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## **Going West: Temporary Immigration and the Higher Educational Journey of Palestinian Students from East to West Jerusalem**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This qualitative study examined the daily educational experiences of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem who travel to universities in West Jerusalem. While existing research focuses on traditional international student mobility, limited attention has been given to students crossing internal boundaries within contested urban spaces. Through interviews with 27 Palestinian students selected from a larger research project and enrolled in Israeli universities, this research explored how students navigate daily border crossings for education within settler colonial structures. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Systemic barriers and daily struggles, where students experience checkpoint crossings and institutional discrimination as temporary immigration within their ancestral homeland; (2) cultural and linguistic navigation, where students develop strategic approaches for acquiring Hebrew and building cross-cultural relationships while preserving Palestinian identity; and (3) identity and educational resistance, where students view their education as collective Palestinian investment rather than individual assimilation. These findings reveal how daily border crossing creates unique forms of temporary immigration that challenge conventional frameworks of mobility. The research highlights what we call "settler colonial internal bordering": boundaries within indigenous territories that create immigration-like experiences for native populations accessing dominant institutions. Students' complex navigation strategies demonstrate how indigenous peoples can strategically engage with colonial educational systems while maintaining cultural sovereignty and political autonomy. This research contributes to understanding educational mobility in contested spaces and offers insights for academic institutions, policymakers, and indigenous communities navigating similar colonial structures globally.*

**Keywords:** Palestinian students, settler colonialism, temporary immigration, identity negotiation, educational resistance, East Jerusalem

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## INTRODUCTION

Globally, more than six million students engage in higher education mobility, with numbers growing from 2.8 million in 2005 to almost 6.8 million in 2022 (OECD, 2025; UNESCO, 2023; Zayim-Kurtay et al., 2025). These learners typically cross-national borders to access study opportunities abroad, encountering cultural adjustments, language-related hurdles, and identity negotiations as they relocate (Shen et al., 2022). Recent research on international student mobility has revealed increasing complexity in global educational migration patterns, with post-pandemic policy shifts fundamentally reshaping how students navigate educational opportunities across borders (Vashisht-Rota, 2025).

International student mobility research has long documented how students adapt when they move abroad for education. These students face well-known challenges, including learning new languages, navigating unfamiliar cultures, and managing their identities as they adjust to foreign academic systems (Berry, 2005; Sam & Berry, 2010). They experience what Berry calls *acculturation stress*, as they balance maintaining their heritage culture while adapting to their host country's educational and social environments (Ward et al., 2001; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013; Hoffmann et al., 2025). From language barriers to social isolation, international students must develop strategies for succeeding academically while preserving their cultural identity in genuinely foreign settings (Zhou et al., 2008; Glass et al., 2014; Mersh & Auburn, 2021; Zhang & Ren, 2024). Recent scholarship on Arab students in Israeli institutions documents comparable challenges in language acquisition and cultural adaptation (Abu--Rabiah, 2025). While this scholarship focuses primarily on cross-national movement, our study extends the debate by examining mobility within a colonized homeland. However, this extensive body of research on international student mobility overlooks a crucial phenomenon: what happens when students experience conditions akin to those of immigration without ever leaving their homeland? Current scholarship assumes that students either cross national borders to study abroad (Berry, 2005; Marginson et al., 2010) or relocate permanently to colonial institutions (Grande, 2015; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). This literature lacks attention to students who navigate internal colonial boundaries daily and experience cultural adaptation and identity negotiation within their own ancestral territories. This gap becomes particularly visible in contexts such as Jerusalem, where colonial division has created what we might call 'domestic

foreignness'—a phenomenon that challenges our understanding of both international mobility and settler colonial education.

The daily journey of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem to West Jerusalem tells a very different story. While traditional international students experience cultural adaptation through relocating to foreign countries, Palestinian students undergo remarkably similar processes through daily temporary immigration within their own ancestral homeland. This creates a striking paradox: indigenous inhabitants experience conditions similar to those of immigrants without ever leaving their native city. Every morning, these students cross into Hebrew-dominant academic environments, navigate cultural differences, and carefully manage their Palestinian identity within Israeli institutions. Every evening, they return home to Arabic-speaking Palestinian communities in East Jerusalem. This daily cycle of temporary immigration within one's homeland challenges everything we think we know about international student mobility and reveals an understudied form of educational movement that deserves serious scholarly attention.

This is a paradoxical situation in which indigenous inhabitants find themselves navigating settler colonial boundaries that transform them into temporary immigrants in their own city. This occurs every day as they navigate distinct cultural, linguistic, and political environments while dealing with complex settler-colonial surveillance systems, security checkpoints, and territories specifically designed for demographic transformation (Baumann, 2022; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019).

This daily westward educational movement reveals theoretical limitations in current scholarship that maintain established distinctions between domestic and international student mobility (Marginson et al., 2010; OECD, 2025). Palestinian students' experiences reframe these categories by demonstrating how settler colonial geography creates what we conceptualize as "indigenous temporary immigration", daily cultural adaptation processes that mirror international student experiences of language acquisition, cultural navigation, and identity negotiation (Ward et al., 2001; Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013; Zhang & Ren, 2024) while occurring within ancestral homelands restructured by ongoing colonization.

Unlike domestic minority students, who remain within familiar national educational frameworks, Palestinian students cross settler-colonial internal boundaries that function as quasi-international borders, requiring documentation, cultural code switching, and strategic identity management—experiences comparable to those of international students. However, unlike voluntary international mobility, this movement involves constrained choices shaped by settler-colonial educational policies that limit access to Palestinian institutions while channeling indigenous students toward colonial knowledge systems (Abu-Saad, 2019; Wind, 2024; Barakat et al., 2025).

For many Palestinian students, going west to pursue higher education involves complex identity negotiations, cultural adaptations, and structural barriers that mirror broader immigration experiences while occurring within a contested urban landscape shaped by ongoing settler colonialism. This westward movement has profound colonial implications, as students move daily from the

marginalized East toward the dominant West, a journey that parallels historical patterns of colonial encounter while simultaneously subverting them through educational resistance. This pattern disrupts the conventional dichotomy between domestic and international mobility, revealing a hybrid form shaped by settler-colonial constraints that has received limited scholarly attention in the field of international education research.

Jerusalem's educational divide reflects deeper settler colonial structures that have shaped the city since Israel's occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967. This occupation fundamentally altered the educational landscape, creating distinct educational systems that reflect broader power dynamics within what Wolfe (2006) terms the "logic of elimination", the ongoing project of settler colonialism to eliminate indigenous presence through various means, including educational assimilation. Palestinian students in East Jerusalem face a complex educational ecosystem characterized by fragmented authority, limited resources, and settler colonial policies that significantly impact their educational choices and opportunities (Alayan, 2018; Wind, 2024; Diab, 2024).

Recent research by Diab (2025) reveals how Palestinian students navigate Israeli academic institutions while maintaining their cultural identity, developing sophisticated strategies for educational success despite facing isolation, discrimination, and systematic marginalization within settler colonial educational structures. This phenomenon of temporary immigration within one's homeland offers unique insights into how settler-colonial geography shapes educational access and cultural adaptation in contested urban spaces, particularly in relation to broader discussions of indigenous students' experiences in dominant educational systems worldwide (Barakat et al., 2025).

