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## research article

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# Relationships and reciprocity in learning: a Palestine field trip for social work and youth and community students

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For over ten years now, social work and youth and community students from a university in England have travelled to Palestine to be hosted by families and conduct a study tour of the West Bank. They have visited governors in the West Bank, community centres, camp committees, art centres, social work agencies, museums and faith and political heritage sites across the West Bank and Jerusalem. This article reports on the reciprocity between host families and university staff in addressing student learning for social justice in a community that seeks international recognition and action in respect of the injustices of an illegal occupation. We argue that the goals of the host community in respect of extending their voice and reaching a constituency beyond their borders are compatible with experiential learning goals for students in developing political and cultural awareness through engaging with community experiences of responses to social injustice.

**Key words** social work education • youth and community work education • field trips • experiential learning • social justice

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## Introduction

Every two years for ten years now, social work and youth and community students from a university in the north of England have travelled to the West Bank of Palestine to be hosted by families and conduct a field trip or study tour of the West Bank. There have been five trips in total. They have visited key figures in the Palestine Authority (PA) within the West Bank, community centres, camp committees, art centres, social work agencies, social service providers for disabled young people, museums and faith and political heritage sites across the West Bank and Jerusalem. The ten-day trip generally involves around 20 students and three to four staff members from the school of social science.

This article reports on qualitative research with five host families in Palestine. We examine family member responses to questions around the reciprocity between

host families and the university programme in addressing student learning goals and community impacts for the host community seeking international recognition and action in respect of the injustices of occupation. We also report on comments made by the governors of two PA administrative governates in the West Bank. We consider the kinds of pedagogies that can form an experiential link between host community and students, providing them with opportunities, through the stories and examples of everyday living they encounter in Palestine, to reflect and learn about social justice and human resilience.

The issue of reciprocity is an important element for sustainability for the field trip. Communities are partners in such a project, and as such, the field trip is an exercise in co-production, where the goals, motivations and aims of staff, students and the host community need to be addressed in an inclusive way. We argue that in the context of occupation and resistance in the West Bank, the goals of the host community in respect of extending their voice and reaching a constituency beyond their borders are compatible with experiential learning goals for students in developing political and cultural awareness through engaging with community experiences of responses to social injustice.

In social work education, there is evidence of a growing interest in international social work (Gray, 2005; Healy, 2008; Healy and Link, 2012; Cox and Pawar, 2017; Ferguson et al, 2018), though there is no accurate up-to-date information on the numbers of qualifying courses that offer international fieldwork experiences and what those opportunities are in the UK. There is a significant and growing interest around the role of international placements in relation to student learning around cultural competence and human rights in the US, Europe, Canada and Australia (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich, 2002; Razack, 2002; Panos et al, 2004; Wehbi, 2009; Cleak et al, 2016; Matthew and Lough, 2017; Askeland et al, 2018; Jönsson and Flem, 2018; Mapp and Rice, 2019). This literature suggests that there has been sustained interest during this millennium for international student social work field trips in the wealthier nations at least, particularly the US, though we found little evidence to indicate that there is a significant trend in the UK.

The UK is not insulated, however, from the growing interest in international social work as part of the knowledge agenda (Dominelli, 2010; Ferguson et al, 2018; Lyons, 2018). Meanwhile, the international organs of global social work have initiated an agenda for an international social work that sets out a range of goals for universal human rights and sustainable well-being across all the globe, which includes an expectation for social work educators to bring these issues into professional training (International Federation of Social Workers, 2020).

