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## **Students of an International Degree Programme Go Local**

### **Exploring the Interactions as Reflected by Friendship Families**

#### **Abstract**

This study examines the interactions and communication between a group of African university students and a local Finnish community, as discussed by local friendship family members. Studies show that ensuring the well-being of international students and their study success is challenging in a foreign country. Students tend to remain in their own groups, and interaction with native students and local society may be minimal. To support international students' adjustment, the university unit in question organised volunteer family support. The data consist of interviews with eleven participants. Interpretation of the data is based on the applied theoretical framework of cultural communication and various types of social and emotional support. The findings reveal that the local friendship families and adult friends had international backgrounds and were interested in international issues. The interaction was an evolving process with some difficulties in communication. The process included three main approaches: accepting the students as family members, introducing them to Finnish culture and providing them with emotional and instrumental support. When asked about communication with members of the local community, most participants described the students' encounters with local residents as friendly and beneficial, but some also used the words 'racism' or 'racist' when describing certain situations. A local network is a flexible and versatile resource for supporting international students. The results indicate that friendship families could be used more effectively and better organised as part of the support programme for international students.

**Keywords:** International students, higher education, friendship family, local society, emotional and social support

## **Introduction**

A group of students from the southern part of Africa pursued their first bachelor's degree at a Finnish university beginning in 2017. This was a novel situation for the study environment and local society since the students represented the first large group (n=24) of foreign students from a single country. Also, introducing the model of friendship families to support the students' well-being was a novel endeavour. When the programme ended and the students returned to their home country, almost all of them having obtained a BA degree in education, questions arose about the local friendship families' experiences interacting with the students. The students were reportedly happy to return home, and likewise, a sigh of relief was noticeable among the friendship families. Nevertheless, the programme director (the first author of this article) presumed that the friendship families had played a crucial role in the adjustment and well-being of the African students. This was based on several encounters by the programme director with the Finnish student tutors, friendship families and students themselves at the time.

At the strategic level, Finnish universities emphasise internationalisation as an essential part of studies in the field of education and teaching. To all appearances, the significance of inter- or multicultural competence will grow in the future. Its connection with marketing and efforts at being more competitive is part of a growing agenda (Kauko & Medvedeva 2016). The number of international students has increased in Finland during the last few decades. Whereas approximately 500 international students enrolled for first-year studies at Finnish universities in the year 2000, the number of new students had increased to more than 2 000 in 2019 (Education Statistics Finland 2020). Student mobility is one of the most important ways to achieve the internationalisation of universities. At the same time, the mobility of students has changed and developed from that of individual student choices to participating in exchanges and mobility within specific programmes (Nilsson 2015).

In a situation where universities are increasingly emphasising internationalisation for economic, cultural and educational reasons, discussions about the importance of emotional and social support on the part of the host nation raise the issue of the need for more evaluation and development initiatives. Studies show that making the transition to a foreign country is demanding and that students face numerous challenges. Achieving successful learning outcomes depends on the overall well-being of students (Rienties & Nolan 2014). As Bennett (2009) points out, there is currently a general ongoing discussion among policy makers, research-

ers and potential sponsors about how to create a supportive environment for such programmes.

Only a few existing studies focus on the experiences or reflections of the members in a local community, including families (Wiedemann & Bluml 2009). The data collected from international students mostly reflect interactions from their perspective and not that of the host community (Chai, Van, Wang, Lee & Wang 2020; Grieve 2015; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart 2010; Pappa, Elomaa & Perälä-Littunen 2020; Nilsson 2015). Since relationships with locals are a crucial component of international students' ability to cope with the new situation (Chuah & Singh 2016; Marangell, Arkoudis, & Baik 2018; Rohmann, Florack, Samochowiec & Simonett 2014), it is also important to listen to the lived experiences of the locals when trying to understand the communication process as a whole. Cultural adjustment is the ability to operate effectively within a new cultural environment, and as Woods et al. (2013) recognise, it is a mutual process.

Local friendship families' reflections on their interactions with the African students staying with them and with the local Finnish community as a whole will provide new and important insights for the university unit in question. Hence, the research question is as follows: What kind of support did the families reportedly provide, and how did the families themselves experience their role as friendship families? Further, what does this tell us about these particular intercultural relations? When assessing the participants' experiences with respect to the social and emotional support offered to the students, we used the frameworks proposed by Chuah and Singh (2016) for assessing intercultural relations. Van Bakel, Gerritsen and Van Oudenhoven (2015) studied the impact of a local host in the intercultural competence of expatriates and found several benefits of contact with a local host. In this study, we applied the concept of intercultural competence, whereby interculturality is always ideological and involves an instability in power relations (Dervin 2016, 58; see Hylland Eriksen 2015, 7–8). In addition to the main purpose of this article, there is a need to stimulate discussion about how to develop and improve the support programme for international students at the campus in question.