### **Education in East Jerusalem**

The educational landscape in East Jerusalem presents a unique and challenging environment for Palestinian students seeking higher education opportunities within settler colonial structures. According to recent reports, approximately 110,293 Palestinian students attend 249 schools in East Jerusalem, distributed across three main categories reflecting settler colonial educational governance: municipal schools supervised by the Israeli Ministry of Education, private schools with varying degrees of autonomy, and unrecognized schools that operate under Palestinian authority but receive no Israeli funding (JLAC, 2023). This fragmented educational system creates significant barriers for Palestinian students aspiring to higher education while serving the settler colonial project of cultural transformation.

The educational challenges faced by Palestinian students in East Jerusalem are multifaceted and deeply embedded within settler colonial structures. Israeli policies have systematically sought to exert control over Palestinian education through curriculum restrictions, funding mechanisms, and administrative oversight that serve the broader project of demographic transformation and cultural elimination (Asali Nuseibeh et al., 2024; Diab, 2025; Abu-Saad, 2019). The implementation of Decision 3790—a five-year plan (2018–2023) that allocated approximately 2 billion shekels to East Jerusalem education—

exemplifies these complex dynamics. While ostensibly aimed at improving educational opportunities, critics argue that the program primarily serves to integrate Palestinian students into Israeli educational systems while marginalizing Palestinian national identity and Arabic language instruction—a classic example of what scholars term "settler colonial education" (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

Palestinian students in East Jerusalem face severe limitations in their educational choices because of the settler colonial geography of occupation and internal bordering. The Israeli separation wall and checkpoint system have effectively severed East Jerusalem from the broader Palestinian educational network in the West Bank, making it extremely difficult for students to access Palestinian universities such as Birzeit University, Al-Quds University, or other institutions in Ramallah and Bethlehem (Fobzu, 2023). Before 2000, significant numbers of Palestinian students from Jerusalem could easily commute to Palestinian universities; today, movement restrictions created by settler colonial infrastructure made such educational mobility nearly impossible.

These constraints have created a situation where Palestinian students seeking higher education increasingly look westward to Israeli institutions. Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, and other Israeli institutions have become accessible alternatives for Palestinian students, who find Palestinian higher education options either geographically inaccessible or academically limited due to settler colonial restrictions. This phenomenon of going west represents more than mere educational choice; it embodies a complex navigation of settler colonial boundaries that fundamentally shapes students' educational experiences and identity formation within ongoing colonization.

The motivations for Palestinian students to choose Israeli institutions are multifaceted and often pragmatic. Israeli universities offer internationally recognized degrees, better funding opportunities, and access to advanced research facilities and academic networks (Nuseibeh et al., 2024). Additionally, degrees from Israeli institutions provide better employment prospects within the Israeli economy, which dominates the economic landscape of Jerusalem and the broader region. For many Palestinian families, this represents a strategic investment in their children's future, even as it requires significant cultural and linguistic adaptation.

Recent scholarship has begun to examine the experiences of Palestinian students in Israeli higher education institutions, revealing complex dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and adaptation (Arar, 2017; Halabi, 2023; Nuseibeh et al., 2024). Recent research specifically examining Arab students in Israeli academia has revealed similar patterns of language barriers and asymmetrical relationships (Abu--Rabiah, 2025; Abu--Gweder, 2025). In contrast, studies of Muslim students in Western academic institutions highlight broader challenges of cultural navigation and identity management (Al-Krenawi, 2025; Al-Said & Jaber, 2025). Research by Asali Nuseibeh et al. (2024) reveals how neoliberal and colonial policies within Israeli institutions create particular challenges for Palestinian students, who often find themselves disillusioned with their experiences and inadequately supported within these institutions. Additionally, Diab's (2025)

comprehensive study demonstrated how students develop sophisticated strategies for maintaining their Palestinian identity while achieving academic success in Israeli institutions.

However, limited research has conceptualized these experiences through the lens of temporary immigration theory and settler colonial analysis, offering valuable insights into how individuals navigate cultural boundaries, language barriers, and identity negotiations in their daily educational journeys within colonial contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining how Palestinian students from East Jerusalem experience their daily movement to West Jerusalem universities as a form of temporary immigration within settler-colonial internal bordering systems, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of educational mobility in contested spaces and of temporary migration experiences globally.

This research offers insights into educational mobility in contested urban spaces and how indigenous students navigate dominant systems. As educational migration increases globally, understanding how students cross cultural boundaries becomes crucial for policy. The study contributes to discussions of international student experiences while offering specific insights into the Palestinian experience within settler-colonial structures.

While scholars have extensively examined international student mobility and settler colonial education separately, these two fields rarely intersect. International student research has developed sophisticated frameworks for understanding cross-national adaptation (Berry, 2005; Sam & Berry, 2010), but these frameworks typically assume movement between distinct sovereign nations. Settler-colonial scholars have examined how indigenous students navigate dominant educational systems (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Grande, 2015), but typically focus on students who permanently relocate to colonial institutions. What remains underexplored is the daily, repeated crossing of internal colonial boundaries, a form of educational mobility that shares features of both international and domestic experiences yet fits neatly into either category. The crossing of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem to West Jerusalem offers a window into this theoretical blind spot.

Settler colonial education scholarship has made crucial contributions to understanding how colonial institutions shape the experiences of indigenous students, particularly in relation to cultural resistance and identity maintenance (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Grande, 2015). However, most research examines indigenous students who permanently relocate to attend colonial institutions rather than those who engage in daily temporary immigration between indigenous and colonial educational spaces. This creates a significant conceptual gap in the understanding of how repeated border crossing shapes educational experiences within ongoing settler colonialism.

Most significantly, existing research has not adequately theorized the phenomenon of temporary immigration within one's homeland, particularly in educational contexts. This represents a fundamental theoretical limitation because it leaves unexplored a form of mobility that challenges core assumptions in both international student and domestic education research (Wind, 2024; Barakat et al., 2025). The daily movement of Palestinian students between East Jerusalem and

West Jerusalem reveals a hybrid form of educational mobility that operates within settler colonial internal bordering systems—a phenomenon that current theoretical frameworks cannot adequately explain.

This study addresses these gaps by applying three interconnected theoretical frameworks to understand how Palestinian students navigate daily cultural and linguistic adaptation within contested educational spaces. While we draw on established theories—Settler Colonial Theory, Decolonial Theory, and Critical Indigenous Pedagogies—we extend them by conceptualizing two novel constructs that emerge from Palestinian students' experiences: 'settler colonial internal bordering' and 'indigenous temporary immigration.'

### **Research Questions**

Drawing on the identified gaps in current scholarship, this study aims to understand the daily experiences of Palestinian students who temporarily immigrate to their ancestral homeland. The following research questions guide this qualitative inquiry:

1. How do Palestinian students from East Jerusalem experience their daily educational mobility between East Jerusalem and West Jerusalem as a form of temporary immigration?
2. How do these students navigate cultural and linguistic differences as they move between two worlds daily?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study draws on three interconnected theoretical frameworks to analyze the educational experiences of Palestinian students. Settler colonial theory helps us understand the structural conditions that shape educational access in contested territories. Decolonial theory provides tools for examining how students engage with dominant knowledge systems while maintaining critical consciousness. Critical Indigenous Pedagogies reveal how educational participation can serve collective resistance rather than individual assimilation. Together, these frameworks allow us to extend international student mobility theory into settler-colonial contexts, where traditional domestic/international boundaries are blurred.