Here, we consider the extent to which the use of international field trips to further learning aims in terms of human rights, decolonialisation or social justice in the most general sense depends on the establishment of reciprocity in relationships with host communities as partners in field trips as sites of experiential learning. Social work education in the UK is based on a competency and capabilities framework, while a more experiential approach to social justice, we argue, can offer a powerful additional opportunity, potentially transformational, with critical benefits to student learning, particularly around social justice and human rights. The evidence from the host families in Palestine suggests that, what Rone (2008) terms, the ‘immersive field trip’ (extended over five days at least) allows for an exchange between host and student participants that both addresses the host families’ goals in finding ‘honest messengers’

and obtaining a recognition of their struggle under oppressive occupation, and meets academic aims to engage students in learning not only about the experience of occupation, suffering and struggle, but also about resilience, cultural diversity and strategies of active resistance.

## The field trip

The supplementary field trip is one approach from a range of measures that can be used in internationalising the curriculum in social work and across related disciplines in the social sciences (Cox and Pawar, 2017; Lyons, 2018). Exchange visits, volunteerism and field-study trips all appear in a growing literature exploring cross-national educational experiences in social work and more generally (Rone, 2008; Lough, 2009; Cleak et al, 2016; Mapp and Rice, 2019).

In the UK, the social work practice placement is subject to the professional capabilities framework (PCF) administered by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), so social workers are required to demonstrate capabilities designed for general fieldwork practice (BASW, 2021; Lucas and Acar, 2021). There is significant evidence to suggest that the international experience may offer specific enhancements and opportunities, as well as challenges, for learning that the domestic fieldwork placement may not (Dorsett et al, 2019). Indeed there is also a growing set of studies exploring the benefits and opportunities, as well as challenges, of this kind of cross-national educational exchange (D’Cruz et al, 2005; Lindsey, 2005; Gilin and Young, 2009; Greenfield et al, 2012; Bell and Anscombe, 2013; Cleak et al, 2016; Beck et al, 2017; Bell et al, 2017; Askeland et al, 2018; Dorsett et al, 2019). In this article, rather than focus on direct benefits to student learning, we consider the element of reciprocity from the local host community’s perspective and explore the ways in which a partnership approach to the field trip may address the goals and motivations of hosts, students and the university.

### *Partners as stakeholders*

In Askeland and Payne’s (2001: 263) article, they argue that there is a need to move beyond a naive ‘travel broadens the mind’ approach to cross-national field education in social work. Unwelcome outcomes may also result. Figures for the growth in this sector globally may be sketchy at best, but there is reason to believe that an explosion of poverty tourism and a saviour mentality, rather than a respectful engagement, is very much in evidence in this century (Mapp and Rice, 2019). The extent to which this reinforces and trades on the perceived helplessness of poorer nations serves to continue the relationships of colonialism and global oppression that characterise political and economic relations across the globe. More formal cross-national field education programmes in social work, public administration and liberal arts are also a growth industry, perhaps only temporarily checked by pandemic restrictions, and can also be subject to powerful critique in terms of their exploitative potential (Grusky, 2000; Gray, 2005; Wehbi, 2009; Perold et al, 2013; Lough, 2014; Mapp and Rice, 2019).

Despite evidence of gains to be made, it is also clear that there is an imbalance here in terms of the opportunity and potential to benefit from cross-cultural travel, exchange and study. The means, context and freedom by which the richer nations can visit and sample poorer nations is in contrast to the ways in which poorer nations

can afford to sample richer nations. There are concerns and challenges to ethical practice in a world of unequal power and resources. Grusky (2000: 858) warns that study programmes ‘may easily become small theatres that recreate historical cultural misunderstandings and simplistic stereotypes and replay, on a more intimate scale, the huge disparities in income and opportunity that characterise North–South relations today’. The drive towards charity models or social action projects can result in tokenistic efforts at change that instead reinforce the impact of global structural inequalities on individual and community identities. Much of this critique is laid at the door of contemporary trends in volunteerism, particularly of young travellers from wealthy nations (Grusky, 2000; Lough, 2014; Mapp and Rice, 2019).

In terms of the more measured interventions of more formal social work programmes of field practice and education, Gray (2009) discusses three axes of indigenisation, universalism and imperialism, and the difficulties in achieving clarity around where the focus of intervention, learning and social change lies. International social work has to decide where the universal values of a global profession reflect a greater or lesser degree of imperialism, and where indigenisation can strengthen local capabilities and strengths.

