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## **Decolonising concepts of participation and protection in sensitive research with young people: local perspectives and decolonial strategies of Palestinian research advisors**

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**Title:** Decolonising concepts of participation and protection in sensitive research with young people: local perspectives and decolonial strategies of Palestinian research advisors

### **Abstract**

*Scholars in childhood research have been reconsidering whether the participation of children and young people in sensitive research is necessary. This paper questions whether some of these objections arise out of colonial attitudes towards childhood, young people, human rights, and research. This paper draws on a participatory study that sought to ascertain how Palestinian young people construct their understandings of human rights. Discussion of some of the local perspectives and decolonial strategies offered by the Young People's Advisory Groups show how they facilitated the voices of their peers safely and decolonised concepts of participation and protection in the process.*

### **Key words**

*Palestinian young people, decolonisation, protection, participation, childhood, sensitive research, human rights*

## Introduction

Listening to the voices of children has become an important feature of work conducted by policy makers, researchers, activists and politicians alike (James, 2007). Involving young people as research advisors in the form of Young People's Advisory Groups (YPAGs hereafter) have become a popular way of accessing the voices of other young people (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015) and is a core aspect of a children's rights-based approach (CRBA hereafter) to research (see Lundy and McEvoy, 2009, 2012). Advocates of this approach contend that working with child research advisors leads to the generation of more authentic data (Cahill, 2004; Grover, 2004), the empowerment of child research participants (Alderson, 2001; Cahill, 2004; Kellet, 2005), and the enhanced trustworthiness and authenticity of a study (Lundy and McEvoy, 2009). However, enthusiasm for working with YPAGs has arguably resulted in a lack of methodological reflection at times (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). Therefore, more recent debates suggest that not all research benefits from being conducted with children and that not all children benefit from participating in research (McCarry, 2012). Within these arguments, the question of whether the participation of children in *sensitive* research is necessary is raised. The purpose of this paper is not to dismiss these important considerations around the need to protect child participants but to acknowledge that some of these objections to involving children, more generally, in sensitive research may stem from Western conceptualisations of childhood, youth and what is deemed sensitive. This paper highlights how little is known about how children themselves wish to be protected and to participate in research (Collins, 2016) and seeks to further debates on

decolonising concepts of participation and protection through working alongside local YPAGs.

This article draws on research which explored how Palestinian young people (aged 13-15) living in the West Bank construct their understandings of human rights in a context where youth experience political violence and rights violations daily. This research was situated within the transformative paradigm and employed participatory strategies adopting a CRBA. It included the participation of two local YPAGs who were involved throughout the research process.

## The participation of children in research: past and emerging debates

Participatory approaches have become the new orthodoxy among social scientists conducting research with children (Hart, 1992; Alderson, 2001; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Kellet, 2005). This stems from when a paradigm shift took place in the 1990s within childhood studies which began to reposition children as *social actors in*, rather than, *passive witnesses of* the world around them (Prout and James, 1990). This was further propelled by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). In response to Article 12 especially, listening to the views of children became a popular trend in research situated within the children's rights paradigm (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). Similarly, in the 'new sociology of childhood' researchers contended that children should be researched in their own right and that research should be conducted not just *on* and *about* children but *for* and *with* them (Punch, 2002; Christensen and Prout, 2002; Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Kellet, 2010). A methodological shift towards employing participatory approaches also took place as a result of the developments within childhood studies and children's rights-based research (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Thus, participatory childhood research has come to be regarded as almost the sole means of generating authentic data and ethical practice (Clark and Richards, 2017). Nonetheless, debates around some of the more problematic aspects of participatory research with children have been discussed in development studies (Cooke and Kothari, 2001), human geography (Kesby, 2005) and more recently among scholars who have researched alongside young people in childhood studies (McCarry, 2012; Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015; Hammersley, 2017). When it comes to working with YPAGs, the concerns raised often centre on methodological, practical and ethical issues of working in consultation with children (Conolly, 2008; Cater and Øverlien, 2013; McCarry, 2012). Important issues such as remunerating child research advisors, informed consent, lack of long-term support for YPAG members, claims around empowerment and the dangers of tokenism are often discussed (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015).

