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### “A Once in a Lifetime Experience” : The Practice Placement in Palestine Project (PPP)—A Report

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## **“A Once in a Lifetime Experience”: The Practice Placement in Palestine Project (PPP)—A Report**

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*The Practice Placement in Palestine Project is the result of collaborative efforts aimed at offering students from Lillehammer University College in Norway practical training in Palestinian refugee camps. The project brought the two cultures into close contact through which an exchange of ideas, cultural values, and educational and social experiences took place. This contact aids in offering students educational opportunities that qualify them in their field of study and better their understanding of Arabic and Islamic culture. This article offers explicit description of the project’s vision, components, theoretical frames, procedures, successes, and obstacles. The project is unique in its proposals, results, and prospects.*

*KEYWORDS* *child welfare, social work, placement, education, Palestine*

### INTRODUCTION

The practical training component in the programs of study at Lillehammer University College (LUC) in Norway is of crucial importance for students since it helps them in the practical application of gained theoretical information and in gaining actual life experience. The authors of this report explored

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Author note: This article is the final report of the Practice Placement in Palestine (PPP) project conducted from 2009 to 2012 at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, Lillehammer University College.

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the possibility of giving students the opportunity to spend their practical training in a place where psychological and social traumas are conspicuously troublesome, especially for children. Palestine has an outstanding history of a pernicious political strife whose major victims are children, women, and the disadvantaged living in refugee camps. The search for a field site ended at the Yafa Cultural Center (YCC) in the Balata Refugee Camp, one of the largest refugee camps in the West Bank. The Balata Refugee Camp is located in the suburbs of Nablus, in the northern part of the West Bank. It has a population of approximately 26,000 people. Totaling an area of one square kilometer, Balata Refugee Camp is in miserable condition—lacking in every facet the necessities for a decent standard of living. These refugees (today, of course, ancestors of the original population) are among the almost one million people currently living in different refugee camps inside and outside Palestine after being displaced from their lands following the war in 1948.

Today, 9.8 million of the total Palestinian population (approximately 11.3 million) are located outside the borders of Israel and have been so since 1967. Of them, 4.3 million people are living in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza (2.7 million in the West Bank alone). Of the total 5.6 million Palestinian refugees, approximately 1.5 million live in one of the 59 officially registered United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) camps. This means that in one form or another, approximately between one-half to two-thirds of the entire Palestinian population are in Diaspora (*shatat* in Arabic). This is the largest number of refugees in the world (Badil Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency & Refugee Rights, 2012; Brynen & El Rifai, 2007; Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [PCBS], 2008).

A study from 2007 considered the behavior of many children in West Bank camps and found them to be “requiring a lot of attention, hyper-active, to have high attachment and/or dependency on adults, to be talkative, to be agitated or rigid, secretive, spending time with older people, getting into fights, and doing a lot of yelling” (Hussein, 2007, p. 155). The same source found “attention difficulties and aggression indicators” as a common denominator for the same children. As in other refugee camps in the West Bank, the Balata Refugee Camp in Nablus is an area where posttraumatic stress symptoms, such as nocturnal enuresis (bedwetting), aggressiveness, lack of concentration, depression, and flashback symptoms are common. Other things one can observe are signs of a lack of socially accepted behaviors that can be regarded as mildly asocial or diffident and difficulties engaging in age-appropriate play activity. Among children and adolescents one can see an alarming rise in criminality and drug abuse (Hussein, 2007, and authors’ informal interviews, 2009–2012).

YCC was established in 1996 by a group of educated individuals with similar social backgrounds of those in the refugee camp, with the aim of promoting self-awareness among Palestinian refugees, especially children,

about their plight. It aims to foster an understanding of civil society that is based on freedom of thought and expression, and to build a generation of young enlightened Palestinians who are aware of their rights and are capable of shaping a better future. As such, YCC works toward building a local community that holds firm to principles of freedom and independence, and through this they state that they “try to offer some help in improving the situation of the refugees” ([www.yafacenter.ps](http://www.yafacenter.ps)).

This article describes the educational goals of the project, to what degree they are achieved, and the general objectives for the outplacement period of the students. It also describes the research methods used for analyzing data and the observational methods used by the students in reporting experiences during their practice. It aims to highlight the successful features of the project, as well as the learning opportunities the project has given to the involved parties.

## METHOD AND SOURCES

Here we distinguish between methods used for writing the report and methods used by the students during both work and observational reporting.