In considering the field trip, Askeland and Payne (2001) refer to the ‘ringmasters’ and the other stakeholders. Ringmasters are those who provide funding and institutional legitimacy, which allows the cross-national project to take place at all, while stakeholders are the participants and planners who design the project and carry it out to completion. These stakeholders include the students, who have vested interests in learning outcomes and future professional careers, and the tutors and staff, whose professional and personal interests provide an axis that includes personal and professional commitments to social justice, and who are bound to professional responsibility for student learning. However, the host community is equally a stakeholder in this model. For the purposes of this article, we have adopted the more relationship-focused term ‘partner’. Communities have no obligation to take part, though they may be induced through instrumental benefits or offers underwritten by other partners. Local communities will also have complex motivations and provisos that form part of the constellation of goals and aims that will, in turn, ultimately provide for the desired student learning experiences and the sustainable relationships between partners that affirm and allow for continuity for field-trip programmes over time. The potentially exploitative and ethically compromised effects of a programme are perhaps less likely to be a facet of less powerful community partners, though it could be that local inequities and politics could have a bearing on access to perceived benefits from facilitating a field trip.

An experiential field trip can facilitate student learning, but how does it address goals for the host community as partners? To proceed, we need to consider the aims and prospects of partners and the associated pedagogies for student learning.

### *Learning pedagogy, students and the host community*

The cross-national field trip can be an exercise in opening new insights and perspectives for students (Lindsey, 2005; Gilin and Young, 2009; Bell and Anscombe, 2013; Beck et al, 2017; Pawar, 2017). Pawar (2017) underlines that the lack of routine and the struggle in respect of unfamiliar language and culture removes students from

the embedded expectations of the classroom and the routinised reflections of their own culture and heritage. The experiential theory of John Dewey is commonly drawn on by contemporary scholars, where learning is understood to take place in the novel situation, rather than in the routinised and familiar, and in this way extends the lived experience of the learner through a process of reflection and analysis (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich, 2002; Rone, 2008; Roholt and Fisher, 2013; Pawar, 2017). Rone (2008) found that students could be like researchers and experience the 'emic' role of the insider perspective and a greater respect for indigenous cultures. In this sense, cultural sensitivity and responsiveness is an essential experiential phenomenon that is often observed in the sense of reciprocity between the dominant paradigms of colonial powers and the decolonialisation struggles of the colonised (Bessarab and Wright, 2020).

The student participant learner has the opportunity to reflect on abstract concepts, such as knowledge, power, injustice and inequality, in real and practical application outside their assumed frame of reference, and to connect those experiences with the emotional and lived experience of informants. Ledwith (2020) and others stress the impact of the personal stories of others and their power in exposing the experience of injustice and in overcoming the justifications and contradictory positions of the powerful.

This experiential learning pedagogy lends itself to the insights of Freire (1970), where it is acknowledged that education is never a neutral experience, but puts knowledge in touch with values, politics, culture, lived experiences and life choices. Theories of experience and learning from Dewey (1897) onwards, including the reflective learning cycles of Kolb and others (Kolb, 1984; Passarelli and Kolb, 2012), stress the role of action and reflection in cyclical reflective models. Other influential theories of professional social work practice include the central reflective action axis between thought/knowledge and practical experience, which forms an important part of the supervision relationship in social work (Fook and Gardner, 2007).

The need for a supportive presence from tutors before, during and after to help students process experiences and reflect on their significance is supported widely in the literature (Razack, 2005; Mathiesen and Lager, 2007; Wehbi, 2009; Nuttman-Shwartz and Berger, 2012; Cleak et al, 2016; Matthew and Lough, 2017; Askeland et al, 2018). Learning about culture and context in advance is frequently supported as a crucial means of addressing student preconceptions and issues of motivation for joining a field trip. However, we must consider how the hosting community facilitates the learning opportunity available to students and how their position and participation as partners is facilitated before and during the field trip. In the following account, we explore the family hosting relationship in the Palestine field trip and the interchange between student and family members as a crucial and central part of the educational opportunity for all partners.