### **Settler Colonial Theory**

Settler colonial theory provides the foundational framework for understanding the structural conditions within which Palestinian students pursue higher education. Unlike other forms of colonialism focused on resource extraction, settler colonialism seeks to eliminate indigenous populations and replace them with settler societies (Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2015). Patrick Wolfe's formulation of the "logic of elimination" is particularly relevant, as it reveals how settler colonialism operates through various mechanisms, including education, to transform indigenous subjects and territories.

In the context of East Jerusalem, settler colonial theory sheds light on how educational policies and practices are intertwined with processes of land

appropriation, demographic restructuring, and cultural erasure (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019; Abu-Saad, 2019). The daily movement of Palestinian students from East to West Jerusalem occurs within what Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) terms "settler colonial surveillance," where indigenous mobility is constantly monitored, controlled, and used as a mechanism of elimination.

Recent scholarship on settler colonial education reveals how institutions function as "settler colonial formations" that simultaneously provide opportunities for indigenous advancement while serving the broader project of cultural transformation (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Arvin et al., 2013). For Palestinian students, Israeli universities represent both sites of potential empowerment and institutions designed to assimilate them into settler colonial knowledge systems. The theory's emphasis on territorial control helps explain the "internal bordering" that Palestinian students navigate daily. Unlike traditional international borders, these internal borders within settler colonial systems serve to maintain indigenous populations in states of controlled inclusion, present enough to serve settler colonial needs but are marginalized enough to prevent genuine self-determination (Veracini, 2022; Wolfe, 2016).

Contemporary applications of settler colonial theory to educational contexts reveal how cultural identity intersects with academic achievement and psychological well-being among indigenous students within colonial institutions. Studies examining indigenous students in settler-colonial contexts have demonstrated that a strong heritage identity serves as a protective factor against discrimination while facilitating academic success (Smith & Silva, 2011; Coulthard, 2014). For Palestinian students in Israeli institutions, maintaining a strong Palestinian identity while developing academic competence requires sophisticated identity management strategies with ongoing colonization.

### **Decolonial Theory**

Decolonial theory, as developed by scholars such as Aníbal Quijano (2000), Walter D. Mignolo (2011), and Ramón Grosfoguel (2007), offers crucial insights into how Palestinian students navigate dominant knowledge systems while maintaining their indigenous consciousness. This theoretical approach focuses on unlearning dominant ways of knowing and making space for indigenous knowledge systems (Parent, 2023). The framework has been enriched by indigenous and Native American thinkers, who offer grassroots perspectives that both support and challenge these foundational theorists (Arias, 2018).

The concept of "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo, 2009) is particularly relevant here. It describes how colonized peoples can strategically engage with colonial knowledge systems while remaining critically aware of their limitations and biases. For Palestinian students in Israeli institutions, this plays out through what Mignolo calls "border thinking"—the ability to think from the colonial difference without being trapped by it. Al-Hardan (2014) demonstrated how decolonial approaches can be applied specifically to Palestinian contexts, providing tools to critique dominant research paradigms while fostering more authentic engagement with Palestinian experiences. This framework helps explain

how students can simultaneously excel within Israeli academic systems while maintaining their Palestinian identity and political commitments.

The decolonial emphasis on "pluriversality" (Escobar, 2018) versus "universality" provides tools for understanding how Palestinian students challenge dominant knowledge frameworks by bringing Palestinian perspectives into academic discussions. This aligns with recent scholarship on "decolonizing the university," which examines how marginalized students transform academic spaces through their presence and participation (Bhambra et al., 2018; Ahmed, 2017).

Decolonial theory's focus on the "coloniality of knowledge" (Quijano, 2000) helps frame Palestinian students' educational experiences as encounters with knowledge systems designed to marginalize non-Western ways of knowing. However, the theory also emphasizes agency and resistance, providing frameworks for understanding how students can use colonial education for decolonial purposes. Recent developments in decolonial theory emphasize how daily engagement with colonial institutions creates opportunities for what scholars term "everyday decolonization" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). The daily border crossings of Palestinian students create space for this everyday decolonization, as they develop sophisticated strategies for maintaining indigenous consciousness while accessing colonial knowledge systems.

### **Critical Indigenous Pedagogies**

Critical indigenous Pedagogies offer important frameworks for understanding how indigenous peoples navigate colonial educational systems while maintaining cultural sovereignty. Key scholars, such as Smith (2021), Tuck and Yang (2012), and Simpson (2014), have developed approaches that emphasize participatory research methods in support of indigenous self-determination (Blangy et al., 2024). These scholars position decolonization as a political project rooted in indigenous ways of knowing rather than colonial frameworks (Curley et al., 2022). McCarty and Lee (2014) extend this work through their concept of "critical culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy," which emphasizes indigenous education sovereignty and community-based accountability. Simpson's concept of "political life" (2014) is particularly relevant, as it describes how indigenous peoples maintain political existence despite settler colonial attempts at elimination.

This framework helps us understand how Palestinian students' educational choices represent "political life"—strategic decisions that serve both individual advancement and collective survival. When students choose Israeli universities, they are making calculated moves to strengthen Palestinian communities, not simply seeking personal benefits. The concept of "indigenous futurity" (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013; Shay et al., 2024) explains how students view their education as serving Palestinian collective futures rather than assimilating into Israeli society.

Recent scholarship on "indigenous resurgence" (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017) offers valuable tools for understanding Palestinian students' educational participation. Their engagement with Israeli universities can be seen as a resurgence

practice—strategically using colonial systems for indigenous empowerment while maintaining critical awareness of those systems' colonial nature. Dei and Cacciavillani (2024) argue that decolonizing education requires institutions to "reorient themselves toward Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous futurity." Students access the resources and credentials they need while maintaining their Palestinian identity and culture.

The framework's focus on "cultural continuance" despite colonial disruption helps explain how Palestinian students maintain their identity while accessing Israeli education. This approach differs significantly from assimilation models. Rather than expecting students to abandon their Palestinian identity, it recognizes how indigenous peoples can engage with colonial systems while remaining culturally and politically distinct. Sa' di and Masalhas' (2023) recent collection on decolonizing Palestine studies provides important perspectives on how Palestinian scholars lay the foundations for research that centers Indigenous Palestinian voices and experiences.

Critical indigenous pedigrees also emphasize the importance of community accountability and collective responsibility in educational decisions. For Palestinian students, this means that their educational choices are understood as collective strategies serving broader Palestinian liberation goals, not just individual advancement. Students often feel a sense of responsibility to their communities and view their education as a means to build Palestinian capacity and resistance. Arce and colleagues (2024) help us understand educational choices as forms of anticolonial work that maintain cultural integrity while engaging with dominant systems. This pedagogical approach aligns with broader conversations about indigenous education that extend beyond mere inclusion. Shay and colleagues (2024) argued that indigenous education involves fundamentally different knowledge systems and values than Western educational approaches do. For Palestinian students, this means that their educational journeys can be understood as expressions of indigenous futurity—ways of imagining and working toward Palestinian collective futures that remain grounded in Palestinian identity and resistance.

### **Bridging Settler Colonial and Mobility Frameworks**

Each framework addresses a distinct dimension of Palestinian students' experiences that no single theory can capture on its own. International mobility research explains the cultural adaptation processes that students undergo, but it cannot account for why these processes occur within ancestral homelands. Settler colonial theory reveals that structural violence shapes educational access but lacks tools for understanding daily cultural navigation. Decolonial theory offers frameworks for strategic engagement with dominant systems, whereas indigenous pedagogies enable us to understand education as a form of collective resistance. These frameworks are not redundant but complementary—together, they reveal how Palestinian students' mobility operates simultaneously in terms of forced adaptation, strategic positioning, and indigenous futurity.