### Research Method

The method used to understand the collected data is hermeneutics. It involves interviews with individuals involved in the project, learning from conversations with students, employees, and participants (mostly children and adolescents), reading students' reports, etc. All of these sources require an understanding for interpretation, an understanding that the meaning of phenomena is not the truth in itself. When the researchers, for example, discussed topics with students and the local staff at YCC, they at times experienced that the students differed in their presentations of themes. The researchers needed to interpret and mentalize the actual context of what the conversation partners were engaged in.

Cultural sensitivity is a mandatory prerequisite of every “scientist” or collaborator in order to really obtain knowledge about what is going on when representatives from different cultures, such as the northern, secular European and the Arab/Palestinian Muslim, meet one another.

There were different kinds of data sources used when writing this research. In the mandatory written learning contracts the students are responsible for documenting their assumptions and goals for learning. At the end of the practice placement, the students reflect on the same contracts by what means and to what degree they have achieved their goals.

Once the students are placed in the field site, the Norwegian project leader visits YCC for two to four weeks in order to meet, discuss, and

collaborate. The different student groups also make collective activity reports.

At the end of the students' stay interviews are conducted between the students and the Palestinian project leader, the Personal Special Contact/Field Coordinator (SPC) (discussed later under the Advisor and SPC), the staff and leaders of YCC, and also with the families that the students have visited. The students also answer a standardized questionnaire upon the completion of their practice. The questionnaire asks the students about their understanding of information before, during, and after practice. The questionnaire also addresses what the students learned on an academic as well as personal level, and utilizes two seven-step scales to obtain overall estimates about the academic and personal experience of the students.

Information is also gathered from the mandatory project reports conducted by the students at LUC, after ending their stay at the Balata Refugee Camp. Some months after returning to Norway, the students are interviewed about their more lasting experiences and impressions of the placement in the West Bank.

Most of the data are stored in electronic form, but some are also on paper. Analysis of data is made by comparing the questionnaire answers and interview data from the different individuals and groups. Berg (2008) wrote that "data analysis can be defined as consisting of three concurrent flows of action: data reduction, data display, and conclusions and verification" (p. 35). The sampling and reduction of data to a manageable size was a continuous affair during all four years of the project. As Berg wrote, "Frequently, data reduction occurs throughout the research project's life. As the project continues, further elements of data reduction will occur. This data-reduction and transformation process occurs throughout the span of the research" (p. 35).

The researchers' evaluations and decisions were made in response to the data as they were collected, and are based on observations in the field, statements made during interviews, and observations of patterns in various documents (e.g., the learning contracts, the questionnaires, etc.). In addition, the researchers verified their impressions of the data through displaying them for the interviewees. The researchers in this way have done what Berg (2008) suggested when he wrote, "Conclusions drawn from the patterns apparent in the data must be confirmed (verified) to assure that they are real, and not merely wishful thinking on the part of the researcher" (p. 36). That is, securing a certain degree of both validity and reliability is essential.

### Students' Work and Observation Report Method

The students' role and method during the placement is to be engaged in "participation observation." The basic issue is to actively collaborate with the staff, children, and youths at YCC. Observation is a means to achieving the skills necessary in order to make qualified, informed interventions when

working with children in an appropriate professional manner. Observation as a goal in itself, in a mere anthropologic sense, was not a desired option. The students had to learn through participation—in situ. Even though the students were not expected to perform anthropological research, it lies near at hand to make comparisons between fieldwork as a method and the students' practical studies. Among other things, one can identify the open and unpredictable way in which reality presents itself both in the field and in practical studies. In both cases it is often afterwards that one can decide whether something is a real "data," or redundant (Ringdal, 2007; Hammersley & Atkinsons, 1983).

Field methodology, in a theoretical sense, was not part of the curriculum before the students traveled to Palestine. This is because the students were expected to be with, in a deep sense, the actual culture, and not be researchers in a disinterested, "neutral" position. They were expected to be in the culture in order to develop cultural sensitivity, as well as a critical distance based on actual participation in different contexts. As one Norwegian anthropologist expressed, the participants "involve themselves by interacting with others, at the same time as they observe what the others do" (our translation; Fangen, 2004, p. 29). He continued to say that they thereby "come closer to the people's reality and get personal knowledge about them," and "such a direct experience can result in a better understanding and interpretation" of the field (our translation; p. 29). The students are asked to follow a matrix of six steps in reporting their observations. These reports were made once a week in the supervision meetings with the advisor, the SPC, and the students.