## Methodology

The historical and contemporary social injustices of the Palestinian struggle are well documented (Pappe, 2006; Horton, 2013; Amnesty International, 2021). The Palestine field trip grew out of earlier research into the circumstances and challenges of being a young person in the West Bank (Jones and Lavalette, 2011). There have been five trips, and the relationship between the host community and staff at the university has deepened,

involving the co-writing of two book chapters with one community leader and the hosting of a delegation that included several young people at a global youth conference in the UK (Liverpool Hope University, 2018; Lavalette et al, 2018). In 2021, an online exhibition of Palestinian schoolchildren's artwork was opened after the global COVID-19 pandemic stymied plans for a synchronous live exhibition in both countries (LHU, 2020). The research discussed in this article was initiated to explore the impact and potential of the relationship and the field trips for the future benefit of stakeholders and students.

In Palestine, students and tutors stay for ten days and are hosted by local families in a West Bank refugee camp and surrounds. They take part in normal family life in the morning and evenings, while they will generally be taken out to tour specific sites of interest during the day. Some host family members will accompany the students in addition to the staff and local tour organiser. The local organiser for the trip is a community leader who hosts staff from the university, and members of their family may also accompany the students on the daily trips out of the camp. There is an extensive itinerary, from social work projects to arts centres and community action groups, as well as local governmental authorities.

An application was made to the university's research ethics committee, and formal approval was obtained for a qualitative project involving interviews and focus groups with host families, students and local politicians, subject to all appropriate consents and risk assessments for participants. Five individual student interviews and three student focus groups were completed by staff who had been on at least one previous trip to Palestine. The student interviews will be reported on elsewhere, while this article reports on the two interviews that were undertaken with governors in the West Bank, five family interviews with host families and one interview with the main community organiser managing the Palestinian side of the field trip. The Palestinian interviews were conducted in host family homes in and around the West Bank City refugee camp in 2019 by university tutors and engaged a range of extended family members, all of whom had been involved in hosting with the exchange programme for a period of years. During interviews, family members would often come and go, discussions were informal, and speech was translated by the main Palestinian trip organiser where necessary.

The interviewers worked with the community organiser as interpreter in three interviews where families did not speak English and in the interviews with the governors. All names of people and places are anonymised. The findings were subsequently analysed by the researchers at the university in the UK through a thematic analysis using NVivo software.

## Findings

Families were all asked a similar schedule of questions around why they hosted students, the perceived benefits and challenges, and their expectations of the students during and after the conclusion of the visit. Families were also asked to reflect on and make any suggestions regarding the preparation of the students for the visit, and how the visits could perhaps be improved as a programme for future occasions. Additional questions were around the impact on the immediate community or friends and neighbours included in the wider local community. These questions allowed a general discussion over the space of approximately an hour, with repeated interviews on two occasions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a thematic analysis was undertaken based on the schedule questions. Here, we report on the main emerging themes from these interviews.

### *Hospitality and cultural exchange*

The opening discussion in interviews focused on the families' motivation to be involved and the benefits and challenges of their experience. Here, a common thread was cultural, and three families mentioned a religious duty or obligation to be welcoming and offer hospitality to strangers. One family also mentioned a duty to offer their homes out of respect for the organiser of the Palestinian side of the field-trip programme. Some of these opening statements are offered in the following extracts:

'Because of our traditional attitude to guests and welcoming, as Arabs, when we receive guests, we have a good chance to exchange culture: to see how you live and vice versa towards us.' (Amir – Household 1)