This study addresses a significant theoretical gap by integrating settler colonial theory with international student mobility research to understand

educational movements within contested territories. While international student mobility scholarship has extensively examined cross-national movement between sovereign states (Berry, 2005; Sam & Berry, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008; Marginson et al., 2010; Shen et al., 2022), it has not adequately theorized mobility within colonially fragmented territories where indigenous populations experience immigration-like conditions without crossing national borders.

Recent developments in international education research have begun to recognize more complex forms of mobility beyond traditional cross-national patterns (Vashisht-Rota, 2025; Hoffmann et al., 2025; Zayim-Kurtay et al., 2025). However, these frameworks continue to assume movement between distinct sovereign territories rather than the daily navigation of colonial internal boundaries that create foreignness within indigenous homelands.

Similarly, settler-colonial scholars have examined how colonization fragments indigenous territories and creates mechanisms of controlled inclusion (Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2015; Maynard, 2017), but have paid limited attention to how these spatial reconfigurations shape educational mobility experiences. Recent scholarship has begun to examine how settler colonial surveillance operates through the regulation of daily movement (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019; Baumann, 2022), yet the educational implications of these mobility constraints remain underexplored.

The daily movement of Palestinian students between East Jerusalem and West Jerusalem reveals what we term "settler colonial internal bordering" boundaries within indigenous territories that create temporary immigration experiences for native populations accessing dominant institutions. Unlike domestic minority students, who navigate familiar national systems, or international students, who voluntarily cross sovereign borders with return options to stable homelands, Palestinian students experience constrained mobility within ancestral territories that colonization has restructured to create daily foreignness.

This theoretical integration contributes to both studies by revealing hybrid forms of educational mobility that transcend conventional domestic/international distinctions while extending settler-colonial analysis to include daily cultural adaptation processes that serve indigenous strategic positioning rather than colonial assimilation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study employed a narrative inquiry approach to understand the daily educational experiences of Palestinian students as they transitioned from East Jerusalem to West Jerusalem (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008; Clandinin, 2023; Smith, 2021). Narrative inquiry was particularly appropriate for investigating how students make sense of their daily mobility experiences and the meanings they assign to crossing internal boundaries within their ancestral homeland. The narrative tradition emphasizes understanding experiences from

participants' perspectives, focusing on the stories they construct rather than imposing external interpretations (Riessman, 2008). This approach aligns with the study's goal of revealing how Palestinian students navigate and narrate their daily experiences of temporary immigration within contested urban spaces (Chase, 2023; Denzin & Lincoln, 2023).

### **Data collection**

This study emerged from a larger research program examining the experiences of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem in Israeli higher education. Between 2020 and 2024, we conducted 47 interviews across two interconnected research projects: one focusing on the educational dreams and challenges faced by Palestinian students (Diab, 2024) and another examining the intersectional experiences and gender-related challenges of Palestinian women in higher education. For this focused analysis of daily mobility experiences, we employed purposive sampling to select participants whose narratives consistently addressed themes of border crossing and temporary immigration. During the initial analysis of all 47 interview transcripts, 27 participants devoted substantial portions of their interviews to mobility-related experiences, making their stories particularly relevant to this focused analysis.

The selection criteria included (1) participants who discussed daily travel between East Jerusalem and West Jerusalem in detail, (2) those who described cultural and linguistic adaptation strategies, (3) participants who reflected on identity negotiations during border crossing, and (4) those whose narratives demonstrated thematic saturation across our three main analytical categories. This purposive selection process ensured that our sample represented the phenomenon of interest while maintaining analytical depth. Their experiences provided rich data that achieved thematic saturation across three main areas: systematic barriers and daily struggles, cultural adaptation strategies, and identity negotiations within contested spaces.

This study focuses specifically on daily mobility experiences through the lens of settler colonial and decolonial theories. This analytical framework reveals dimensions of temporary immigration that were only partially visible in broader projects. The approach aligns with established practices in qualitative research that emphasize revisiting rich data set with new theoretical questions while remaining true to participants' original narratives (Heaton, 2008).

To ensure analytical rigor, we approached the selected transcripts with relevant research questions. We systematically recoded them from the ground up, focusing specifically on themes related to border crossing and temporary immigration. This process allowed new patterns to emerge while benefiting from the contextual richness of the original interviews (Hinds et al., 1997).

The interviews were conducted in Arabic between 2020 and 2024 and lasted 60–90 minutes each. The interview protocols explored students' daily experiences, cultural navigation strategies, identity negotiations, and educational goals. The participants were fully informed about the research purpose and voluntarily consented to participate, with explicit assurances about data confidentiality and their right to withdraw. The participants consented to their data being used for

related educational research purposes within the broader research program (Johnston, 2014; Smith, 2021).

### **Participants**

The final analytical sample comprised 27 Palestinian students from East Jerusalem enrolled in Israeli universities. All participants held Jerusalem residency status and had been studying in Israeli institutions for at least two academic years. The participants' ages ranged from 20--26 years, with 14 females and 13 males.

### **Data analysis**

We employed thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) approach, combined with narrative analysis techniques to understand how students constructed stories about their daily mobility experiences (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry shaped our analytical approach by keeping us attentive to how students storied their border-crossing experiences—the temporal sequences they emphasized, the meanings they assigned to daily encounters, and the ways they positioned themselves as actors within settler colonial constraints. This meant that we coded not just for themes but also for narrative patterns: how students framed their journeys, what turning points they identified, and how they connected individual experiences to collective Palestinian histories. The analysis process involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts, initial coding focused on mobility and border-crossing themes, pattern identification across cases, and theme development via our theoretical frameworks.

We analyzed data across three specific dimensions that emerged from the recoding process: systematic barriers and daily struggles; cultural adaptation and navigation strategies; and identity negotiations within contested spaces. The interview transcripts were translated from Arabic to English via Claude AI. To ensure accuracy and preserve cultural nuance, the lead researcher—a native Arabic speaker—carefully reviewed all translations, checking for semantic equivalence and correcting any mistranslations of culturally specific terms or expressions. Particular attention was given to preserving the emotional tone and political significance embedded in the students' original Arabic narratives.

### **Ethical considerations**

All the interviews were conducted in accordance with ethical protocols that prioritized participant safety, given the sensitive political context and potential surveillance concerns affecting Palestinian students (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015). Data confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the research process. All identifying information was removed, and participants were represented by pseudonyms in this study to protect their identities and ensure their safety within this politically charged environment. We were particularly mindful of the risks associated with Palestinian students' visibility in Israeli academic institutions. We took measures to ensure that no individual could be identified through the combination of demographic details, quotes, or experiences shared in their narratives.

## FINDINGS

This study examined how Palestinian students from East Jerusalem experienced daily educational mobility as temporary immigrants and navigated cultural and linguistic differences during their academic journeys. The analysis of the interview narratives revealed three interconnected themes that directly addressed these research questions.

Systemic Barriers and Daily Struggles demonstrated how checkpoint crossings, document verification, and institutional discrimination created immigration-like conditions within the ancestral homeland. Cultural and linguistic navigation revealed the sophisticated strategies that students developed to acquire Hebrew and maintain cross-cultural relationships while preserving their Palestinian identity. Identity and educational resistance demonstrated how students perceived their educational participation as a collective investment in Palestinian advancement rather than individual assimilation.