Within these broader debates, questions have been raised about the suitability of working alongside YPAGs in research about sensitive topics or with vulnerable groups (Conolly, 2008; McCarry, 2012). McCarry (2012) argues that whilst research advisors may be experts as *peers* of the research

participants, they may not necessarily be able to offer insider perspectives on the sensitive topics under investigation and may be unnecessarily exposed to engaging with such issues. It is important to stress that the protection rights of the child in research is paramount and there will be situations where the involvement of children in research is not appropriate for example, if the safety of the children would be put at risk (Berman et al., 2016). However, as Powell et al. (2020 p. 2) highlight, determining what constitutes a sensitive topic is not straight forward since it is 'experienced subjectively, as well as culturally and socially bound'. After working with child research advisors, Canosa et al. (2018: p. 409) reflected that adults and young people may perceive 'harms and benefits' very differently.

In research with non-Western children, initiated by Western researchers, it is often the researcher who determines what is sensitive and whether children should participate and if they can- how they ought to participate or be protected. And yet, this may differ from what the research participants themselves consider to be sensitive and how they seek protection in research. Whilst these attitudes dominate, there are scholars who have carried out participatory research with children affected by war and have examined international child protection, such as Boyden and de Berry (2004), Hart (2012) and Wessells (2018). Therefore, this paper seeks to build on this work by discussing how researching *with* children living under occupation in the form of YPAGs can further efforts to decolonise childhood research and by extension, childhood itself.

## De/colonising childhood

Within childhood studies, postcolonial scholars (Nieuwenhuys, 2013; Cheney, 2018; Burman, 2018; Balagopalan, 2019; Liebel, 2020) argue that childhood has been colonised and consequently, a universal global model of childhood has been privileged by which other childhoods must be evaluated. Central to Euro-American understandings of childhood(s) is the notion that childhood is distinct from adulthood to the extent that children should be protected from the hardships faced by adults. Whenever the boundaries between adulthood and childhood become erased such as in situations of armed conflict, children are often constructed as victims whose childhoods are deemed deficit (Hart and Tyrer, 2006). Furthermore, Nandy (1984) and Nieuwenhuys (2013) have argued that this Western understanding of childhood was used as a metaphor to illustrate and justify colonisation itself- the child/native who was on a trajectory towards maturity and enlightenment. Additionally, the notion that the child must be protected and provided for was dependent upon the oppression of the colonised (Liebel, 2020). Therefore, not only is it possible to claim that childhood has been colonised but that childhood itself is a colonial construct. Balagopalan (2019) states that it is essential to acknowledge the impact that colonialism continues to have on the lives of children and how the global

and local are co-constituted both currently and historically. This is especially pertinent in the Palestinian context which has yet to achieve postcolonial status.

The enduring legacy of colonialism in the Palestinian context

Whilst 1948 marked the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for much of the world, for Palestinians, that same year signified the establishment of the state of Israel and the *Nakba* (the catastrophe) in which they became a displaced and dispossessed people. As a humanitarian response to the horrors faced by the Jewish people due to the Holocaust, the establishment of the settler colonial state of Israel was legitimised by the wider international community (Perugini and Gordon, 2015). Then, during the 1967 War, Israel went on to occupy the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem as it pushed back the Arab opposition, causing further displacement. In 2002, Israel began building the 'separation wall' in response to the Second *Intifada* (Darweish and Rigby, 2015) and today, Palestinian children in the West Bank live in the shadow of this wall unable to travel beyond it without a permit. Even internally, they have to pass numerous checkpoints- some even to go to school (Barghouthi, 2018). Thus, Palestinian children encounter various forms of settler colonialism in their everyday lives. They are also subjected to types of 'soft' colonialism.