Some other reasons were included by young people, and one father in particular, which related to the potential to increase knowledge capital within their own families to the benefit of young people. This included improving English language acquisition, learning about university life in the UK and learning about young people from the UK in terms of the freedoms they inherit and their attitudes and values more generally. The following extracts from Omar and his son Yousef give some flavour of this:

'My kids have never been outside Palestine. They have never seen the sea or been to the beach, owing to the lean budget to fund such trips. Yes, these groups will give my kids a new experience. Also, to learn about the university – the subjects, their ambitions. They compare what they have and what they have themselves. For example, this had encouraged my kids to understand English language. Just to have better contacts.' (Omar – Household 2)

'I felt that it was a good opportunity to learn from them. Also, we were able to keep in touch with their culture, beliefs, values and traditions. Because they are also young, we believe that we have a good chance to stay in touch and to create understanding and awareness. Also, because they are students, we are of the same ages. I believe these students were in touch with the needs we have. Comparing with their lifestyle, their freedom to move everywhere, where we are not able, so they know that and understood that. Without these visits, they wouldn't know that.' (Yousef – Household 2)

### *Honest messengers*

However, the reason most strongly communicated for taking part in the exchanges regarded having students fulfil an 'honest messenger' position with respect to seeing and hearing the oppressive features of life under occupation in Palestine and carrying that message home. This was a consistent theme among all host families and, while nuanced to some degree, has to be regarded as a primary reason for families taking part in the field trips, opening the family home and entering into the relationship in such an intimate way. Here, we give some extracts expressing this in general terms before looking in more detail at some of the host family responses:

‘To send messages everywhere through your group – to explain the reality and tell everybody about our life. So, the students will transfer – will not change the reality, but, at the same time, they will talk to friends, neighbours and families, and spread the stories.’ (Amir – Household 1)

‘In one sentence: we trust you are honest messengers to transfer the truth of what you are hearing and seeing, it is enough. This is your next country. You can go anywhere, see anything and do not hesitate to ask questions ... it is your responsibility to be the honest messenger and by yourself to judge. I would like you to be non-aligned and to see and tell everyone the truth. We don’t want to exaggerate or build images that is not really the truth ... no, no, no; we want the reality.’ (Khalil, local organiser – Household 3)

The ‘honest messenger’ who makes up their own mind and can ask any question was important, and the asking and answering of questions are core activities addressed by all participants. For that message to be an effective one, the families wanted to allow students to make up their own minds about what they saw:

‘They have received many questions from them about traditions or political situation or work or study. Either to me or to my kids or my wife. And these are questions according to their interests. This makes us think they are interested. We feel when we respond, there is an interaction from them. So, during these times, we feel we come closer to each other.’ (Omar – Household 2)

### *Social justice*

We now turn to other ways in which the time spent with families may impact the development of professional ethics and thinking when it comes to notions of social justice, respect for diversity and building understanding about individuals and groups. This includes the need for students to consider, through listening to the stories of family members, how a given community and the individuals within it can be presented in fundamentally opposing ways by some international and domestic mass media:

‘We feel it is important because Israelis explain and use their own stories, dreams and rights to persuade people. We believe it is our right to explain our story and show our story. It is important not just to hear this, but to see with your eyes. Even we believe that you along with the trips do not see the whole story about what goes on. It is the situation itself that has to influence you, not just what we say. You have to see for yourself.’ (Ibrahim – Household 4)

There was a theme here of being seen and recognised from the Palestinian families. They wanted to be seen not through other eyes in a wider global media context, but at first hand in their homes. Families sought the revealing of the truth that would speak for itself through close relationships, friendship and hospitality. This was also a political

agenda, not just at a micro level, but on a wider stage in a historical context. The historical role of Great Britain and the Balfour Declaration runs deep in the cultural memory, but the issue of responsibility was carefully distanced from the student visitors and staff. However, there was still a sense of a duty of consideration of that historic role in discussing the expectations of families. This was frequently acknowledged:

‘When the groups come from London. There is difference when American or British come, even in our subconscious mind. Because, first of all, we feel uncomfortable because the Americans support Israel in everything, so it depends on the nationalities sometimes, even if sometimes they are caring and coming to see what is going on.’ (Ali – Household 5)

This generation of young British students was seen as a new positive development to nurture. The educational job from the Palestinian side was about righting a historical wrong, as explained in the following quote:

‘Also, one of the benefits of the group’s visits ... is can strengthen the relationship between people in Palestine and people in Britain. Feedback through the history books and our historical studies is that UK is responsible for our catastrophe. It can change the perception, so that UK can have a positive side as well. So, your visits is the way to change the history – people in UK do not agree with what happened, and people in UK can have the intention to change the situation and what happened.’ (Amir – Household 1)

The students are not burdened with a heavy duty of action by host family members, but expected to ask, question, listen, look and judge with their own eyes and ears. Families hope they will learn from what is happening around them and speak of that experience when they return. This involves differentiating between the commonly traded media stories of violence in Palestine and the actual everyday experience of daily domesticity and life within local communities, of work and school, and of living, loving and learning. Equally, this means seeing the impact of the occupation on all areas of Palestinian life through forced removal from their lands, checkpoints, raids, shootings and imprisonment. Although students were not held responsible for historical wrongs, they are placed in a position of weighing that sense of responsibility for themselves and coming to terms with it. There is an appeal to act in some way and to tell others what they have seen. However, the families can only hope that their experience is understood, that their sense of injustice is validated and that the honest messenger will spread the message:

‘First, that we hope we did the best and they left us satisfied. This is what we hope. And also that when they go home, they are not aligned to us, just to say what is the truth and the reality, and to take their responsibility in defending the right and the truth.’ (Amir – Household 1)

‘Also, responsibilities come from their own beliefs. They can decide their own responsibilities, and no one can carry more than they can.’ (Ibrahim – Household 4)

### *Challenges to learning*

The main challenges to the learning process that families perceived were around, first, the language barrier. Only a minority of students would understand or speak any form of Arabic, and none were familiar with Palestinian Arabic. Many of the local community have some elementary English, and some are accomplished English speakers. A common language was only one aspect of this problem, but in a busy itinerary, the time at home learning and taking part in family life has to be balanced with the daily round of community visits. One or two families felt that students were too tired to socialise much after daily trips. Here, the data underlined the message from students that this was a demanding field trip, not a relaxing holiday. The intensity of this social contact, the struggles over language, the realisation that this is a real life of adversity and political and social oppression, and the information students are offered as they are introduced to community life engages all the senses:

‘For me and the families, it can be difficult because of communication. Language the barrier. But they continue – this is the sweet thing – to help each other.’ (Amir – Household 1)

‘First, I really have sympathy for the group because you have an intensive programme ... they are exhausted. So, the members of the groups come back tired. Most of the time, this caused a lack of, or short, meetings with them in the evening. Showers, then sleeping. Sometimes, we don’t find enough time to talk. We apologise to them for that. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t have any time to talk. Sometimes, there are flexibilities like when the group stay in [West Bank City] and they can talk then.’ (Omar – Household 2)

The families were mostly content with the preparation of the students prior to coming. There was some concern that students might be shocked at things they would see, so it was felt necessary to have some idea of local cultural conditions and the political situation:

‘I think, when you are preparing them, they know it is not a trip for having fun. It is a trip to see the true evidence. Like, when you tell them, “I will bring you to see in the camp and how people get on where they are living.” Most of them, they are prepared and sometimes cry. Maybe one or two not taking serious. This is a normal thing. You can’t have 20 persons and all of them are positive. If you take me to [English city], you can’t guess how I will react. Perhaps I miss my family and I cry – you can’t know.’ (Amal – Household 5)