The six steps in the matrix are as follows:

1. First, students have to make a neutral description of a specific situation (case). The situation must be precise and the description as concrete and non-committed as possible.
2. Following is a "naive" interpretation of the situation—an interpretation of the immediate thoughts that could be made from the background description.
3. A theoretically informed interpretation follows. The "empirical" material is analyzed using relevant theory and evaluated according to this theory.
4. Out of these three steps a conclusion is made (i.e., what can be said from synthesizing the results of the three steps?).
5. After this synthesis, the students are expected to consider what actions were taken and which alternative actions were possible. What action was actually taken in response to the situation and what other possible choices were possible to tackle the situation in a good manner?
6. The sixth and last step is to encourage the students to think more holistically. On a meta level, what is to be learned from the actual observation?

What universal/general learning could be taken out of the essence of the experienced and interpreted situation? What predictions for future occasions could be made? What was learned from the situation that is useful in social child care and social work in general?

In short, through insistence that the students comply closely to the matrix structure, the goal was to train the students' ability not only to make "free" assumptions and interpretations, but also to present these in as much of a "nonbiased and neutral" way as possible, to actively use theory as a tool to attain deeper understanding, to conceptualize and synthesize the large amount of findings in the observations, to focus on the practical implications of the observations, and to encourage the students to generalize their learning, so it can be useful in different occupationally relevant situations in the future.

## STRUCTURE, GOALS, AND DUTIES

### Student Population Background Data

Twenty students from LUC have participated in the project since its inception in 2010. Of the 20 students, 3 are males. This is because women are traditionally more represented in the child welfare profession. Generally speaking, only around 10% of a normal student population in social welfare education is male. The youngest students were, at the time of placement, 21, and the oldest almost 30. The average age was 23. All were of Nordic heritage, except one whose parents were from Turkey, and one whose parents were from Bosnia. Both were moderately practicing Muslims; the rest of the students for the most part were secular nonreligious. As far as education is concerned, even higher education in Norway is free, so students' private savings and economic backgrounds were of limited importance. A subjective estimate is that nearly all of the participating students were of fairly normal, working or lower-middle-class background. None of the students were married at the time of placement, but many had a girlfriend or boyfriend. Few of the students came directly from high school before beginning the university college education. Some of them had jobs at elderly homes as wards, or homes for disabled persons. Some had worked at kindergartens. Most of them had only had different sorts of summer jobs due to their young ages; it is not uncommon in Norway for adolescents and young adults to have spent their entire lives as pupils or students. Generally speaking, the students did not have any exceptional or different circumstances in regards to the aforementioned criteria that could have influenced their learning experience. All the 20 students are fairly "normal," young Norwegian persons, meaning that as far as the research showed, they had no special backgrounds, personal interests, political or



religious affiliations, or other sociological or psychological factors that make them different from the average Norwegian, university-level student.

## PROJECT GOALS

The project was launched in fall 2010. From the beginning, in 2010, until the end, in late 2012, 20 students visited Palestine. From then on, the project has become a regular offer in the college portfolio of possible places for students to choose from when doing their long-term, bachelor-level, study-abroad programs.

The Norwegian curriculum for Bachelor in Child Welfare state that placement in the second or third year of the three-year education at LUC is meant to give students “an experience of direct contact with children, adolescents, and their relatives,” and an opportunity to develop skills in the “planning and implementation of activities” (our translation; The Norwegian Education and Research Department, 1999, p. 44). Through interaction with participants of different types of welfare facilities, the students are challenged to work in a reflective and self-reliant way to develop a professional standard on different topics related to their education.

The interaction with participants and colleagues in collaborative partnership promotes the capacity to identify relevant professional challenges and issues. The placement encourages and challenges students to recognize, to critically reflect on, and to use theoretical concepts, perspectives, and methods. Of the aims of having students in placement abroad, the first is thinking on a general level, to develop a certain degree of knowledge of other peoples’ cultures and habits, to develop cultural sensitivity. To have students in the West Bank means also to have students in a profound Islamic community. Regardless of the experiences the students face, they acquire different types of learning on a daily basis through meeting with children whose behavior is in some degree different from the social norms that the LUC students are accustomed to in Norway.

Students are also confronted with tasks to cooperate with colleagues, and work with parents and adults who in some respects have different standards on matters related to child rearing, gender-normative behavior, ethical outlooks in general, etc. The LUC students can expect to meet refugees from the Middle East in different areas of social and care context in Norwegian society. To have obtained “in-depth” understanding of cultural and social norms and standards that direct the way people think, react, and behave, is very important knowledge. This can be obtained by dealing with people from this region. Another aim for sending students to Balata Refugee Camp to work with children and youths is to enable them to use the different skills and theoretical knowledge obtained during their course of education at LUC. In Balata they have the opportunity to practice nearly all the pedagogical and therapeutic knowledge they have acquired through the previous two years.