### **Local arrangements**

To support student learning, Finnish universities provide several services for international students. The students are entitled to the same educational, social, cultural and student health services as the national students. In addition, international students are offered support and help from Eng-

lish-speaking student tutors, tutor teachers and, occasionally, friendship families.

In this case, the goals of the local Finnish university campus are clear: to produce bachelors' degrees, balance the budget of the programme and increase internationalisation. The international students are provided with accommodation by the municipal housing organisation and regular assistance from the university. As an example, they are given the opportunity to be provided with a friendship family. An e-mail was sent to campus personnel (about 120 persons) with the request to pass on information to potential friendship families or friends. Three weeks after the arrival of the students, a student tutor organised a meeting with six initial families who introduced themselves to the students, and the students then had an opportunity to introduce themselves and their backgrounds. The students were active in contacting the persons they found most suitable for them. The entire group of students accepted the offer of spending time with one or more local families. From the university's perspective, there were no prior expectations regarding the amount of communication and depth of relationships between the partners. Four current or previous university staff members initially volunteered their own families as support families for the international students. Before the African students arrived on campus, the university provided staff members with brief training about the culture of the country in question. The training included a presentation and discussions conducted by a leader of the campus's well-being and crisis team and a native expert studying in Finland. Later, the number of friendship families increased as a result of the social networks of the first families. When the students left, they said goodbye to ten families. The first author of this article was an unofficial contact person for the families.

All of the participants, with only one exception, had an international background. They had studied or worked outside of Finland, and they spoke good English and had or had had several international contacts in their everyday lives. It was natural for them to continue their international way of living and to continue to use or want to practise the English language. They wanted to support students facing a challenging new situation. They found the project interesting and their life situations were suitable to the nature of the study; some of the families were experiencing empty nest syndrome at the time, as their own children had left the family home.

The individuals and families who took part in the educational project were invited to do so using two words, *friendship family* or, in Finnish, *tukiperhe*, which can be translated as either host family or friendship family. *Tuki* means mental support but also a concrete pillar or supporting structure. In

that sense, the families could see themselves as a sturdy support to lean on, if needed, or as friends who freely and mutually shared their free time. A buddy programme concept is also used at Finnish universities to support exchange researchers (University of Turku 2020). We employ here a broad concept of family, although this idea is constantly evolving and being discussed in Finland (Statistics Finland 2020). In this article, the term *friendship family* is used to highlight the fact that the students lived by themselves in flats and only stayed with the families for a day or a weekend, although there were some exceptions, such as when a student lived in a family's home for several days or even weeks. The families also provided a home when relationships between students sharing a flat became challenging.

### **Theoretical framework**

There is a significant relationship between community support and student adjustment. Marangell et al. (2018) and Chai et al. (2020) point out that the larger environment may have more influence on students' satisfaction than the university itself. When entering various types of communities, efforts by local families, student organisations and various religious and ethnic groups can also help support academic performance. Nevertheless, it is not easy for international students to find their place within the local community. Researchers suggest that more community-based approaches are needed to support students' well-rounded learning experiences. There are several reasons for examining interaction as a whole. For example, discrimination is one strongly negative experience that may be exposed by adopting a more holistic research approach. Walking home from a university campus and experiencing harassment because of one's appearance is a community issue (Marangell et al. 2018).

Observing the importance of interactions in the local community is a relatively new approach. The development programmes of the host culture can be divided into two main approaches: understanding the broader networks of the local community, including the host university's practices, and understanding the local community from a more limited perspective, by focusing on local host families. Studies are often conducted in English-speaking countries or in countries where the local language is globally spoken. In such situations, the hosts speak their native language while the international students speak several languages. The host culture dominates the power of language. In our study, both of the partners used English as a second or third language. The interactions were therefore complicated by the added risk of misunderstandings. At the same time, the language produced a balanced and equal power situation between the students and families. The extant litera-

ture suggests that the administrators of the educational unit could improve students' homestay outcomes by working with hosts and advising the families on how to help students understand and adapt to cultural differences; cultural learning increases when the families include the students more in activities (Van Bakel, Gerritsen & Van Oudenhoven 2014; Chai et al. 2020; Grieve 2015; Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart 2010; Rollie Rodrigues & Chornet-Roses 2014; Woods et al. 2013).