Following the Oslo Accords (signed in 1993-1995), Palestinians have been reconstructed as victims of a humanitarian crisis rather than of a political one, and as 'intruders in their own land' rather than a people who have been forcibly displaced and occupied (Roy, 2012: p. 80). Palestinians also experienced an influx of foreign aid with donors displaying a preference for funding projects that were as politically neutral as possible (Pitner, 2000). Trauma relief projects aimed at children appealed to donors since children were portrayed as innocent victims caught up in an unnamed conflict (Challand, 2009). Whilst disproportionately affected by the conflict, Palestinian youth have played a central role in collective forms of resistance against the occupation for decades. To this day, their participation at demonstrations where they throw stones at clashes with armed Israeli soldiers has helped to achieve the symbolism of 'David versus Goliath' (Darweish and Rigby, 2015: p. 61). Nevertheless, Israel has used their participation in collective protests to vilify Palestinian youth (boys particularly) as potential terrorists and justify their surveillance and detention of Palestinian children (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019). As Ensor (2010: p. 30) states, whether youth are perceived as 'endangered little cherubs' in need of adult protection or 'dangerous little devils' in need of adult discipline (Jenks 1996) they are often portrayed as those who lack agency. It seems Palestinian children are subjected to both conceptualisations at once- the former by NGOs and the latter by their coloniser both of which seeks to divorce them from their historical narratives and deny them political agency (Pitner, 2000). Therefore, this research sought to foreground the counter-narratives of the colonised in relation to human rights but also participatory approaches to childhood research (Cheney, 2018). Working with

local YPAGs facilitated attempts to dismantle the dichotomy between the so-called 'empirical south' and the 'theoretical north' (Balagopalan, 2019) by adopting a decolonial approach not only empirically but also conceptually when studying the lives of Palestinian children and how they make sense of participation and protection in the research process.

## Research methodology

This study sought to explore how Palestinian young people understand and appropriate human rights and how this is shaped by what they learn inside school through human rights education (HRE hereafter) and their everyday lived experiences outside school.

A qualitative methodological framework best suited the aims of this research inquiry because this investigation was concerned with Palestinians' conceptual constructions relating to human rights (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Since the study sought to listen to the marginalised voices of Palestinian youth, it was appropriate to situate the research within the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010) employing participatory strategies with the purpose of addressing power inequalities and generating grassroots knowledge. Transformative research has been conducted with various disenfranchised groups such as the deaf (see Gerner de Garcia, 2004), those affected by HIV (see Chilisa, 2005) and minority groups (see Clarke and McCreanor, 2006), however, there appears to be a paucity of this type of research with children affected by war.

The perspectives of young people were accessed through participatory focus groups which were conducted with a selection of youth aged 13-15 in four different schools in Areas A of the West Bank. This included a co-educational Private School (*PS*), a Boys' Government School (*BGS*), a Girls' Government School (*GGs*), and a United Nations Relief and Work Agency (*UNRWA* hereafter) Girls' School (*UNGS*) attended by child refugees. Whilst education across these schools sit under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (*MoEHE* hereafter) their respective HRE differs in its content and delivery. Students in government schools learn about human rights in weekly Civics Education classes, (Qazzaz et al., 2010), *UNRWA* provides enrichment material for HRE (*UNRWA*, 2013) and private schools enjoy more autonomy and may not follow the *MoEHE's* HRE but instead teach about human rights in Ethics or Religious Education. Most educational institutions are reliant upon international aid and the *MoEHE* is accountable to two foreign monitoring groups- Israel and the United States (Velloso de Santisteban, 2002) therefore, it was necessary to consider the different degrees to which their HRE is influenced by a Western rights discourse. Thus, this purposive sample of young people from these different school contexts were selected in order to increase the breadth of the inquiry and to include various perspectives from participants who learn about human rights

through different HRE provisions (Cohen et al., 2013). Furthermore, young people who attend these schools come from different socio-economic (from refugees camps, rural villages or cities) and religious backgrounds (secular, Muslim and Christian) thus, adding a comparative lens to the study.