## General Objectives for Learning in the Placement Period

One of the objectives of the placement is to train LUC students to relate to children, adolescents, and families in a way that nurtures the possibility of predictable, professional treatment of real-life situations. During placement, the students apply their theoretical knowledge in practical settings and are able to assess different situations concerning basic child care and social work. In cooperation with participants, the students plan and implement a wide range of activities, and are encouraged to work in a reflective and self-reliant modus. The students, in a critically reflective way, use different theoretical concepts, perspectives, and methods to achieve professional competence. The connection between theory and practical understanding is essential for achieving a true professional standard. The same can be said about achieving a profound, well-established self-understanding. The goal for the whole curricular period (where the placement is the main, but not the only, focus) is that the students are encouraged to reflect on themes surrounding ethics and work. In doing this, they show that they can use these reflections in practical work among clients. They show that they can participate actively in collegial fellowship including, of course, their supervisors and contacts. They are also encouraged to reflect on and be conscious of their thoughts, personal development, feelings, and attitudes, and to communicate this with their supervisors as a part of the guidance process (Askeland, 2008). As an outcome of the placement, the students show that they are able to identify, from their own experiences, different competencies and values concerning the social work/social child care field, in that they become able not only to describe individual psychological and sociological matters, but also to describe social problems on different levels in the society, how these problems can be understood, and what consequences this different understanding may have on professional work.

Immersion programs, in general, are developed to give students a deeper knowledge in a specialized topic—typically, a better and deeper understanding of the foreign language of the host country. As one might expect, an Internet search on the nature and function of an “immersion program” points overwhelmingly to deepening the understanding of a foreign language. The placement project, on the other hand, is a program that aims to give students an opportunity to study the same topics as their classmates in Norway, but in a different setting. It aims to give the students possibilities to practice their knowledge on both a general and a more individually focused level—to obtain not merely practical, general, and specific skills, but also to give the opportunity for personal growth, and enhanced competence in using oneself as a person in matters of occupational relevance. That makes it less of a program for immersion than a program that targets giving opportunities to students to exercise, in a new context, activities they have already learned (theoretically and practically), and to use oneself as a vehicle for relational and social change.

The researchers found two programs that in some regard can be compared to the Norwegian placement project. One is at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Duke engages its students in an international immersion program (<http://dukeengage.duke.edu>) where students can take partnership in more than 40 programs worldwide. The focus is on being with and supporting local organizations on education, health, refugee, and social issues. The other is the University of Southern California (USC) Global Immersion Program. There the "School of Social Work offers cross-cultural immersion opportunities for students to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures and models of social service in an international setting" (<http://sowkweb.usc.edu>).

Compared to the project discussed in this paper, both of these programs seem more inclined to give students an opportunity to observe and study special topics on site (in a learning context relatively well regulated by the home institutions), but perhaps from a slightly less involved and directly participational view than the placement project. In addition, the immersion programs do not seem to be part of the educational requirements leading to a degree in social work, or other comparable fields of study.

#### THE ADVISOR AND SPC

The advisor is in a sense the executive arm in the West Bank for the college representative and other project leaders in Norway. The researchers believe that this is a learning procedure that one can generalize to most parts of the world. A project of this type, that involves many people and which is dependent on their cooperation, has to be anchored in the local community, and has to rely on the culture in place. In most parts of the world this means that participants, if coming from the West, have to take help from persons in the community who have a certain degree of influence, who are regarded with esteem, and therefore have a network of personal contacts who are willing to give the necessary help in special situations. Through the duration of the project, the local advisor had the main on-site supervision responsibility. He also had the duty to evaluate the students' performance with the LUC advisor. The local advisor was assisted by a Personal Special Contact/Field Coordinator (SPC). The SPC duties, as specified in a written job performance contract, are to devote real-time assistance, to guide, and to translate for the students in their everyday work with the children. He also aids the students in planning and organizing activities, facilitates contacts with different institutions, and translates to and from Arabic and English. In summary, the SPC's job is to assist the students on various occasions and in various settings when necessary, and to give general assistance in study-related situations.

## STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE AND DUTIES

At LUC all interested students must apply for the placement abroad, as well as choose from among the different possibilities in the college portfolio. The students who have chosen YCC as their primary choice are asked to write a motivation statement, indicating why they have chosen to spend their placement time in the Balata Camp. Before making a final decision, all students are invited to a short informational meeting. The department at LUC also has selection criteria to aid in choosing students who will go to the West Bank. Finally, an individual interview is conducted. The selected students attend a mandatory, introductory course in Arabic culture; some of the new history aspects of the region and other different topics are useful to discuss before leaving. The course duration is approximately 12 hours, divided into 3 or 4 periods.

The placement for the students at YCC is about three months, due to visa regulations. It is shorter than the placement period for students located inside Norway. Before the end of the third week of the placement, all students write a "learning contract." This is a statement of what each student would like to learn, how they plan on learning it, and what occupational goals the students have for their stay. It has to include both occupational and personal goals, showing individual preferences. At the end of their placement at YCC, the students also evaluate to what degree (high/low) they have achieved their goals.

During the third and fourth weeks of their stay, each student moves to live with a host family in the camp that YCC finds suitable, for at least five days. The stay with the family brings students to the actual family life inside the homes of refugees. The host-family experiences during the project have been nearly all positive. The criteria of assigning families to students' state that it is an advantage if the family contains among its members teenagers or adolescents, and at least one member who is able to communicate intelligibly in English. Interviews with the families and the students show that the students experienced forming very close relationships with their host families, and that the bonds became strong very early in their stays.

For the families in Balata, it is the first time ever that students in an educational program have been so close, for such a long period of time. In an economic sense, our experience shows that the stay is often better with families that earn an average income, but families that are below the economic average can present a unique opportunity for the student.

One thing that has shown to be a challenge is that male students, due to Middle Eastern culture, cannot remain alone with a woman in the family while the men are at school or work. As a result, male students' stays with their host families are somewhat restricted and the host families used have a member employed at YCC (Barakat, 1993).

In the middle of the placement during the project period, the LUC advisor made visits, which lasted two to four weeks. This practice proved to be essential for the project to proceed and progress. There were various planning meetings, evaluations, and discussions. The advisor also investigated new sites for the students to visit, made preparations for the next group, and guided the staff and close coworkers. Without such visits the project would have perished. All of the involved parties agreed that placement projects of this type absolutely require deep contact between all cooperating parties. It is only when this cooperation is functioning in a profound way that the team-building can evolve and progress.

Around the middle of the placement period, all students were obliged to make a 20-minute individual or 1-hour group presentation for the rest of the YCC staff, the local advisor, and the SPC. The presentations were filmed and stored on either DVD or other electronic media. Students presented a situation that had invoked their interest, gave theoretical understanding of the situation, and reflected on themselves in the situation. The topics were relevant to peoples' lives in the camp, not in any sense "detached" or functionally disconnected from the real living conditions of both the staff and the rest of the people facing the tough living conditions in the Balata Refugee Camp.

## ON DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY

The main question regarding distance and proximity was how to manage to be in a really close psychological and social encounter and at the same time be at a "safe distance," enabling one to make independent, impartial interpretations and analyses. This balance is of crucial importance in social work.

The students, while working in a foreign cultural context, had to strive for achieving informed, multicultural understanding and cultural sensitivity, and to evaluate in a fair and positive critical way their own assumptions and culturally embedded opinions. What sort of cultural expressions can, with some sort of investigative "neutrality," be regarded as beneficial or harmful for doing a good job as a social worker? That is, what sort of comparisons can be made, on both an academic and personal level, from different cultural expressions (in this context the Islamic Middle East and secular northern European cultures) that are relevant to the task of doing a good professional job?

One of the challenges every student has to consider is to go from an individualistic, egocentric, emancipatory, and mainly secular culture and society to a collectivistic, sociocentric, family-centered, deeply religious, and patriarchal/paternalistic society. Later in this article the researchers encounter

this question in the context of the female students' experience of gender and religious differences (Eriksen, 2003).

The students were asked to deal with relevant experiences as representatives of a major liberal culture who came to be in contact with a conservative culture. How does one adjust to foreign standards of thinking and living and integrate in the community, and at the same time remain able to represent his or her values and beliefs? What "universal" social and ethical standards (according to the United Nations' declarations on women's and children's rights, the freedom of speech, religious freedom, gay people's rights, etc.) seem to be contradicted by locally, and culturally specific, and religious norms and standards? Questions like these arose when the students compared themselves and their own inherited and internalized opinions and standards with people conforming to a quite different set of standards. This occurred especially when discussing and performing concrete matters, such as how to deal with children who are shy or acting out, how to deal with information about more physical, punitive child-rearing methods, how girls receive different treatment than boys, or how to deal with people representing sexual minorities.

