a questionnaire belonged to the Hebrew-Jewish state education system, and 25 percent are Arabic speaking schools (Muslim, Druze and Christian), which are also part of the state education system. Only ten percent of the teachers that answered the questionnaires teach at orthodox schools. These questionnaires and interviews were used for the purpose of examining what is really happening in classes, beyond the formal curricula. Drawing on this research as well as on many years of experience teaching the subject and training students to teach it, this paper outlines a new model for teaching the topic of borders.

## Framing the Issue / Theoretical background

Much has been researched and written about the importance of relating the content to the learner (Michaeli 2014, Naveh 2014). The teaching of geography at its best connects the study to current events and to the world

experienced by the students (Ministry of Education). Political events taking place every day have a close connection with the geographical world. Teaching that connection is the heart of the profession. Current events are identified through geographical concepts and studied within the framework of the main ideas of geography, using specific methods of inquiry into this subject (Sneh 2004). There is an irony in the inverse relationship between the importance of the subject, as teachers believe, and their eagerness to talk about it in classrooms (Miles 2011).

Teaching political issues encounters difficulties and barriers in various places around the world (Grayson 2015). For example, a study examining the knowledge and understanding of geopolitical teaching in the US at the beginning of this century shows that there is a lack of attention and awareness surrounding geopolitical issues (Holm & Farber 2002). The researchers found that although understanding geopolitical processes was significant for teachers in times of change (the article was written one year after September 11, 2001), the knowledge they demonstrated was poor. The geopolitical issues examined relate to the international economy and international markets, the power of countries, cooperation between countries, multicultural cooperation (e.g., the Olympics reflects the need for cooperation among nations), as well as environmental issues such as climate change and environmental sustainability, human rights, migration, and population growth. The researchers found that the source from which the respondents gained most of their knowledge was not the education system but from the media (Holm & Farber 2002). In Europe, the contents of the study were examined, and it was found that the perception of "European integration" is derived from a national point of view in each country, and that the textbooks serve as "vehicles of nationalism" (Sakki 2014). Professor O'Reilly from Dublin City University emphasizes the complexity of political geography in general, and the issue of borders in particular (O'Reilly 2019).

The importance of teaching the topic can be found in two main directions: the first concerns the importance of basic geographic knowledge for the behaviour of a functioning adult member of society, while the second supposes that discussing real-world disputes improves the critical thinking of students (Sziarto et al 2014; Michaeli 2014; Lamm 1998; Rasisi & Diamant 2002). The complexity of teaching political geography in general, as reflected in this literature review and especially the topic of borders, has created a need for teacher training and teacher guidance for teaching the subject. Therefore, working with Israeli curriculum, this paper asks the following research questions:

- What are the contents that appear in the geography curriculum?
- What are the contents of the textbooks that appear in the educational system?
- What will we actually teach in middle and high school classes?
- How can teachers be trained to teach the subject?



Figure 1. Two views of the separation wall. Photographed in east Jerusalem by the author, 2018.

## Teaching Borders in Israel

Much has been published about the borders of the State of Israel, concerning their determination and establishment and their changes over more than a century (Braver 1988, 2014; Biger 2018; Newman 2020 among others). This research literature informs the teaching of the subject, but this article does not discuss border studies. Rather, this article delves into the subject of teaching about borders. The first part relates to existing curricula and textbooks, the continuation of this paper will present what is happening in the actual teaching the subject in secondary school's classrooms.

A study conducted in 2011 by William Miles on the topic of border teaching in Israel concluded that many teachers feel uncomfortable and avoid geopolitical issues. The researcher concluded that the textbooks on borders contain confusing and contradictory messages. It was also recommended that sophisticated and multi-layered typology was needed (Miles 2011).

The starting point for teaching the subject of borders is that in Israel it is impossible to accept the boundaries as a matter of course. They are a subject that is controversial, expresses conflict and requires negotiation both between Israel and its neighbours and within Israel. Teaching a subject that is uncertain and temporary is problematic and challenging (Bar-Gal 1993); it requires teacher training and preparation for the teaching of the topic in advance.