The study adopted a CRBA and included the participation of two local YPAGs using participatory methods (Lundy and McEvoy, 2009). The aim of a YPAG is to enable the researcher to draw attention to the issues they want to explore, to know what to ask and how best to ask their peers about the issues under investigation. Then once their peers have been asked, to ask the YPAG to facilitate the voices of their peers. Therefore, this research consequently developed YPAGs consisting of Palestinian students because they were able to inform and refine the research instruments ensuring that they were age and culturally appropriate for the Palestinian context. Thus, throughout the research process, the advice of the research advisors was ascertained, and they were involved in the development of the research design, the methods and in the analysis of the data (Lundy and McEvoy, 2009; 2012). The two local YPAGs were recruited voluntarily to participate through their respective schools in the West Bank in consultation with the relevant staff. They were free to opt out at any time throughout the study. YPAG 1 consisted of six students aged 14-15 (four male and two female) who attended a Private school. YPAG 2 was made up of six female students aged 12-13 from a UNRWA school in a different city. Working alongside two YPAGs from these different backgrounds meant that they closely represented the participants of the study and thus would be better positioned to offer their more nuanced interpretations of their peers' voices. Assumptions are often made that childhood in places affected by conflict is characterised only by hardship and yet there is a plurality of childhoods in the Palestinian context just as there is in other contexts (Twum-Danso Imoh, 2016). Additionally, Palestinians have a long history of colonisation, therefore, working with local YPAGs had the potential to be a decolonising strategy since the knowledge generated by the indigenous community was foregrounded as opposed to that of the Western researcher (Zavala, 2013). To monitor my positionality regarding the research participants, YPAGs, the field but also the 'geopolitics of knowledge' (Mignolo, 2002: p. 59), I kept a reflective journal during data collection. I wrote not only about sessions in the schools but also about other experiences whilst living in the West Bank for six months. As a non-Palestinian researcher, I sought to 'own up' to existing opinions and orientalist attitudes that surfaced at different moments of the research (Hendrick, 2008). For instance, before undertaking this research I had encountered little criticism of the Fatah-led PA and yet I had been exposed to an entirely negative perception of Hamas since Western governments consider it a terrorist organisation and yet these preconceptions were challenged and my understanding deepened by the participants.

The young people (both YPAGs and research participants) were informed that their school counsellors and other relevant staff were available to offer necessary long-term support after focus group discussions.

This paper will explore how working with local YPAGs enabled me to better understand what was considered sensitive to young people and how to approach these issues using the decolonising strategies they proposed. This enabled them and their peers to participate in this research in ways that were both meaningful and safe.

## Sensitive in whose eyes? Young people's perspectives and decolonial strategies

Prior to data collection, I assumed that issues around the occupation would be considered the most sensitive source of discussion. Conversely, in the initial phases of the research, the YPAGs suggested that their peers would wish to discuss these issues and would feel comfortable doing so. However, they advised me that young people may feel more cautious about expressing their opinions about internal politics and religion especially if overheard by adults. As Boyden (2003) warns, researchers could risk side-lining issues that are important to children because of what they assume must be sensitive to the participants. Had I not consulted with local YPAGs prior to data collection then I may have missed these subtleties. What follows is a discussion of how the YPAGs sought to protect their peers in this research and employed strategies that would better enable their peers to participate meaningfully and safely.

### Co-crafting unambiguous questions and creating safe spaces

Their ease when it came to discussing political violence became evident during the phase when the YPAGs co-crafted the questions that their peers would be asked. Throughout this process of refining the focus group questions the YPAGs revealed that I was wording questions ambiguously whereas the research advisors altered questions into a more direct form to ensure their meaning was clear. YPAG 2 adapted the following question: 'How optimistic are you about the future of human rights for Palestinian young people in the West Bank?' (my original question) into the two questions that follow:

- Do you think your rights will be fulfilled in the future? (adapted by YPAG)
- Do you think human rights are a powerful tool for Palestinian young people? (adapted by YPAG).

Although implicit questions may seem clear to an adult, they can come across as ambiguous to children. Adults often feel the need to use euphemisms or to tone-down their language when talking to children. As McCarry (2012) argues this paternalistic approach often is more about protecting adults

than young people. Admittedly, I would not have felt at ease asking a focus group of Palestinian young people whether they think their rights would be fulfilled in the future prior to consulting with the YPAGs in case it seemed insensitive. Therefore, working with the YPAGs to co-craft questions meant I was able to enter the data collection phase with more confidence that I would be respectful to the participants but also ask unambiguous questions. Thus, the YPAGs built my capacity around what they deemed to be sensitive topics which contrasted to what I had expected. As previously stated, the YPAGs indicated that religion and Palestinian political issues would be considered sensitive by their peers. This was later confirmed during focus group discussions. For instance, in relation to religion, students during a focus group commented that they 'have freedom of speech but not when it comes to religion' and that 'it's a very sensitive topic'. In relation to internal politics, young people indicated that there were fears around surveillance at the hands of the Palestinian Authority and its network of spies which became a key theme during focus group discussions. It also became apparent that the Palestinian state also exercises control at UNRWA and government schools via the MoEHE. The discussion of politics is strictly banned in these schools but in practice it is Palestinian political affairs that are not debated on the school premises as opposed to politics surrounding the conflict. Young people gave insight into why this would be too much of a risk:

In school, teachers can't talk about him [the President] and the government or the [Ministry of] Higher Education will arrest him if he talks about them (*UNGS*).