The danger the students had to avoid was both over-identifying with their colleagues and friends (e.g., Are really all problems in the society ultimately caused by the Israeli occupation? Could not some of them be of a more inherent origin?), or under-identifying (e.g., Are there really fundamental differences between perceived Islamic and Western secular norms? Cannot some of the observed differences also depend on personal and social differences?).

The dichotomy of social differences is related to the behavior of individuals in a collectivist society as compared to individuals in an individualistic society. Individuals in individualistic societies tend to be more independent in their thinking, more self-reliant, more prone to critical thinking and creativity, and perhaps more secure since they are protected by a democratic system that guarantees their freedom of opinion. Individuals in collectivist societies, however, tend to be less independent, less self-reliant, and more prone to imitation of established norms, that they do not dare to question, and therefore become more inhibited and less creative.

In The Holy Koran, which everybody has to follow, it is stated how to behave and what is allowed and not allowed (*halal* and *haram*). If you are a good Muslim you inevitably will act well, as you don't question God's words and the *hadith* of The Prophet. That makes it very easy to know how to act. You do as you have been taught, and what by the majority is regarded as good behavior—and thinking! (Personal interview with inhabitant at Balata Refugee Camp)

Hofstede (cited in Kitamura, 2009), establishes what he calls an "Individualism Index Value" (IDV) indicator, in which he examines

individualism in 70 countries by studying the behavior of IBM employees who come from different cultures and countries. The IDV in European countries is above 69 while in the Arab countries it is around 39. This, according to Hofstede, means that individuals in European countries are more individualistic than individuals in Arab countries. While the IDV is not an indicator of cultural superiority or inferiority, it certainly serves as an indicator for analyzing and understanding the behavior of individuals in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. For example, due to their placement at YCC, the students experience different cultural encounters with the staff and students in the camp. The students asked questions in relation to some of the cultural encounters and in some circumstances did not feel they received adequate or satisfying answers. One disturbing example was when the students got worried after a nearby shooting and sought answers from the witnesses. The answer given to them by many people was, "Do not worry; it was nothing." The LUC students felt nervous and uncomfortable because they felt that they were mature enough to shoulder responsibility and to fend for themselves if there was any imminent danger; an individualistic stand that their Palestinian counterparts could not relate to. For them, as Palestinians, they feel they belong to a community and other people in the refugee camp may take care of problems as they arise; a collective stand that ties them to the community, reducing their sense of individualism.

### THE UNIQUENESS OF THE PROJECT

As far as the researchers are aware from their experience and knowledge about educational projects inaugurated by foreign institutions in the different refugee camps at the West Bank, there are none that compare to the project that this article describes.

It is the only that is, on a basic level, developed in a deep cooperation between local people and their counterparts in a Western academic government-funded institution. In no part of the project were any superior authorities involved; all activities were inaugurated, planned, and carried out by people who are directly involved in education, child, and youth work. One can, in that sense, call it a real solidarity project—which brings students from LUC in contact with the sociopolitical situation through engaging in educational activities.

The child welfare and social work students from LUC were the only ones that stayed for such a long period of time in such a close relationship with local colleagues. The normal stay of some visitors is a couple of weeks, just long enough to get some information, to make a thesis, or to be "acquainted" with the culture. The researchers are not aware of any other programs where students live in a refugee camp and socialize in a profound way for three months. That is to say, as mentioned previously, the students were in no



sense “observers” or detached “anthropologists,” but they were guided by and cooperated with the Palestinian staff all the time.

The students therefore did not go as volunteers; their placement was part of their educational requirements. It means that their stay in YCC and Balata was an integral part of their education. They are getting their license as social workers in Norway, partly on the basis of what they have achieved in the West Bank. The stay was evaluated, the students’ performance examined, and finally submitted to an evaluation on the same level and with the same criteria as their co-students in Norway. The placement on the West Bank was on the same level in degree of importance as other educational courses during the three educational years at the college in Norway.

## FINDINGS

From the original learning contracts and the reflections on them, the researchers found that students wanted to learn more about communication with children—how to engage themselves in activities with the children. They wanted to know how to communicate despite language difficulties, to learn more about the local culture, how to relate in a proper way to different people and to know more about Islam and the struggles of the Palestinian people. On a personal level, some students strived to be more patient, more self-reliant, and self-assured, in relation to communication, ability to plan and organize, or to go into difficult situations concerning their own capacity while under a high level of stress, and maintaining professionalism. The vast majority of the students reported substantial achievements in most of their personal goals. They learned to communicate despite the language differences, developed insights into the Arabic and Islamic cultures, and learned to plan and organize in a more efficient manner. Many experienced what, for lack of a better word, can be called personal growth and maturity. They came back after the stay with a better understanding of how to relate to people from different cultures. They came to know significantly more about the political situation in the area, as well as having a greater knowledge about “practical” Islam. They learned ways to motivate and encourage children and adults into partnership. Reaching their professional goals was in many cases felt deeply.