These themes illuminate a distinct form of border crossing within a contested urban space that requires complex strategies that serve both academic success and cultural preservation. Pseudonyms are used to identify all participants, protect their identities and ensure confidentiality in this politically sensitive context. The findings present participants' voices as they described confronting academic, social, and political challenges in their pursuit of higher education.

### **Systemic barriers and daily struggles**

The educational pathways of Palestinian students were fundamentally shaped by structural obstacles that extended far beyond typical academic challenges. Their journeys to and from campus involved navigating security apparatuses and institutional barriers that cascaded into their academic performance and daily lives. This theme examined how students navigated military checkpoints, managed financial pressures while working and studying, overcame transportation challenges, and confronted institutional discrimination while demonstrating remarkable academic perseverance.

The most immediate and persistent challenge students faced was the presence of military checkpoints that regulated their access to education. Falasteen's daily experience captured the exhausting reality of this militarized educational pathway:

"I have to go to bed early to wake up early and catch the bus heading from the camp to Jerusalem at six in the morning. The occupation soldiers intentionally delay me for an hour to an hour and a half. A female soldier pulls me by my arm and drags me to a small room designated for searches, then searches me thoroughly and begins interrogating me... This happens daily."

The intensity of this daily ordeal was compounded when students' Palestinian identity became a target for harassment. Quds's name itself became a source of particular scrutiny: Her name caused her the most pain and anguish at the military checkpoint near her residence area in one neighborhood, which was considered an extension of the Shuafat camp, separating it from East Jerusalem. There, residents, including Quds, were subjected to the harshest forms of injustice and provocative searches by Israeli soldiers because of their name.

Quds responded to them harshly, "This is my name, and I am proud of it." The soldiers then directed obscene words, deliberate insults, and ill-treatment at her the whole time, intentionally delaying her at the checkpoint for a long time.

Similar experiences of harassment and delays were reported across different locations and transportation routes. Dalia described her experience crossing the Qalandia checkpoint:

"Each morning, Dalia would bid her parents goodbye and take a series of buses, taxis, and checkpoints to get from the West Bank through East Jerusalem and into West Jerusalem. The toughest part was crossing the chaotic Qalandia checkpoint near her village. There, Dalia had to wait long, winding lines for Israeli soldiers to check her documents, often making her late for class. It was so demoralizing, all that wasted time and energy, not to mention the stress and indignity of it all."

The psychological effects of crossing into West Jerusalem extended beyond areas with checkpoints. One student from a neighborhood without checkpoint barriers described her first educational journey:

"I grew up in one of the remote neighborhoods in East Jerusalem - we do not have checkpoints there to go to West Jerusalem, but it always felt like this foreign, scary place to me. When I finally had to travel there for college, that first time was tough... I took the light rail westbound, and the whole way there, I was shaking with fear. I felt like everyone was staring at me, mainly Jewish people, like I was this strange thing that did not belong there. Like, just by being there, I was somehow threatening to them. The fear was so overwhelming that I felt utterly lost and was not sure I could actually go through with it."

The psychological toll of daily harassment became evident in the students' descriptions of suppressed anger and helplessness. Alyan expressed the internal conflict of enduring daily stops:

"I live across the checkpoint and have to pass through Qalandia every day... many precious hours are wasted every day... there is no freedom... only alienation and estrangement."

The participants frequently discussed anxiety about documentation and legal status during their daily crossings. Khalil explained the constant concern about proper documentation:

"Even though I have a Jerusalem ID, I always carry extra documents - proof of enrollment, letters from the university, anything that might help if soldiers question my presence in West Jerusalem. My friend Ahmad was detained for three hours last month because they did not believe he was a student. The anxiety is constant - am I allowed to be here? Do I have the right documents? What if they decide I do not belong? It is the fear of being forced out, of never feeling secure or truly at home in the place where you were born."

Nour expanded on the bureaucratic challenges:

"I keep photocopies of everything - ID, student card, university letters - in multiple bags because I am terrified of losing them. Without proper documentation, you become illegal in your own city. My grandmother always tells us stories approximately 1948, how, overnight, people became foreigners in their own homes. That is how I feel every day - like they could tell me I cannot be here anymore, just like that. These papers remind us we are never truly safe, never truly home."

The sense of powerlessness was echoed by another student, who described a more personalized form of harassment:

"Every day, the same policeman stops me...and checks everything in my car...and I keep silent and look and explode inside...and I want to shout and tell him...why only me? Because I am Palestinian? However, I keep silent...and recently they put a checkpoint at the entrance of our village; every time they search my body, I feel like a stranger in my village."

These systemic barriers created additional pressures within students' home communities. Dahlia found herself defending her educational pursuits to neighbors who questioned her late returns from university:

"How are you, Auntie, returning home at this time? May God protect you and take care of yourself. Education is not necessary until this hour. You will not benefit from the degree because a girl's real place, in the end, is her husband's home."

Despite these overwhelming obstacles, the students demonstrated remarkable persistence in pursuing their education. The financial burden of Israeli tuition fees added to the stress. The students described economic pressure in personal terms:

"As I mentioned earlier, the financial situation was part of the basic difficulties that took up a large space in my thinking during the university stage, but with time and with working during studies in a clothing store, which helped my parents with university expenses, I felt comfortable."

The complex dynamics of family financial support revealed both pride and guilt among the students. One participant reflected:

"Honestly, my financial situation was half and half, although my family disagreed with my specialization. However, they provided support and financial support, especially. They used to give me and not withhold a shekel from me, but I stood in front of the mirror and said it is a shame I am wearing them out so much and my expenses are too much for them, why do not I try to help them, I mean, my family does not need to pay the entire tuition, let them pay half."

Transport challenges extended the daily struggle beyond checkpoints. Khalil described how basic mobility became a significant obstacle:

"I faced hardship with this, even though the college's location is considered close to where I live. At first, I used public transportation (buses). I would often arrive late to my lectures because the bus took between an hour and an hour and a half to get me to campus due to severe morning traffic. People were going to work, school, or various departments and institutions to take care of something, so the trip was long. Sometimes, you would fall asleep on the bus because of how slow it moved."

The challenge of balancing work and studies created another layer of difficulty. Ahmad explained:

"I work and study simultaneously to avoid falling into hardship. My problem is that I do not have enough time to keep up with my studies at home, nor the chance to put in longer hours at work. As for my friends, some work even more than I and undoubtedly face greater difficulties. A small minority do not work due to their families' good financial status and have no issues with their studies."

Even within academic institutions, students encounter institutional racism in their interactions with administrative staff. Fadi experienced direct verbal harassment:

"The registrar mockingly gave him the form, saying, 'Study hard for the psychometric, Arab!'" This incident represented just one example of casual discrimination that students faced in supposedly neutral academic spaces.

Despite facing these multiple, intersecting barriers, students maintain their determination to succeed academically. Their persistence often comes at significant personal cost, as reflected in one student's summary:

"After all the problems, difficulties, and obstacles that I faced not once or twice, more than once, in the end I was determined about my goal and my dream and I was able to achieve it, so I felt that this step I

accomplished in my life, so I am proud of this step that I took in my life and I am very happy that I was able to accomplish it as a first step."