A resounding theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was that Palestinian young people longed to participate politically because they experience alienation from elite gerontocratic politics (Tuastad, 2017), are surrounded by largely politically disaffected adults and they believe they have a valuable contribution to make (Jiménez, 2018). Therefore, it makes sense why both YPAGs did not recommend that I avoided these discussions during focus groups but rather they provided strategies that would protect their peers in research and simultaneously enable them to discuss these sensitive matters- especially Palestinian politics. Additionally, my understanding was deepened of how the adult participants may feel about sharing their views about religion or Palestinian politics during interviews. Consequently, the YPAGs proposed that anonymity should be stressed on several occasions and that information would not be passed on to their principals to reassure the participants. Whilst anonymity would have been emphasised, the extent to which this was a serious preoccupation for the YPAGs heightened my awareness of the importance of creating spaces that were safe for these 'hidden transcripts' to be heard (Scott, 1990). It also provided an indication prior to data collection that the young people would resist some of the narratives of adults and offer alternative realities about politics, patriarchy and religion- as long as they felt safe to do so. Therefore, focus groups were

not carried out in classrooms but in I.T. suites, libraries or equivalent non-classroom type setting and were done without teachers present.

Furthermore, the YPAGs were crucial in challenging some of my residual essentialist viewpoints because during the analysis phase they offered a much more nuanced portrayal of the occupation, the internal political situation, and the cultural and religious complexities within the Palestinian context. For instance, Islam was cherished by most of the participants and often seen as the source of human rights. This provided a counter-narrative to secular human rights discourse that dominates scholarship (Johnston, 2015). Thus, I sought their expertise regarding themes relating to these sensitive matters. This proved to be a decolonising strategy that curbed my potential bias as a researcher.

#### Preferencing group-based discussions

Children's participation can take on different meanings in different cultural contexts (Wyness, 2013). Therefore, whilst researchers are often responsible for the research agenda, in cross-cultural research it can be highly beneficial to include methodologies that are not only child-centred but also appropriate to the culture under investigation (Boyden, 2003; Cheney, 2018). In this research, there were moments when I had to relinquish control of my agenda and enable the research advisors to determine how they (and their peers) would prefer to participate in the research.

During the analysis phase, the YPAGs were provided with vignettes from the focus group transcriptions and they coded the data and identified key themes and offered interpretations of their peers' views. However, YPAG 2 requested that rather than writing on the vignettes that they could discuss the data as a group instead. Whilst in a British educational setting, this more individualistic written task may not have been found problematic by a YPAG, it was by this Palestinian YPAG. This was because in the Arabic-speaking world there is Modern Standard Arabic (*fus-ha*) which is *written* in newspapers, textbooks and is only used orally in more formal situations such as political speeches. There is then the colloquial regional (*amia*) *spoken* Arabic used daily by the people in their homes and on the streets. Therefore, young people felt it was a lot more meaningful for them to discuss the findings in colloquial Levantine Arabic than to write in a formal language when analysing the data since this enabled them to express themselves more freely. This resulted in me recording the session with their consent and adapting the activities to involve less individual written work and more group-based discussion. Once more it was a decolonising process since the Western-styled activity that I had prepared needed to be amended to suit the YPAG and enable the more meaningful and organic analysis of the findings. The fact that the YPAG asked to change the format of an analysis activity shows that they were not simply seemingly actively participating out of habit because they are used to doing so to meet adults'

expectations as Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) claim can happen. This is possibly because the voices of girls are often excluded in discussions about political matters at home due to the patriarchal aspects of the culture. Often the way a YPAG opts to participate can offer a researcher clues as to how their peers will prefer to participate during data collection. YPAGs had suggested participatory activities for the focus groups that were spoken and group-based such as a walking debate rather than individual written tasks. Research often involves Western researchers inflicting voices upon subalterns (Spivak, 1988). Therefore, the YPAGs' involvement in the analysis of their peers' views was an attempt to hinder in some way my colonialist impulse to impose my own interpretations onto the children's voices since the YPAGs were able to offer indigenous insights of what their peers meant. Another way I sought to better facilitate the voices of Palestinian youth was through asking one of the YPAGs to compile a summary of the findings.