Regarding the students’ opinion on the most important learning experience from the stay, the researchers distinguished between learning in an academic setting and learning in a more personal context. In nearly all the answers from students, better knowledge about the local culture and how to accommodate it were mentioned. Many answered by saying that they learned much more about Islam as both a religion and a normative matrix. To experience how it is to live in an occupied society also increased their knowledge about the political conflict.



On learning as connected to the occupational, professional context, students mentioned topics such as gaining better understanding to implement activities with children, especially children with low activity or with introverted behavior, to communicate despite language differences, to be patient and to see things from many perspectives. Improvising, and taking the initiative to organize and plan different activities, were also things many of the students mentioned. The following are some comments that students made in the questionnaire:

- “I have learned to tackle difficult problems better.”
- “I have been much more patient and I consider more what to do before acting.”
- “I have learned to improvise, to take initiative and be a part in conflict (not so shy any longer).”
- “Cooperation and planning are things I never had any ideas about before, but now I have really gotten into that; it is something important in social work.”

Many also reported a better appreciation of how good the Norwegian health and social system in reality is. When comparing the two societies (Palestine and Norway), students expressed a greater satisfaction with the Norwegian safety net and how it works. The comparisons of the two societies in Norway and Palestine are somewhat more positively in favor of Norway, than they were before the stay. This finding is supported by studies elsewhere (Dølie & Askeland, 2006).

In the interviews and in the questionnaire the researchers asked about the sort of difficulties, discomfort, and annoyances the students experienced. The two highest-ranking difficulties were related to cultural/religious factors governing treatment of women and children. The students became acquainted with different individuals and questioned the great differences in attitudes concerning the proper behavior of men and women. Paternalistic attitudes toward women as a gender and as individuals were sometimes mentioned.

The use of physical punishment in bringing up children upset many of the students. Other conflicts affected difficulties in cooperation with some of the staff members. Some students felt that some colleagues did not take their efforts seriously. Sometimes they were dubious when making agreements, perhaps because of the surrounding realities. They also felt that the general organization of YCC needed to be restructured, that the governing roles and norms at the center are difficult to decipher, and that there is a perceived difficulty in working in a setting where one must rely on translators. The students were often unsure about the exactness in the translations to and from Arabic. Some also mentioned intrinsic difficulties evolving in the student

group; they often had different opinions on how to manage situations, or deal with academic tasks. These difficulties can be attributed to the different grades of maturity among the students.

Regarding the general culture and society in Palestine, many expressed ambivalence. All of the students agreed on the great friendliness and generosity that the Palestinians had shown toward them. Some students also came back with a more critical attitude concerning the ethics and standards governing people and society as a whole. Despite this, all students expressed clear and great sympathy, and a larger engagement for “The Palestinian cause.” The most critical evaluation of the social and cultural conditions in the area, communicated to one of the project leaders, is expressed in this quote: “I don’t like the Arab culture at all, especially the treatment of women, children, and animals, but I fully sympathize with the Palestinian peoples’ struggle against the Israeli occupation and the longing for freedom.” There was no evidence in the questionnaire answers, or in the interviews, of any student who did not, in the deepest sense, sympathize with the Palestinian struggle for freedom. Some expressed critical thoughts about the culture, mainly about the treatment of women, but for the most part the students generally seemed rather positive to the local culture.

The students were also asked to estimate the grade of satisfaction with the placement on a 7-step scale, where 1 denotes “none” or “very little” satisfaction, and 7 denotes “very great” satisfaction. They used two scales: one for academic satisfaction and one for personal satisfaction. All students completed the questionnaire.

On the academic scale, 70% of the students put themselves on grade 5 or higher. On the personal scale, 55% put themselves on 6, and 35% on 7. All in all, it’s safe to conclude that an overwhelming majority of the 20 students regarded the placement in Balata as a very satisfying experience, both on the professional/academic level and on the personal level.