In order to address geopolitical issues and understand the meaning of the curriculum, this research asked participants questions that have no unequivocal answers. For example: Is there any consensus on the delineation of the state? and what do we teach the younger generation? Paradoxically, something so important receives little attention in the geography class (Bar-Gal 1996; Miles 2011). Further complicating the teaching of borders in Israel, political perceptions that appear directly or indirectly in textbooks, as Peled-Elhanan (2013) argues, are laced with a pro-Israel ideology.

For example, the Green Line was the border between Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan from 1949 until 1967. Since then, according to international law it has been the line between the sovereign state of Israel and the Palestinian territory known as the West Bank. For many Israelis, the West Bank is Judea and Samaria, with a history that goes back millennia to biblical times. In 2006, the Minister of Education, Yuli Tamir, removed the injunction on drawing the "Green line" on the maps of Israel (which are produced at the Israel Mapping Centre). Still, in most classrooms there are maps that do not contain the "Green Line". Even in most of the atlases that are used in schools, there is no mention of this border. In the latest edition of Professor Moshe Braver's *University Atlas* (2014), the marking of the Separation Fence appears clearly.

## Existing Curricula and Textbooks

The geography curriculum is presented online on the site of the Ministry of Education, Department of Geography, in Hebrew ([http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/UNITS/Mazkirut\\_Pedagogit/Geographya](http://cms.education.gov.il/EducationCMS/UNITS/Mazkirut_Pedagogit/Geographya)). The site lists the content required for teaching the subject of borders. The subject of Israel's borders appears twice in the curriculum for high schools: for the first time in the ninth grade, in the framework of teaching geography for the Land of Israel. All Israeli students are supposed to study the subject in the ninth grade, although in practice this is not the case, and various schools teach innovative interdisciplinary programs that do not follow the "regular" curriculum. For the second time, the subject is meant to be taught in the higher grades as part of the matriculation programme in geography that includes the subject. Geography is a profession that the student can choose, and only a minority of students study geography during their high school studies.

In the ninth-grade curriculum, just two hours of instruction are planned for the subject of Israel's borders. The content required of those teaching this topic includes various terms: the borders of the country (The "Land of Israel") and the borders of the state ("The State of Israel") which are not the same terms in Hebrew, as they involve a deep political and historical meaning. Teaching the borders of Israel today, and lastly, changes in the borders' lines. As mentioned, only two hours are recommended for these complex terms and topics.

The geography textbook for the ninth grade, Israel: *Man and Space* (Fine et al 2007) was published by a private publisher, the Centre of Technological Education and received the Ministry of Education's permission to be used in schools. It contains only three pages on borders. The subject is at the beginning, and this indicates its importance. On the first page are the basic concepts of borders: "The Land of Israel", "The State of Israel", "Agreed border", "Temporary border", "Armistice line". On the second page, the historical processes of border formation in Israel are described: the borders of the British Mandate (1922), the borders of the Partition Plan (1947), borders following the War of Independence (1949), and finally the review of border changes following the Six Day War (1967). One column is devoted to "Israel's borders today". It contains the continuation of the historical review: the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979, the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan, and finally, the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. Because textbooks are re-written once every five-to-ten years in Israel, teachers have to update the text and to add external sources.

The three-page textbook section includes six maps. Two of the maps are large in relation to the other four, the first of which is the Land of Israel, with its eastern border running along the Jordan River, the West Bank with areas marked "Palestinian Authority A". The second large map

is that of Israel with the occupied territories after the Six Day War (1967), including Sinai, Gaza, Judea, Samaria and the Golan Heights. Choosing the size of the maps, the elements included and those that are not included reflect a political statement and meaning (Collins-Kreiner et al 2006).

It is particularly interesting to examine the question that summarizes the chapter:

Write briefly about the four major wars of the State of Israel since its establishment: when did they take place, which countries participated in them, and what were their effects on the borders of the country?

This question expresses the view that the border is a product of war and, as such, it constitutes a problem.

On the website following the textbook there is a video showing a lesson taught by Professor Gideon Biger on the subject of Israel's borders. The professor adapts his lecture to the target audience which is composed of religious youth. The introduction presents borders as a complex problem, and most of the lecture is a historical review of the formation of boundaries.