Resisting tokenism and exposing the conflicting aims of the transformative approach

Another critique of children's participation in research (more broadly) has centred on notions of voice and issues of representation (James, 2007; Komulainen, 2007; Lundy, 2018; Wyness, 2013; Spyrou, 2011). Concerns have been raised that the inclusion of the child's voice can become a tokenistic gesture since it is the adult researcher who determines the research process. James (2007) argues that when disseminating the findings of research conducted with children, adults still have the final say when it comes to what gets included and shared back to stakeholders. This can result in de-prioritising what actually concerns the children (Berman et al., 2016). Admittedly, in this research, the YPAGs were asked to code, analyse and discuss segments of data that I had selected. However, in a final session, YPAG 2 compiled a child-friendly summary of the findings for dissemination which identified the barriers that Palestinian young people face at various levels when it concerns the enjoyment of their rights:

We have our identity and culture that we feel proud of. However, we face many difficulties and obstacles that prevent us from taking our rights... there are things in our culture that restrict our freedom... discrimination between the sexes, and ignoring the youth's opinions... Occupation prevents us from enjoying freedom, for example prison, destroying homes, no freedom of speech and we are deprived from living in safety... In Palestinian schools they teach us about human rights, but we as Palestinians we learn about human rights from our daily lives (personal lessons). Unfortunately, our voice as youth is not heard outside and not many groups know about our suffering. However, we still have hope, and we are optimistic about taking our rights and we will not give up (Extract from YPAG 2 Summary of Findings [translated]).

The main themes highlighted by the YPAGs served as prompts which guided my own journey through the analysis. This summary also revealed how the aims of a transformative approach to research can

at times conflict. Transformative research should be carried out in a way that advances human rights but also respects local cultures (Mertens 2010). Whilst measures were taken to ensure that the research was conducted in a culturally appropriate way under the guidance of the YPAGs, it also contested aspects of the culture which clash with human rights values- namely prioritising the child's voice. Therefore, the transformative approach when done in a rights-respecting way can expose discriminatory aspects of the culture it simultaneously seeks to respect. Thus, when researching *with* children as advisors, the researcher may find that the aims of a research approach do not align so neatly together. Nonetheless, it was the young people (both participants and YPAGs) who drew attention to the moments when human rights values and Palestinian culture clash and they do this with a sensitivity that I may not have exercised.

Moreover, what is notable about this summary is what the YPAG choose to omit- namely a critique of the PA despite this theme permeating the data which they analysed. Spyrou (2011: p. 157) highlights that 'the unsayable' might reveal more about the child's voice than what gets articulated verbally. The YPAG's omission does not mean they were being inauthentic about the issues they did include such as the occupation and patriarchy. However, it does illustrate the importance of taking into consideration, the complex context in which these voices were produced- a school which is under the watchful eyes of the PA via the MoEHE. Therefore, the way they chose to represent the voices of their peers was not driven by power imbalances among themselves (since this YPAG was made up of refugee children who were all highly critical of the PA) but rather hegemonic structures they face as citizens in an authoritarian pseudo-state. Aware that their summary could be read by those working at the MoEHE, it seems that the YPAG made a reasoned-decision not to include a critique of the PA in order to protect themselves, their peers and arguably their teachers too. Secondly, it is possible that they also did not wish to be seen to hinder Palestinian state-building efforts, however imperfect they may be- a tension that was discussed by participants and YPAGs. It is also apparent that the audience they preferred to address in their summary was those 'outside' the Palestinian context.

#### Forging international networks of solidarity

Said (1984) claims that Palestinians have been denied 'permission to narrate' to the outside world and their voices have been delegitimised. This is still felt by Palestinian young people and it became clear that the research advisors and participants sought to redress this in this research. Therefore, it is notable that the YPAG's summary ends by pointing to the way they feel the international community is unacquainted with their narratives of pain as Palestinians. As discussed, the YPAGs at the start of the research process emphasised that their peers would wish to participate in discussions about the occupation and rights violations. First, they seek to do this because young people have feelings about the conflict but they are not being asked by adults about how it negatively impacts them. In a focus

group, the following girl was asked if she knew adults were going to listen what would she like them to hear, she answered:

To tell them about our feelings, everything in our minds and everything we feel (*UNGS*).