### **Language, cultural adaptation, and social integration**

The linguistic landscape of Israeli universities posed complex challenges for Palestinian students from East Jerusalem, which extended far beyond simple language acquisition. Hebrew proficiency became both an academic necessity and a cultural battleground, whereas social relationships were developed through the careful navigation of political and cultural differences.

Students' initial encounters with Hebrew-dominated academic environments often left them feeling voiceless and excluded from classroom participation. Hana described the isolation of being unable to engage academically:

"I remember in my first year of major, I would not ask questions during lectures. I would go home, research answers on Google and YouTube, and conduct self-study because I did not dare raise my hand to ask a question in Hebrew. I could understand what they were saying but could not participate in answering."

The students described feeling overwhelmed by Hebrew academic terminology and specialized vocabulary that went well beyond the conversational Hebrew. The academic rigor of institutions such as Hebrew University added another dimension to these language challenges, as one student recalled:

"Academically, there was great difficulty at the beginning owing to language, place, people, and my feeling of fear in a new place, because this is natural when separating from a place (high school) and starting in a new place (university), but with time everything began to disappear gradually, especially since Hebrew University courses are difficult and require more time and effort than other universities, and this is what distinguishes it and makes us as students in it distinguished and capable."

The emotional toll of linguistic exclusion became evident in the students' descriptions of frustration and isolation. Rasha captured the internal struggle of having ideas but lacking the linguistic tools to express them:

"There were times when I had so much to say, so many ideas to contribute, but I could not find the right words in Hebrew. It was frustrating and isolating."

Students recognized that language learning in this context extended beyond academic utility to encompass more profound questions of cultural value and hierarchy. Nour articulated this cultural dimension:

"It is not just about learning a new language. It is about feeling that your own language, your own culture, is somehow less important, less valuable."

This sentiment reflected a broader understanding among students that Hebrew proficiency was viewed as necessary for survival rather than enrichment:

"Palestinians living in East Jerusalem view learning Hebrew as a skill for survival rather than simply an academic tool for personal development. This underscores the importance of mastering Hebrew to navigate society and seize opportunities rather than just a desire to engage with the language and culture on a deeper level."

Students frequently described their first day as overwhelming, as they faced simultaneous challenges of linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and social isolation. Many felt conspicuous due to visible markers of Palestinian identity and struggled to navigate campus without Hebrew proficiency. The first-day experiences often involved profound social disorientation and cultural shock. The process of social adaptation involves navigating unfamiliar behavioral norms and cultural practices. The students described feeling like outsiders observing incomprehensible social dynamics.

Despite initial barriers, many students described gradual progress in building relationships with Jewish classmates. The evolution from suspicion to cooperation was captured in one student's reflection:

"At the beginning, there was difficulty in communicating with my Jewish colleagues, first because of the language and second because of the political situation in the country that they are our enemies and we should not talk to them because they are all bad, so I was avoiding talking to them most of the time, but after mixing with them and spending a long time with them, I started dealing with them in a good way."

This transformation often led to meaningful collaboration and mutual support. The same student continued:

"I became aware that some of my Jewish colleagues are peaceful people who are with me in the same place for one goal, and this helps me to get to know their ideas, culture, customs and others, which increases the percentage of awareness and knowledge that makes me cautious in places and cooperative in other places with them, and now I have many Jewish friends."

Academic collaboration has become a pathway for building cross-cultural relationships. The students described how shared academic goals facilitated friendship:

"During my practicum experience in the hospital, I was in contact with Jewish students. I did many assignments with Jewish students, and I now have Jewish and Arab friends. Jewish students helped me when I faced difficulty in learning Hebrew and showed me their summaries. Now, my relationships with Jewish and Arab students are good; we have a position of respect between us."

Some encounters transcended academic cooperation to become deeper cultural exchanges. Laila described a transformative conversation:

"One day, after class, he asked me to explain the meaning of a Mahmoud Darwish poem he was struggling to translate. I was stunned that he even knew Darwish, let alone appreciated his work. We ended up having this amazing conversation about Palestinian literature and identity. It completely humanized him in my eyes."

However, political tensions remain an underlying challenge in campus relationships. Students noted institutional double standards:

"I also resented the double standard wherein Jewish students were allowed to publicly celebrate their holidays and national events on campus while Arab Palestinian national expressions were suppressed. It undermined the facade of coexistence they were trying to project."

Some students found it easier to connect with other Palestinian students than to bridge cultural divides with Jewish peers. Hayat expressed this preference simply:

"I find it hard to connect with Jews. I do not get them... I feel at ease with Arabs in the program."

Students developed strategic approaches to social interaction that prioritized safety and conflict avoidance. They learned to navigate conversations carefully:

"Adaptation mechanisms employed by Palestinian students in interaction with the Jewish Israeli other within courses and throughout the campus - is to look for the nonthreatening common and talk about it, and avoid discussion and discourse about controversial topics such as complex political-religious and national issues."

The linguistic challenges extended beyond classroom participation to the basic navigation of university facilities and services. The students described practical difficulties that highlighted their outsider status:

"On the other hand, the educational materials were very difficult because I was in the literary track and did not have sufficient background in scientific subjects such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry, and the scientific terminology differed from the spoken terminology in the language, which is a foregone conclusion in every language, so the difficulty was compounded, and most of the lecturers were Israelis and could not explain and clarify except in Hebrew."

Professional preparation became closely tied to language competency, as students recognized that Hebrew skills would be crucial for their future careers. The broader implications are as follows:

"All of us - myself included - need language strengthening courses, and this will come at the expense of our years of study and specialization. A student may fail a certain course owing to poor Hebrew skills."

Despite these challenges, students develop resilience and independence through their linguistic struggles. Many described a sense of pride in their growing capabilities and determination to persist despite obstacles.

### **Identity, Belonging, and Cultural Resistance**

The experiences of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem in Israeli universities revealed complex negotiations of identity, belonging, and cultural preservation. They consistently described feeling caught between worlds while actively maintaining their Palestinian identity and developing forms of educational resistance.

The fundamental challenge of belonging was captured in Hiam's geographic and political confusion:

"I always felt Palestinian...but like a stranger and a refugee in my homeland... Is this Shuafat (a neighborhood in east Jerusalem)? Or the State of Israel? Shuafat has Palestinian symbols...but when I take the light rail toward the campus...everything is not Palestinian...not the roads, not the buildings, and not the people."

This sense of displacement in one's homeland permeated many students' experiences of moving between Palestinian neighborhoods and Israeli institutional spaces.

Students described the psychological burden of navigating dual identities and conflicting loyalties. Laila articulated this challenge:

"As a Jerusalemite Palestinian, you are always straddling two worlds, not fully fitting into either. You face pressure from both sides to conform or pick a lane. It can be incredibly isolating and disorienting, especially when you are young."

However, she also described her approach to maintaining authenticity:

"For me, although, staying true to myself, my faith, my people, my values, was nonnegotiable. This meant embracing my Palestinian roots while still engaging Israeli society pragmatically. It meant advocating for my community unapologetically through my words, actions, and mere presence in Jewish-dominated spaces."

The experience of forced silence emerged as a recurring theme in students' descriptions of their campus lives. Michail described the internal struggle of suppressing his Palestinian voice:

"In the ID card...you are Palestinian...and you also live in Palestine...but until the age of 16, everything was normal...kind of...and then one day, a good friend of the family was killed by Israeli soldiers...a young man almost my age...and since then, I am a different person... I am fighting with myself...in order not to open my mouth...and not let anything out of me...in front of the Jews, you keep silent."