In 2009, the textbook for twelfth graders was published as preparation for the matriculation exam in Geography. The book *Israel in the 21st Century: Selected topics in Geography for High Schools* (Graitzer 2009) was published by the same private publisher as *Israel: Man and Space*, the Centre of Technological Education. Some of the writers participated in writing both books. The introduction to the 2009 book deals with the borders of Israel. This book devotes fourteen pages to the subject. Half of them are historical descriptions of the formation of Israel's separate international boundaries: Israel-Egypt, Israel-Jordan, Israel-Syria, and Israel-Lebanon, plus special attention to the disputed separation line between the state of Israel and the Palestinian authority. In this book there is a specific reference to the question of the future permanent borders between Israel and the Palestinian Authority; students are requested to present their own geopolitical point of view. This topic, "Approaches to determining the permanent borders of the State of Israel" is a political, courageous discussion that presents and invites a range of positions on the complex problem, as geopolitical teaching should do.

The students are set the following tasks at the conclusion of the chapter:

- 1a. Define an agreed boundary and a temporary border.
- 1b. Give one example of a temporary border that Israel shares with one of its neighbouring states, and one example of an agreed border.
- 1c. Detail the history of the borders from the days of the British Mandate until the present day.

2. Describe the advantages, difficulties, and problems involved in each of the three approaches to establishing permanent borders between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Determine your position and justify it.
3. What are the implications of the absence of peace, and consequently the lack of regulated borders, on our region?
4. Discuss the following subjects: security, law enforcement, settlement, social ethics, economics, education and welfare, migration and immigration, planning and development, foreign investments, and Israel's international standing (2009, 19).

These questions provide a structure for engaging with specific and contentious aspects of Israel's borders that leads students to acquaintance with other opinions and higher order thinking. Students are required to base their answers on knowledge of the concepts, knowledge of historical realities, and on their own positions. This is the teaching of political geography at its best.

## Teaching the Subject in Practice

The teaching of Political Geography in general, and within it the teaching of borders specifically, is complicated and challenging. In recent years, there has been an increase in the degree of concern that teachers feel about discussing issues with political implications (Michaeli 2014). Ninth-grade teachers devote two hours to the subject at the beginning of the year using textbooks and very often presentations that are available on the Internet.

In order to get a picture of the actual teaching in the schools, questionnaires were given and interviews were conducted with teachers of geography in high school and middle school. They testify that they teach through the book "Israel Man and Space" (2007), 75% using videos and other visual presentations, and all show maps during their lessons. Many try to hold class discussions.

Teachers claim that the few hours in which they can teach the "Geography of the Land of Israel" require them to choose from the vast amount of subjects included in the field. It should be reiterated that even in the curriculum of the Ministry of Education, the instruction is given to teach the subject of borders for only two hours. Thus, the actual subject matter focuses on a few basic concepts: usually a distinction between a "natural border" and an "artificial border" and less a distinction between an "agreed border" and a "temporary border". Teachers note that they use the term "Armistice line" in class. In addition, teachers require that their students be familiar with the historical processes of boundary formation: Who set the limit and when was it done? Because the material presented in the textbook is readable students are able to read both pages in the book on their own. Teachers often leave little time for discussion of political and controversial issues; it may be a sign of disappointment

because teachers often feel that students lack a sufficient knowledge base of the subject to engage in significant class discussion.

Teachers emphasize the "added value" of teaching the topic when they succeed in conducting a class discussion:

Learning about the subject of borders also allows us to experience the arguments that each person tends to hold in his position, teaches them to listen to other opinions and hold a respectful discussion.