Similarly, a research participant from a different school ended the focus group discussions by commenting:

I think the reason why we have so much to say is because we've been holding our feelings inside because nobody asked us what we think...it's the first time somebody [asked] (*PS*).

Some participants also used this research as a conduit to have their voices further afield, a boy wrote on a post-it note in English 'please help us and stand with us' [insert Figure 1]. This boy's uncle had been recently killed by soldiers when planting olive trees and yet after sharing this experience he appealed to the possible readers of this research to show solidarity with the Palestinian people. Second, not only did this research offer grassroots insight into the conflict from the eyes of these young people but it was also used by them as attempts to forge 'networks of solidarity' with those beyond the Palestinian context (Cornwall, 2005), as this boy stated:

But it's important to keep struggling as maybe we will be heard one day or someone will *feel* for us (*BGS*).

Their desire for a global audience also serves as a reminder that there is no space for tokenism in research with children when it concerns those who are marginalised or in this case living in a society affected by war. In the field of human rights studies there has been a tendency for theorists to distance themselves from the victims of human rights abuses and their narratives and experiences of pain (Baxi, 2002). Decolonialist scholars (Baxi, 2002; Barreto, 2013; Mignolo, 2013; Zembylas, 2017) claim that the dominant human rights narrative has become sanitised, abstract and legal and the suffering dimension has been largely purged from the Eurocentric discourse. In this study, young people sought to re-introduce the suffering dimension of human rights and sought to discuss what Western researchers would possibly deem sensitive through offering their de-sanitised experiences of human rights from the perspective of those whose rights are violated.

As has been maintained throughout this article, less is known about how young people wish to be protected and participate in research. Therefore, the suitability of conducting research with young people when it concerns sensitive research depends on the context in which it is being conducted. It goes without saying that the Palestinian young people of this study want to be protected from the

injustices of an asymmetrical conflict but it is exactly because of their encounters with adversity, both as Palestinians deprived of safety, and as young people denied their right to participate politically, that they wanted to participate in this research. They wanted to ensure others would become acquainted with their stories of suffering and perhaps act in solidarity with them. Participants and the YPAGs wanted to ensure that their voices were heard not only locally but by a global audience to which they lack access. Palestinians are cognizant of how the West constructs itself as the subject which is able to judge, subdue or save the East (Said 1978; Abu-Lughod 2002). Thus, they made it clear that they were not looking for an 'outside saviour' (Mignolo, 2013), but they were looking to form international networks of solidarity. Thus, a hope of this article is that the young people's views will be heard by a more global audience whom the participants have no access to because of the rights restrictions they face as Palestinians.

## Conclusion

This article has engaged with recent debates that question the received wisdom that childhood research must involve the participation of children as participants and as co-researchers. Although there is merit in interrogating whether involving children in sensitive research is appropriate or beneficial to participants and the research itself, this paper contends that when doing this, a researcher may also need to reflect on whether these reservations arise out of colonial attitudes towards childhood, human rights, and research. Drawing on participatory research conducted in the Palestinian context, this paper has discussed how working alongside local YPAGs throughout the research process made space for non-dominant ways of knowing when it came to what would be considered sensitive by participants and how sensitive topics could be approached safely. YPAGs also helped to decolonise the research by challenging some of my underlying orientalist assumptions held about Palestinians and childhood(s) and suggesting more culturally appropriate questions, instruments, and analysis by which to better facilitate and foreground their peers' voices. The YPAGs both offered and employed strategies to protect their peers in research in a context of an authoritarian-style state which is also under occupation.

Assumptions are often made that marginalised groups such as children and the colonised have little to offer epistemologically. However, as Balagopalan (2019) claims, there is a need for researchers from the West to not only adopt decolonising approaches empirically but also conceptually when researching the lives of children in the 'Third World'. Finally, children who experience enduring legacies of colonialism need to be presented with opportunities to exercise what decolonialist scholars term 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo 2009: p. 10) and to resist and refashion dominant ways of

researching and conceptualising colonised children. This will then enable their own theorisations to inform academic debates within childhood studies.

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