At Edinburgh Napier University, the friendship family programme is still in its piloting phase, but it follows the model of our Finnish case, where the university is active in pairing friendship families (13) with incoming students (22). The aim of the programme is to support the students' socio-cultural adjustment and to increase the university staff's awareness and understanding of socio-cultural differences (Ecochard & Wright 2017). Overall, the suggestions regarding best practices emphasise the importance of collaborating and having contact with the organisation, e.g. the university administration and the local community, whether as host families or as other participants (Bennet 2009; Marangell et al. 2018; Rollie Rodrigues & Chornet-Roses 2014).

Scholars have identified several predominant paradigms pertaining to culture and cross-cultural communication. In an increasingly global world, communication is as an important factor since culture is created through communication (Delanoy 2020). The set of institutional, political and historical circumstances is the context that emerges and is maintained by a group of people interacting with one another. In other words, this collective, evolving programming of the mind is called culture (Bennet 2009; Pritchard & Skinner 2012). The anthropologist Hylland Eriksen reminds us of a constant cultural flow when new technologies with virtual social network platforms allow people to remain connected in various places at the same time. Such cultural flow also entails a paradox: at the same time that people are increasingly on the move, cultural differences are diminishing and connections between people are increasing, even while an awareness of ethnic identities is becoming more important in social relations (Hylland Eriksen 2007). When the northern European Finnish family culture encounters the southern African student culture, there might be a temptation to highlight cultural differences. However, the aim of this study was not to classify the cultural differences of individuals, but to explore how Finnish family members employed various cultural concepts when describing and constructing their experiences with the group of students from southern Africa. For both parties, an awareness of people's mindsets, strategies and communication skills can either hamper or enhance interactions (Jackson 2020).

The existing literature broadly employs the term intercultural competence (IC) and focuses on the need to identify specific competence orientations along a developmental continuum when focusing on interactions between different cultures (Van Bakel et al. 2014; Bennet 1998; Hammar 2011; Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova & DeJaeghere 2003). Nonetheless, several studies have criticised the notion of using intercultural competence stages or a developmental model that measures intercultural sensitivity (Bolten 2020; Dearsdorff 2015; Dervin 2016; Paige et al. 2003). Instead of the IC model, we apply Dervin's (2016) realistic approach to intercultural competences. After living in Finland for more than twenty years and working as a teacher and researcher in the field of teacher education, he has developed a unique approach to examining the intercultural competence process as it applies to the Finnish higher educational context. The realistic IC model stresses that interculturality is always ideological and involves an instability in power relations. In the educational context, Finland often provides lessons about equality, democracy and human rights to other countries. This philosophy can easily lead to a form of ethnocentrism with implicit and/or explicit feelings of superiority over others; it may also generate moments of self-congratulation (Dervin 2016, 58; see Hylland Eriksen 2015, 7–8). Dervin (2016) asserts that an acceptance of one's failures and successes should appear in any intercultural activity. In concrete terms, instability should be at the centre of intercultural activities, including an instability in terms of how each person feels about the other (Dervin 2016, 82–85).

To study what kind of support the families reportedly provided and how they saw their role as friendship families, we applied Chuah and Singh's (2016) categories of support when assessing intercultural relations. They observed that a lack of such support produces stress, loneliness and many other mental problems. Students pursuing studies in a foreign environment experience the loss of a familiar network. The new learning and teaching environment, where students strain to adjust to new cultural values and probably a new language environment, might also be quite challenging. Social support plays an important role in the well-being of students. Researchers have identified four, sometimes overlapping, categories of support: emotional, practical, informational and social companionship. The main findings show that international students' experiences regarding emotional support, including being accepted by fellow students, were the most important in terms of their well-being. Emotional support includes love, concern, sympathy, approval and encouragement (Chuah & Singh 2016; Summers & Volet 2008; see Van Bakel et al. 2015).

Finally, Chuah and Singh view the concept of support, as well as the concepts of communication, culture and intercultural competences, as processes

constructed during friendship family student interactions. At the same time, their research data only revealed the processes that the local community experienced and reported in the interviews.

## **Method**

Thematic interviews, with features derived from ethnographic interviews, were used as the data collection method. As a director of the educational programme, a teacher and a friendship family mother to five students, the first author of this article was a highly involved field researcher in the study. To some extent, she had her own experiences regarding the daily lives of the students. She followed closely the study's progress, engaged in pedagogical conversations with the teachers and kept in contact with the friendship families. She also worked closely with the academic tutor. As a programme director, she informed the embassy and the financial sector of the country in question about the students' progress and worked with the department administration. As an interpreter, she shared the experienced described in the discussions by those participating in the friendship family programme (see Denzin 2009). In that sense, her close relationship between the researcher and the study participants has its own rewards and pitfalls, as Hylland Eriksen (2015) has pointed out. It is crucial that the researcher maintain the ability to be self-reflexive during the entire research process. Several studies on qualitative research demonstrate how incorporating reflexivity can add authenticity and value to the data (Attia and Edge 2017; Fingerroos 2003; Fingerroos & Jouhki 2014; Pillow 2003).