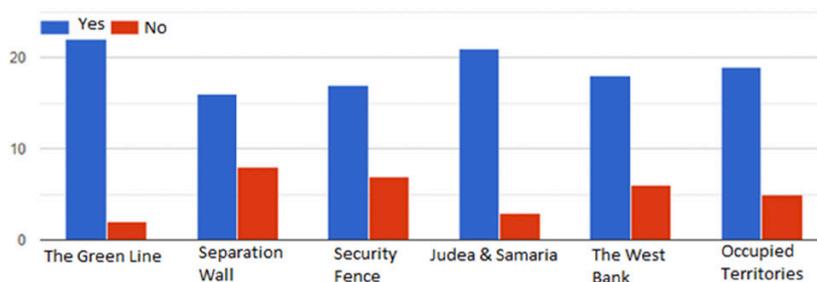
And:

It's a subject I love to teach because it results in a very volatile and very emotional discussion when I manage to conduct an intelligent, reasoned and important discussion with the students.

### Teaching the "Green Line"

As mentioned earlier, the "Green Line" served as the border between the State of Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan between 1949 and 1967; it now serves as an administrative border between various districts of the Ministry of the Interior in the sovereign State of Israel and Israel's government in Judea and Samaria (Soffer & Yaar-Waisel 1999). The Green Line is not an agreed border, and there are disagreements over its future (Khamaisi 2008). A "security fence" or a "separation wall" has been built along large sections of the line, sometimes near it and sometimes further.

There is confusion and inconsistency in teaching the Green Line. Those who say that they teach the subject use a wide variety of expressions and nicknames, sometimes alternating back and forth: "Security Fence", "Separation Wall", "cease-fire line". This follows from attempts to explain "what is separated by this border?" "The Territories", "Occupied Territories", "settlements", "Judea and Samaria" and "the West Bank" all hinge on the Green Line (Figure 2). This issue receives more attention since the route of the separation fence was added to the atlas, while most of the maps presented in the classrooms do not contain it. When the students see the line on the map, they ask about it.



**Figure 2. Relevant terms used by geography teachers.** Teachers were asked: Did you use one or more of the following expressions?

Despite the difficulty, many teachers expressed interest in teaching this topic. They responded positively to the question: "Is teaching this topic different from teaching other topics in the geography curriculum?" For example:

The subject is loaded with meaning and causes quite a few arguments.

Teaching this topic differs from teaching other subjects due to the fact that there are points that touch the political debate within the State of Israel that involve the students.

Because there are students who oppose discussing politics in school.

There is an emotional aspect to the subject, it is a national emotional issue.

The teaching of this topic is very different from teaching other subjects, because it touches on many educational questions, such as politics and worldview, and these reflect the lack of knowledge of many of the students.

The teaching of the topic is very different because it involves a whole lot of other subjects.

The students find this topic interesting.

The "interest" and "political complexity" teachers mention is different from the way in which they choose to examine their students. Questions that students were asked in exams and work exercises focus mostly on the historical aspects of the formation of boundaries, that is to say: there is little that could lead to disagreement.

### A model for teaching the subject of borders

The findings stemming from the teachers' remarks and the difficulty they expressed in teaching the subject suggest a way to help teachers approach the subject and prepare lessons more effectively. Borders are important, and teachers want to succeed in teaching the subject.

At the base of the model is the question whether the teacher is interested and understands the subject or feels uncomfortable teaching it and therefore avoids it. A teacher must understand the totality of the subject: both the emotional aspects and the prerequisite knowledge. Learning should include both levels, since geopolitical subjects are not disconnected from the world and from the life experiences of the teachers and students.

The experience of boundaries can be a result of visiting a border area or living near it, of watching news or from stories that pass through family. The teacher and students should be open to the full range of emotions to teach the subject. Although the emphasis is usually on the history of the borders, the process of establishing them and the conflicts associated with them, it is also appropriate to extend the learning to the political and national contexts of the border conceptions and different views regarding the status and political implications of policy makers. For example, reference to land uses in the border area and the possibilities of cooperation across both sides of the border.

In teaching according to the model, special importance is assigned to drawing conclusions and evaluation ("Higher order thinking"), for example, regarding future possibilities for environmental planning and developing the border region for the benefit of all residents on both sides of the border.

The recommended teaching methods in this study are based on independent student learning and classroom discussions, dealing with the meaning of what has been learned. This means that students will research themselves, ask questions and search for information on the Internet and try to answer the questions themselves, without the teacher providing all the answers. This learning model prepares the students for civic involvement and critical observation, as appropriate for a citizen in a democratic state.