This internal battle translated into daily survival strategies. Amina described how she had learned to change herself:

"I have developed what I call 'checkpoint personality disorder.' I have my Palestinian self at home and my calm, quiet self for crossing checkpoints and attending university. I practice in the mirror—how to look harmless, how to smile the right way, how to answer questions in Hebrew without showing that I am angry or scared. It is the same thing people do when they move to a new country to fit in and stay safe, except I have to do it every single day in the place where I was born. The mental energy it takes to put on this act every day is exhausting."

These performances stemmed from a genuine fear of consequences. The fear underlying this silence was rooted in real consequences for expressing Palestinian identity. Students understood the stakes: "Fear to lose your ID card...to lose your job with the Jews...and you remain alone... We are few, and they (the Jews) are many."

This asymmetry of power shaped the daily interactions and self-expression of Palestinian students from East Jerusalem when they moved west to Israeli academia.

Students also face challenges in terms of their identity within their own families and communities. Rasha described feeling alienated from her family due to her educational pursuits:

"I am passionate about learning... Unlike my family, none of them pursue education... I am the one in my family pursuing education. Sometimes, they find it hard to accept. They mockingly assign labels to me. However, in public, they support me... I often feel like an outsider within my family, as they fail to grasp my choices."

The university environment itself was described as systematically excluding the Palestinian presence and language. Fatima observed:

"As you walk through the university halls, you do not find any signs in Arabic. Even official administrative announcements and faculty

bulletins related to important student matters, such as language courses, tutoring, and job postings, are in Hebrew only, preventing the vast majority of Arab students from understanding the registration steps and, in some cases, exam dates due to their limited proficiency in Hebrew. I can say that Hebrew University is considered a place exclusively for Jews. There is no place for Palestinians or their language there."

The initial university experience often involved profound disorientation and isolation. Yasmeeen described her first day:

"On my first day at the university, I felt lost. It was a tough day for a girl like me who knew nothing about the university and the educational environment in Israel. I wandered around, searching for Arab students to ask for help. However, I could not find any. Eventually, I managed to find my way with great difficulty. Sometimes, your intelligence does not help you in a strange environment."

Students experienced systematic marginalization in university governance and representation. Riham described institutional indifference to Palestinian student concerns:

"Palestinian students constitute a small group at the university, so we live in a state of deliberate marginalization in all aspects. We have applied many times to the Student Council demanding the improvement of the prayer place on par with the place designated for Jews, and we (hear barking on this side and not grinding) - they listen and promise to follow up. After that, it is as if nothing happened."

Postgraduation employment discrimination was commonly reported, with students describing extended job searches and limited opportunities despite their Israeli credentials.

Despite these challenges, the students described their educational persistence as a form of resistance and cultural preservation. They understood their presence in Israeli institutions as meaningful beyond individual advancement. Their commitment to education was framed as a form of steadfastness and cultural continuity, even when facing systematic efforts to marginalize their identity and erase their presence.

Students developed strategies for maintaining their Palestinian identity while navigating institutional spaces designed to exclude them. They described deliberate choices to preserve their cultural markers and resist complete assimilation, as Riham summarized:

"In addition to concealing our nationality, we strive to showcase our presence through attire, wearing hijabs, cooking dishes, speaking Arabic, and engaging in traditional dances and music. When conversing in Hebrew, we deliberately maintain an Arabic accent. Asserting ourselves

through a version of Hebrew distinct from that spoken by our Jewish peers."

Family support played a crucial role in helping students maintain their Palestinian identity while pursuing Israeli education. One student explained how her family framed this challenge strategically:

"My family understands that going to Israeli schools while staying Palestinian is not easy. My father tells me, 'Learn what they have to teach you, but keep your heart Palestinian.' We are not trying to become like them; we are being smart about it. When I accidentally speak Hebrew at home, my grandmother reminds me that language shapes how you think, but she also knows that speaking Hebrew well helps all of us. The important thing is remembering why I am there and who I am doing this for."

The collective memory of Palestinian historical experiences shaped students' contemporary identity formation. Students described how political events and family histories influenced their sense of Palestinian belonging. Mahmoud's childhood memory illustrated this connection:

"I was 6 years old when Ariel Sharon entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque... My father was late that Friday and did not return immediately after the prayer. I was very worried and saw all the events on television."

Students expressed their Palestinian identity through symbolic representations and cultural artifacts. Their artistic expressions revealed deep connections to land, history, and cultural traditions. Ameen included a map of Palestine along with a deed in his art project; to him, Palestine was not something up for sale or negotiation but the sacred land that rightfully belonged to its inhabitants. He symbolically attached his grandfather's house key to represent the right to return home.

The ultimate success of students such as Falasteen was framed as proving Palestinian capability and dignity within systems designed to exclude them. Her father's pride captured this significance:

"My father visits me in my office with tears of joy in his eyes, that I reached what he wanted and achieved what I want, and to prove my name Falasteen in the Israeli courts and chambers of justice, to end my suffering with those who used to call me mockingly 'Israel.'"

Students understood their Palestinian identity as encompassing both personal and collective narratives:

"To be Palestinian and Jerusalemite means you have a personal and collective narrative with testimonies from the occupation and positions

toward the Nakba and the past and recent history, together with the present."

This definition captures how individual educational journeys are understood within broader historical and political contexts of experience and resistance.

Through their persistence in Israeli academic institutions, Palestinian students demonstrated forms of cultural resistance that went beyond mere survival to encompass active preservation of identity, community solidarity, and commitment to Palestinian cultural continuity in the face of systematic marginalization.

These three themes revealed the complex experiences of Palestinian students pursuing higher education across Jerusalem's divide. Their narratives demonstrated both systematic barriers and creative strategies for navigating challenging educational environments while maintaining their Palestinian identity and achieving academic success.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study examined how Palestinian students from East Jerusalem experience daily educational mobility and navigate cultural boundaries within the contested urban space. The analysis identified three interconnected aspects of Palestinian students' educational experiences. Students experienced their daily movements as temporary immigrations within their ancestral homeland, developed sophisticated strategies for navigating cultural and linguistic differences while preserving Palestinian identity, and viewed their education as a strategic investment in collective Palestinian advancement rather than individual assimilation.

Palestinian students' daily checkpoint crossings, document verification requirements, and cultural code switching create temporary immigration experiences that occur within ancestral territories rather than across national borders. This differs fundamentally from conventional immigration in three ways: students never leave their homeland, their movement is not voluntary but constrained by settler colonial geography, and their 'return' each evening to East Jerusalem offers no escape from colonial control. We use 'temporary immigration' deliberately to capture how students experience immigration-like conditions—the cultural foreignness, documentation requirements, language barriers, and identity negotiations typical of international mobility—without the geographic displacement that defines traditional migration. It is essentially a sense of being an immigrant in one's own city.

Students such as Falasteen, who woke before dawn to navigate military checkpoints that deliberately delay her for hours, demonstrate how settlers' colonial internal boundaries function as quasi-international borders requiring immigration-like adaptation processes.

The harassment targeting students' Palestinian names reveals how these borders regulate culture, not just movement. When Quds faces verbal abuse specifically because her name means "Jerusalem," these attacks threaten Palestinian cultural continuity itself (Al-Hardan, 2014; Sa'di & Masalha, 2023).

Students describe feeling "alienated and estranged" in their own city—a displacement condition that mirrors immigration experiences but occurs within indigenous territory (Berry, 2005; Sam & Berry, 2010).