The third author was responsible for one course unit introducing the Finnish educational system. As a leader of the campus's well-being and crisis team, she contacted the international students for a briefing after a racist attack targeting two African students in another Finnish university town. Nevertheless, the authors did not have easy access to the student network within the local community, and the stories that the researchers sometimes heard were more like gossip.

As is typical of an ethnographic approach, the daily observations and experiences of the researcher tended to raise questions regarding the participants. During such a process, researchers can review their own observations but can also be surprised (Mietola 2007). Qualitative research, which applies phenomenological and ethnographic approaches that enquire into the subjective feelings of participants, has been the most prevalent type of research used to study intercultural learning among students. The ethnographic interview may include references to the same people, places or incidents. The interviewer and the participant may share prior expectations, experiences, gossip, emotions and stories. The interpretation of the material demands exploring the



context in more depth (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2014). A successful ethnographic interview yields interesting new data about the field and participants and produces new cultural information, both of which help the researcher organise the research in a new way (Tolonen & Palmu 2007). In this study, where the participants included friendship families and friends, Bennet's recommendations regarding clear content questions with examples were emphasised (2009). The open-ended interviews included the following questions: 'What was your motivation for joining the programme?', 'What activities did you perform together with the students?', 'What was remarkable or what did you notice when you were spending time together?', 'What did the students tell you about their encounters with local residents?' and 'What did the students tell you about their studies?' The questions illustrate that the focus was on the experiences and interpretations of the families, not the students. The interview procedure followed the guidelines of TENK (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK]).

The dataset consists of 11 open-ended and thematic interviews conducted by the field researcher. She contacted the friendship families by e-mail to decide upon the best time and place for the interview. She asked them to recall and relate their own interactive experiences with the African students. The responses were generally positive, although a couple of the participants noted that they had wondered if they would be able to recall everything. The interviewer's official position at the university might have impacted the positive attitudes shown in the responses. The interviewer's position might also have impacted the content of the interview.

After the first eight interviews, two members of two friendship families were interviewed during the writing process of this article. These interviews raised a couple of interesting questions about the attitudes of the local community that had not previously been discussed in enough depth. In addition, the field researcher contacted one person from the university network for a brief interview to hear about his experiences regarding a deer hunt with one of the students. Five of the original friendship families decided to take part in the interviews (the field researcher's family was not interviewed). Two of those interviewed were also teachers for one of the courses. In addition, two outsiders contacted the students independently and took on the role of a friendship family. One person from the campus network was interviewed since her family member became a temporary host for one student. Two of the families had children living at home, and five families had children in their twenties who occasionally visited their parents. Since we employed a broad concept of family, the participants had different kinds of family structures, such as a single-parent family. Two of the participants were males in their fif-

ties, the daughter of one family was around 20 years old, seven participants were females ranging from 40 to approximately 60 years of age and one interviewed female participant was around 70 years of age. Although the participants mostly recalled their own experiences, they occasionally interpreted their partner's or children's experiences. The interviews each lasted between 12 and 54 minutes. As for location, two of the interviews took place at the participant's home and six at their workplace or school. Due to the COVID-19 situation, three of the interviews were conducted by phone, one of which constituted the shortest interview, lasting only about 12 minutes. The interviewer recorded, transcribed and saved the data on the university's secure cloud service. The interviews were coded during the interpretation phase (A–K) to make it impossible to identify any of the participants. The data collection process took place about eleven months after the African students departed and about one month after the graduation ceremony, which was organised in the home country. Three participants were present at the ceremony in Africa. The time lag between the lived experiences and the interviews might have both strengthened emotional memories and also presented difficulties in terms of recollecting them. It is also possible that the participants had built a coherent narrative of their memories during this period.

The field researcher made the initial observations and marked them in the transcriptions. In addition, the authors were open to themes that emerged from the data, following Marganell et al.'s (2018) suggestions regarding taking a more community-based approach to examining international students' environment. Dervin's (2016) realistic approach to intercultural competence was also applied to the data, which accepts instability, failures and expressions of emotion during intercultural activities. The authors performed a thematic analysis based on the content analysis method. The transcribed interviews were read and coded according to themes based on Chuah and Singh's categories of support.