The students were also asked at the end of the questionnaire to make additional comments. The following are some of these comments from various students:

- “I’m very happy that I was chosen to go to this placement and that I took the chance. This has been an experience for life and I don’t regret making this choice for a second.”
- “These three months have been tremendous and I’m very happy that I took this opportunity.”
- “I feel that our placement in Palestine has been very different from what our colleagues in Norway have had. There are a lot of things that we have had the opportunity to train on as our colleagues in Norway have not. Both things we experience on free time and during work have been very challenging and also at times very strenuous. But I feel this stay has taught

me a lot about myself and it can be important in steering me in what direction my life will take in the future.”

- “I have matured a lot and have felt much different from how I felt before.”
- “For me it has been a little worrying that some seem only wanting to float through and to see this placement as a holiday, and that they don’t want to participate in planning and academic discussions.”
- “I must admit that I was in doubt of going reaching the date for departure. But I decided not to retract since I knew that I had to regret that for the rest of my life. I don’t regret going for a second; I have learned a lot and I am pleased I have not missed it. I want to recommend it to all who have the opportunity to go. This is a once in a lifetime experience.”

## DISCUSSION

The Norwegian project leader went down from Norway to Nablus for a two-to four-week period each time a group was there. These visits were absolutely necessary. Every time new issues surfaced that needed to be solved, planned for, or in one way or another dealt with. To be on site is certainly something very different from being in Norway and having to address problems or obstacles by e-mail or Skype. On site, there are various possibilities to influence colleagues and coworkers through guidance, supervision, advising, general discussions, and to achieve goals that are deemed beneficial for the project. As project leader, one can engage directly in planning, obtain knowledge of the locations, institutions, and so forth. The project leader was also available for direct contact with the students.

For project leaders it is mandatory to work at the placement site. It is not possible to monitor affairs from a remote location. One needs to be there for some time. During this project, one of the two project leaders was with the different student groups at all times while they had their placement in the West Bank. In addition, at the end of the project period, the project leaders had the help of the SPC.

The SPC was the direct link between the advisor and the students in their day-to-day work. It was he who followed up with the students and helped them with all necessary practical tasks and acted as a translator for the students. The decision to have a person who could function as a practical field coordinator has proved crucial. Before the appointment of the SPC, the local staff for various reasons could not manage as workers at YCC, advisors, and supervisors of the LUC students. The demand on one or a few persons was too big and the students were dissatisfied. After employing one dedicated person as a working guide to attend only to the students’ interests, the researchers found the students more satisfied and the staff more relaxed regarding their obligations, and the advisor had more time to mediate with students on different topics.

When the organizational structure had settled and matured, the researchers saw it beneficial for the students' learning possibilities to extend their daily work to not only YCC and some of the UNWRA schools, but also to kindergartens and a social development center in another camp in Nablus. It was also decided that the students should visit more of the local helping committees and social organizations to broaden their views. At the same time the researchers reduced the visits to other refugee camps around the West Bank, keeping Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Jericho as places for mandatory visits. They saw that the study time could be too fragmented with travels around the entire West Bank once a week, living in a family for a while, working at different places in Nablus, and visiting interesting institutions in Nablus and elsewhere. The fundamental activity is to be at the center (YCC) implementing activities with children and adolescents.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the students' experiences from a foreign context contribute to strengthen their ability to work in a professional context—both academically and personally. They made an exploratory expedition of self in a different society and culture. They learned to tackle unforeseen and often strange situations, to look inside themselves for unknown or unacknowledged resources, and to meet academic and personal challenges.

LUC students matured substantially, both psychologically and professionally, during the three months in Nablus. To live in such close contact with participants, clients, staff, and other students, in such a foreign context, set the students under mental pressure and tested their personal individual abilities. This heightened their awareness of their own capabilities and therefore helped elevate them to a level that they could not have obtained without participating in the project at YCC.

In general, they developed awareness and sensibility to other forms of family structure, ways of raising children, relating to unfamiliar gender relations, etc. Some students both verbally and in written form expressed having developed a more critical stand after their stay. What they have learned is useful in their future careers as social caregivers and social workers. No students, not even the few who were "critical," expressed regret over their stay in Palestine. On the contrary, all, in different ways, expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to have this "once in a lifetime experience."

After 20 students have happily completed their placement, the researchers suggest that the Practice in Palestine Project, in the context and framework described here, has been a curricular, academic, and personal success. It is an experience which the researchers encourage educators in every part of the world to emulate. That students receive the kind of education that makes them citizens of the world, who are not confined in their

visions and expectations by political geography and cultural and dogmatic values, is by this article's authors, considered an invaluable benefit to future child welfare and social workers.

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