This systematic barrier system functions as what Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) terms "settler colonial surveillance," designed to fragment Palestinian space and create foreignness within the ancestral homeland. These daily encounters serve multiple colonial functions that align with Wolfe's (2006) "logic of elimination": they reinforce settler dominance, consume Palestinian energy that could support collective advancement, and normalize indigenous marginality (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013).

Students develop sophisticated approaches that extend far beyond simple language acquisition to encompass what we identify as "strategic indigenous positioning." Students such as Hana, who initially avoided classroom participation due to Hebrew limitations, develop dual competencies that enable success in Hebrew environments while maintaining Arabic cultural practices (Smith, 2021; McCarty & Lee, 2014).

Students practice strategic code switching and selective cultural visibility as indigenous responses to the colonial linguistic hierarchy rather than assimilation (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). When Laila discusses Mahmoud Darwish with her Jewish classmates, she utilizes Palestinian cultural knowledge as intellectual capital rather than hiding her identity (Mignolo, 2009). Students create spaces for cross-cultural engagement without abandoning Palestinian political commitments (Curley et al., 2022; Arce et al., 2024).

The identity negotiations reveal nuanced cultural continuity practices that reject the typical assimilation demands of colonial education (Grande, 2015). Laila's "checkpoint personality disorder", which involves performing nonthreatening behavior for surveillance while maintaining an authentic Palestinian identity in community spaces, represents indigenous survival knowledge rather than internalized colonization (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015; Simpson, 2014).

Students consistently frame their educational participation as forms of resistance and collective investment rather than individual advancement (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Simpson, 2017). The family's strategic framing—"Learn what they have to teach you, but keep your heart Palestinian"—demonstrates how students maintain oppositional consciousness while accessing colonial knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 2021). This aligns with recent scholarship on indigenous futurity and educational sovereignty (Shay et al., 2024; Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024).

Students understand their presence in Israeli institutions as meaningful beyond personal achievement, viewing educational success as serving broader Palestinian liberation goals. Students maintain "Palestinian hearts" while acquiring "Israeli credentials", strategic engagement serving collective Palestinian goals rather than individual assimilation (Simpson, 2014; Coulthard, 2014).

### **Theoretical Contributions**

These findings reveal significant gaps in both settler colonial and international mobility scholarship. While international student mobility research has developed frameworks for cross-national cultural adaptation (Berry, 2005; Sam & Berry, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008; Hoffmann et al., 2025), these theories assume voluntary movement between sovereign nation-states. Conversely, settler colonial scholarship has examined territorial fragmentation and indigenous elimination (Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2015; Coulthard, 2014) but has paid limited attention to daily educational mobility within colonially restructured territories.

Our concept of “settler colonial internal bordering” builds on Veracini’s (2022) work on territorial control, revealing how colonial boundaries within indigenous territories create temporary immigration experiences. Students’ daily checkpoint crossings function as “technologies of colonial subjectification” that attempt to transform Palestinian political identity through repeated encounters with settler authority. This builds on recent scholarship that demonstrates how settler colonialism operates through everyday practices rather than solely through spectacular violence (Arvin et al., 2013; Baumann, 2022).

We propose “indigenous temporary immigration” as a daily cultural adaptation within an ancestral homeland that colonization has restructured to create a sense of foreignness (Marginson et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2008). This extends international mobility theory by revealing how colonial geography creates immigration-like experiences without cross-national movement while contributing to settler colonial scholarship by examining how daily educational mobility serves indigenous strategic positioning rather than colonial assimilation. Our framework of “strategic indigenous positioning” shows how students develop dual competencies while maintaining oppositional consciousness (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000). Students use Palestinian cultural knowledge as intellectual capital while acquiring Hebrew academic skills for decolonial rather than assimilationist purposes (Al-Hardan, 2014). This builds on calls for understanding decolonial practice as strategic engagement rather than complete separation from colonial systems (Smith, 2021; Curley et al., 2022).

### **Implications**

The Palestinian case offers insights into how indigenous populations navigate dominant educational systems within contested territories globally. Our theoretical framework may illuminate educational mobility in other contexts where colonial or ethnic divisions create internal boundaries, providing insight into the complexities of educational access and opportunity. Native American students attending mainstream U.S. universities face similar challenges in maintaining indigenous identity while engaging with dominant institutions (Smith, 2021; Grande, 2015). Aboriginal students in Australian universities navigate comparable tensions between indigenous cultural preservation and colonial knowledge acquisition (Simpson, 2017; Shay et al., 2024).

The voices of Palestinian students serve as counternarratives to dominant international education discourses that frame mobility as a voluntary opportunity rather than a constrained necessity (OECD, 2025; Shen et al., 2022). Recent

scholarship on Muslim and Arab students reveals similar patterns of strategic navigation and identity management (Al-Krenawi, 2025; Al-Said & Jaber, 2025). Palestinian experiences suggest that educational mobility can operate within colonial control systems that limit rather than expand opportunities for self-determination (Wind, 2024; Barakat et al., 2025).

Their practices suggest alternative models that prioritize collective advancement over individual assimilation, offering counterexamples to dominant narratives that position cultural adaptation as necessarily beneficial (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013; Mersh & Auburn, 2021). While mainstream scholarship celebrates cross-cultural exchange and the development of global competency (Marginson et al., 2010; Vashisht-Rota, 2025), Palestinian students demonstrate how educational persistence can serve as a means of cultural preservation and collective resistance within colonial educational systems (Asali Nuseibeh et al., 2024; Barakat et al., 2025).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study focuses on Palestinian students from East Jerusalem who hold Jerusalem residency status, representing the specific population that experiences daily temporary immigration within a contested urban space. The narrative methodology captures experiences at specific points rather than tracking them longitudinally, limiting understanding of how these experiences develop over time.

Future research could examine these experiences with larger samples of East Jerusalem Palestinian students to explore additional dimensions of temporary immigration and cultural navigation strategies. Longitudinal studies following students throughout their careers would assess whether strategic indigenous positioning ultimately serves the collective advancement of Palestinians as intended. Comparative studies with indigenous students in other settler colonial contexts would test the broader applicability of our theoretical framework.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined Palestinian students' daily educational mobility between East Jerusalem and West Jerusalem, revealing their experiences as temporary immigrants within settler colonial internal bordering systems. The analysis identified three interconnected findings: students experienced daily movements such as temporary immigration within ancestral territory, developed sophisticated strategies to maintain Palestinian identity while succeeding academically, and conceptualized education as a strategic investment in collective Palestinian advancement rather than individual assimilation.

The research contributes theoretical frameworks that extend both settler colonial and international student mobility scholarships. "Settler colonial internal bordering" and "indigenous temporary immigration" reveal how colonial boundaries within indigenous territories create mobility experiences that challenge conventional distinctions between domestic and international spheres. "Strategic indigenous positioning" captures how students maintain oppositional

consciousness while accessing colonial knowledge systems for collective purposes rather than assimilation.

The navigation strategies of Palestinian students offer insights relevant to indigenous populations globally who engage dominant educational systems while maintaining cultural sovereignty. Their experiences demonstrate how education can serve as a tool for cultural preservation and collective resistance, providing frameworks for indigenous educational approaches that maintain political autonomy while accessing institutional resources. This research emphasizes the importance of centering indigenous voices in educational mobility scholarship while developing theories that account for movement within contested territories shaped by ongoing colonization.

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