‘Our behaviour here in Palestine is a reflection of many local conditions. Our behaviour here is a mixture of happy and terrifying. If you are happy in your home, outside your home, you will be afraid of checkpoints or of what happens in the street, maybe soldiers. Danger all the time. Confused all the time. The difference between people. We keep smiling.’ (Ali – Household 5)

‘Yes, I know you are working hard to prepare them and explain culture and tradition. This is a good sign that the students are interested to come with their basic knowledge about the community and the social life that we have. This is highly appreciated. This eases the contact.’ (Khalil – Household 3)

‘A general idea about political, social and economical situation ... traditions, values, halal, haram. Because you have your own environment and we have ours. We respect both, but we have to know each other before ... the main idea is to know about the occupation.’ (Amal – Household 3)

### *The governors*

In addition to the daily round within the refugee camps, students on the field trips visit the different governate areas within the West Bank, hear perspectives from elected governors and community leaders, and visit sites of social and political significance. It is through these means that a greater understanding is achieved of how the historical political struggle impacts the daily life for families in the camps. It is on such trips that students learn about military checkpoints, the dividing wall from Israel, restrictions on travel and other more detailed restrictions on economic life. These include the system of permits needed for movement, the state support of illegal settlements and the powerlessness experienced by officials and local businesses over issues around economic development, planning and control over the basic utilities and essentials of an economic life for a growing population.

The meetings with governors from the PLA that are part of the scheduled field-trip programme for students involve a large group meeting with the governor and PLA officials, as well as a tour around significant sites in the locality. Students learn of the unsustainable nature of the West Bank administration of community development and of the injustices of the Israeli planning restrictions and permits used to deny essential planning for future health, well-being and vital economic development for a growing population. The interviews undertaken with governors make clear that the governors’ approach to field trips reflects that of the host families. The strategy is to inform and hope that the messages can make an impact elsewhere to bridge the gap between Palestinian communities and a wider international community, bypassing the mainstream global media.

The following governors stressed the importance given to the visits from foreign students:

‘Palestine is beautiful but destroyed by occupation. Despite this, Palestinians continue to resist and the education of students is a vital part of resistance ... our demand is that you raise your voice and tell your governments that these things are happening and result in a cycle of violence ... we will not surrender.’ (Governor – West Bank City 1)

‘So, we need witnesses to come to Palestine and see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears without any influence from our side, but to transfer the truth to the other side, to see and hear what they are doing. We need clean hearts and clean minds to tell the truth as it is.’ (Governor – West Bank City 2)

For students to hear the Palestinian story is a battle against misrepresentation, and it is seen as part of a propaganda war:

‘For me as a Palestinian individual, I am so interested to receive daily students from, from Britain from all over Europe universities coming to see and check the truth as it is. So, it will be very helpful to meet and discover the Israeli propaganda and to reveal their stories. And because we are the target of the Israelis and we are the weakest side. We are in need for support from parliamentarians and human rights organisations and students and everybody.’  
(Governor – West Bank City 2)

## Discussion

These findings from the interviews with host families and governors in Palestine make a powerful declaration around the social justice aims that are sustaining the field trip as a venture based on mutual trust and long-standing relationships between partners. The field trip is not presented here as evidence of a relationship of symmetry or even equality of power, but there is evidence of a mutuality of aims in exploring political and cultural realities, values, and lived experiences across the two communities of students and host families. In this case, the family members in the interviews have outlined the kinds of outcomes they are hoping for and that underlie their positive engagement and agency in the exchange. As we have shown, these are a variety of personal and community goals relating to political understandings and cultural exchange. These goals for host families are commensurate with goals for student learning and represent a reciprocity underlying the field trip as an enterprise.

Unlike professional capabilities that we see set out for professional student social workers in the UK (Higgins, 2016; BASW, 2021), the families seek a capacity from students that is more loosely defined by a request for honesty and openness to the Palestinian experience of political oppression. For the families, topics around educational goals, the ambitions of local young people and language skills are part of an agenda for social and cultural capital. The main thrust, however, is for visiting students to ask questions, to observe with an open mind and to tell others what they have witnessed when they go home. In addition, language barriers notwithstanding, it is hoped they will engage in family life in mutual respect, friendship and solidarity with community members and, particularly, other young people.