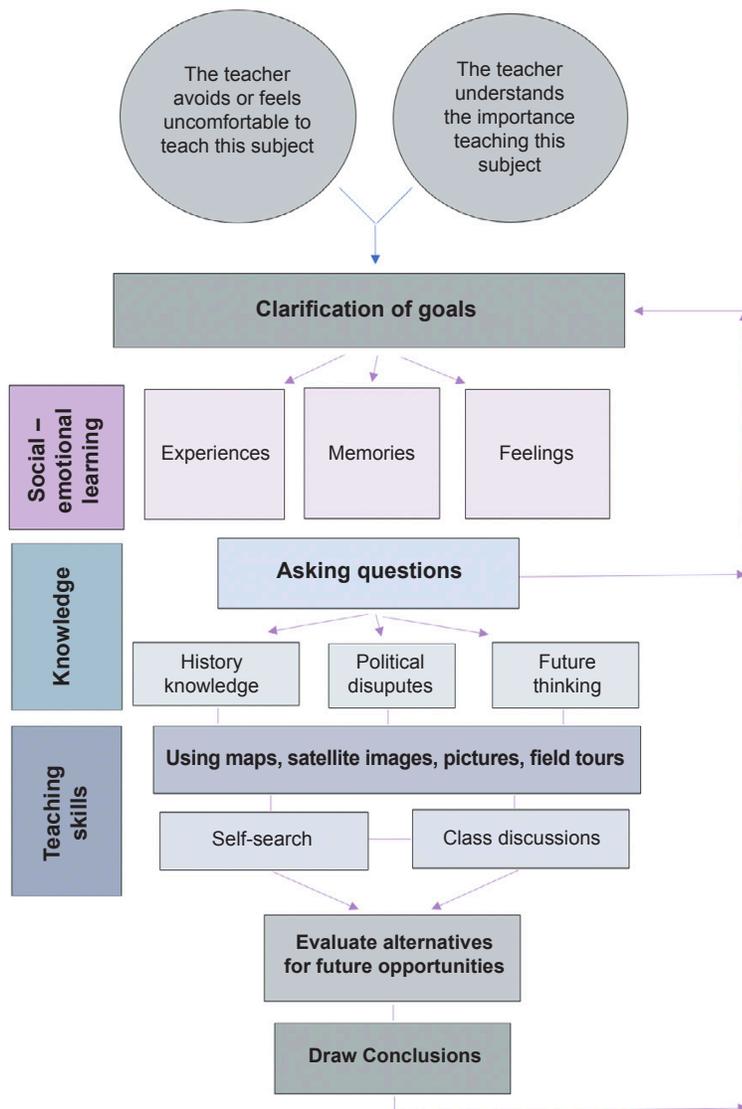
After several years of experience in developing teaching according to the model, in teaching in an academic classroom, it seems that it is possible to open a discussion around complex and value-related questions related to this topic, and to develop collaborative learning that engages students.

### Discussion, Summary and Conclusions

In the geography curricula, both in grade 9 of middle school and in grade 12 of high school, the subject of "Israel's borders" appears as an introduction. The topic appears at the beginning of the curriculum and in the opening of the textbooks, a value statement that expresses the importance of the subject. The geography book for the ninth grade contains three pages on borders. Three pages are too few and inadequate for such a subject. Teachers claim that they cannot expand it, although the question of time may be an "excuse" for their concern about dealing with a subject of political controversy.

The 12th grade textbook ends with the chapter entitled "Approaches to determining the permanent borders of the State of Israel", a courageous, political discussion that presents a wide spectrum of opinions and raises the complexity of the problems. The subject becomes important and relevant.

Much of what is required for teaching is based on the history of the boundaries and their processes of formation. The historical part is clearer than the political questions related to the borders of the country. Regarding the processes of determining the boundaries, there is agreement in the curricula and in the textbooks; there is no disagreement regarding the question of the decision to delimit the various border lines or for significant disagreements that existed at the time of their establishment. In the textbooks, which should correspond to the curriculum, a similar division is made: most of the text deals with the history of the delimitation of the borders and, to some extent, the border reality today.