Practically, the evidence from the host family interviews is that they are conscious of the important role in student learning that falls to them and they are looking for that opportunity and engagement. There is no formally structured tutor time, classes or seminars during the field trip, and accompanying tutors need to be ready to offer mediating support to families and students in opportunist and often reactive ways, reflecting on ‘teachable moments’ so that learning is facilitated in a way that reflects the commitment to highlighting social issues. Transformational learning cannot be achieved for another, but is a personal process of thinking through and adjusting to new information and experience, and the learning is a mutual experience between hosts and visitors. Tutors may facilitate and help students think through incidental learning experiences, but families are also engaging with students daily, exchanging views, answering questions and, by example, dealing with daily routine under their specific circumstances.

Notwithstanding this focus on the experiential, there is opportunity for learning that the university supports through direct teaching and student and community activism in the UK before field trips and upon return. A further article is planned to expand on this aspect of the field trip and report on the data from students in respect of their learning and the impact of the field-trip experience.

Returning to the earlier discussion of experiential and transformational learning pedagogies, the learning relationship between participants is defined by two main constituents (Lutterman-Aguilar and Gingerich, 2002; Roholt and Fisher, 2013; Ledwith, 2020): first, as being a relationship of exchange; and, second, as engaging some form of personal critical reflective process. The tradition of social work education has held the critical reflective process as a central defining element in the development of professional practitioners (D’Cruz et al, 2005; Fook and Gardner, 2007). It is important that students are then prepared and supported to reflect on experiences, thoughts and feelings throughout the trip. On the Palestine trip, the university group leader and host leader will both address students as a group each day, contextualising daily visits and providing orientation to historical or contemporary circumstances.

Support for students includes an opportunity to consider the personal motivation for making an international trip (Wehbi, 2009). Equally, then, engaging with the recognition of issues of colonialism with regard to dominant Western narratives presents an important opportunity for educators to explore these and related themes with students as part of preparation for the field trip. Related themes with respect to faith, constructions of race and ethnicity, and family life, including gender relations, sexuality and individualism, are issues for a respectful approach to living with host families and to minimising the application of dominant Western narratives (Pawar, 2017).

## Conclusion

The global international agenda for social work has historically sought to embody a commitment to the liberation of peoples. There is now enough evidence from research in a variety of settings across the world to demonstrate the value in international field trips for student learning informed by experiential and transformational learning methodologies.

Transformational and experiential pedagogy requires that the reflection required from participants must be rooted in the processing of personal experience and observation, supported by a group process of respectful dialogue between partners. While research has confirmed benefits to student learning from international field trips, there needs to be reciprocal understandings and support to deal with the expectations and priorities of host communities. This will include the political and cultural inequalities that form the basis of colonial heritage. A social justice perspective is, then, inherently called for as a condition of any field-trip project. The findings from the Palestine field trip serve to underline the relationship of knowledge and learning exchange as a prerequisite for the field trip, but equally that this immersive experience within host families offers a learning experience that carries with it hopes for a wider recognition of voice in a hostile world for the host community. The stories we exchange as participants in daily life with others offer a rich resource for support and solidarity, as well as professional learning for students. This need not be

a challenge as such to a professional capabilities approach to professional practice that has formed the trajectory in contemporary social work education for a state-regulated profession. However, to date, there is little evidence that social work education in the UK is opening to this opportunity in the same way that the international field trip has been growing in other lands overseas. While the international agenda for social work is articulated as a response to a range of issues, from human rights to climate change and inequalities, it remains to be seen whether UK social work education is ready to explore a less formal but deeply engaged experiential educational experience for the coming generations of social workers.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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