**Figure 3. Model for teaching borders.**

The curriculum and the textbook intended for ninth graders (middle school), which, officially, all Israeli students are supposed to study, are not aimed at political thinking, or drawing conclusions and formulating personal positions. The topic allows for the study of factual knowledge only. There is no discussion or encouragement in the textbook for the ninth graders to discuss questions such as "What characterises a border area?" or "What are the advantages of an open border?" There is little to think about for the students as regards border crossings and related topics. The student is not asked to draw any conclusions from the historical processes of boundary formation, and there is no assessment that stimulates the student to think seriously about the future of borders.

On the other hand, the material for twelfth graders (high school) includes encouraging the student to think: the questions at the end of the chapter lead the students to higher thinking, and he or she is required to base his or her comments on knowledge of the concepts, familiarity with the variety of concepts, and finally express his or her positions, which is exemplary of teaching political geography.

The study found that teachers want to lead their students to higher order thinking. Teachers enjoy and feel that they are promoting their students' abilities while teaching the lesson. Geography teachers want to relate to the current reality in the classroom, in addition to teaching historical information.

In open-ended questions included in the surveys, teachers wrote:

The subject involves the use of important geographic skills such as map reading and comparison of maps, spatial geographic thinking and dealing with current questions and value problems. That is why I think the issue is important and interesting.

And:

The subject interests the students very much. It is always topical. There are many teaching aids that make the subject accessible and clear (videos and other visual presentations). Maps are used throughout the entire subject.

Teaching materials should be updated frequently, and teachers should be trained to discuss questions that encourage value thinking, even if they have emotional and political aspects.

Teacher training should be based on the recognition of the importance of teaching political subjects and should enable teachers to overcome difficulties in teaching such subjects. Student-teachers, or teachers-in-training, should be exposed to the complexity of teaching the lesson during their training period; they should experience teaching through classroom discussion, and they should acquire the

skills to develop a discussion. There is an important need to expose students to a variety of opinions without fear of confrontation and without imposing a unilateral stance, which may not be well received by students, parents, or the education system. Teachers feel that they are "at risk" when teaching a controversial issue and are cautious in their words. They use different terms for the same things, which can present additional challenges to the students. Geography teachers have to be aware of the existence of a gap between the existing political realities and the maps that exist in class, those that are published in atlases and those in textbooks.

It is important to emphasize to teachers the importance of educating youth in political thinking, evaluating alternatives, and drawing conclusions. A student in a democratic state must develop the tools for independent thinking and establish positions that can be formulated on the basis of historical and political reality. Students who are made aware of different viewpoints and varied opinions become better able to objectively assess the problems being discussed. The subject of the teaching of borders is complex and therefore cannot be taught in only a few hours.

Teachers must be trained to see the teaching of controversial subjects as a primary task, and to reflect on the challenges alongside the deep meaning of teaching this topic. In dealing with this subject, a teacher can bring the "added value" of teaching to class.

Training student-teachers should be done, first, in the course of their training. We must identify the challenging in teaching the subject and encourage them not to feel uncomfortable when raising political issues. Of course teachers can formulate personal positions, based on the wide range of opinions and the arguments that accompany the various opinions.

This subject should also be discussed in teacher training sessions during the academic year. The difficulties associated with teaching this topic can be discussed and legitimized while, at the same time, stressing to the teacher the importance of coping with these difficulties.

This study recommends that one attach importance to the teaching of this issue in various sectors of Israeli society such as those in Arab or Jewish Orthodox religious schools, and to find the common purpose of teaching it, that is exposing the student to a variety of opinions. Of course, when the class population is homogeneous in its perceptions of the subject, the teacher's work becomes even more challenging, because he/or she must present a range of views in the classroom and stimulate students to acknowledge arguments different from those familiar to them.

This paper proposes that teachers in middle school be allowed to teach more broadly the subject of borders. Let us allow teachers to discuss values, morality, debates,

then allow the students to formulate their own positions. Personal attitudes are based on factual information. It is hope that all these activities will encourage the students to be thoughtful and become involved in what is happening around them as befits citizens in a democratic state.

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