The participants were all adults, and neither the names of the participants nor specific places are mentioned in the analysis. The participants gave their permission orally at the beginning of the recorded interview when the researcher notified them about the steps involved in anonymising, recording and transcribing the data and storing it on the university's secure cloud. The participants received copies of the transcriptions and had the opportunity to correct or add information. The African home country of the students is not mentioned, and the students were likewise anonymised. The students represent a vulnerable group of young people and might encounter difficulties in their personal or professional lives if their identities are exposed. The fear of having unfavourable information transmitted to their national organisation

during their studies arose in discussions with the students. One limitation of this study is the relatively long period of time between the lived experiences of the students and families and the interviews. The subjectivity of the shared information is obvious. The secondary goal of the study, to develop the university's global educational marketing capabilities, could be viewed as an ethical problem.

The conducted interviews were based on common ground, shared memories and community. The interviewer (in this case, the field researcher) should recognise the otherness of self and the self of others by engaging in an on-going conversation (Pillow 2003). Reflexivity is a process whereby researchers examine their own assumptions and preconceptions (Attia & Edge 2017). The field researcher faced uncomfortable situations and recognised dialogues where she 'knew more' than the participants. She had background information about the students' personal health and family situations that she could not disclose, even though it might have helped the friendship families better understand the students' reactions and behaviours. This background information was based on official documents from authorities in the country of origin as well as our study records and discussions with the university teachers and students themselves. The limited sharing was probably mutual: the friendship families had knowledge about the students' circumstances that they did not share with the field researcher. In some situations, she heard from the students negative stories about family members. As a researcher, her role in part followed a negotiated trust model. According to Loizos (1994), this model involves parties admitting that they may choose to keep certain secrets to themselves. In the interpretation phase, the field researcher reflects on the context of being a mother in one of the friendship families. Nevertheless, to disclose all of her own or her family's experiences would jeopardise the anonymity of the students in question.

## **Analysis**

### *Conclusion of the interviews*

Table 1 summarises the participants' main experiences with the support activities provided during the students' study period in Finland. Instrumental help consisted mainly of bikes and food supplies. A bike was made available for each student. The most common activities involved spending free time together, usually by way of meals or trips to nearby regions. These shared social activities provided families with an opportunity to support the social and emotional well-being of the students. Most participants reported racism in the form of hostile stares or tense situations. At the same time, they mentioned several beneficial and friendly interactions.

Table 1. Participants' experiences with the social and emotional support offered (frameworks by Chuah &amp; Singh 2016; Van Bakel et al. 2015)

Participant and number of students	Role defined by the participant	Instrumental and informational support	Main practical activities = social and emotional support	Main reflections and experiences	Students' communication with the local community
A A-C, same family: 4	mother*	lending bikes, giving some money	family life, holiday dinner, cultural activities, ballet, hobbies	interesting, humour	no reflections
B: 4	father	lending bikes	travelling, sauna, nature	spending positive time together	some racism
C: 4	sister*		family life	spending positive time together, fun	otherness, some racism, no Finnish friends
D: 2	adult*	work	working together, meeting family members, fishing, introducing them to your own network	spending positive time together	friendly
E: 2-3	mother	food supplies, coaching	meals, family life, nature, arts	spending positive time together	some racism
F: 4-8	mother	food supplies, coaching, shopping at the flea market	cultural activities, theatre, meals, work, health services, cooking, introducing them to your own network	interesting experiences, spending positive family time together	friendly social activities, some racism
G: 2-5	adult	coaching, giving raincoats and winter clothing	social activities, nature, meals, cooking, introducing them to your own network	Interesting, concerns	friendly social activities, some racism
H: 1	adult	arranging mental support	professional support, meals, staying at a family member's place, introducing them to your own network	cultural differences, gender issues	otherness
I: 2-3	adult	coaching	meals, sauna, family life, holiday dinner	concerns	racism, fear, otherness
J: 5-15	mother*	lending bikes	family life, travelling, sauna, offering work, holiday dinner	interesting	friendly social activities, racism
K: 1	adult	lending bikes	hunting, introducing them to your own network	having fun	friendly social activities, some racism

The table seemingly suggests that the total number of students was 52 (including the two families not interviewed), whereas in point of fact the group consisted of 24 students. The numbers thus highlight the practice of 'family shopping'.

\* Personal contact continues with one or several students two years after the programme ended.

### **Introducing the Finnish culture and way of life**

The first evening when the students arrived was exciting. The university's volunteer student tutors helped by furnishing the accommodations. The field researcher's way of welcoming the students was to place a famous Finnish chocolate, *Fazer's Blue*, on the kitchen tables. She then explained the laundering and waste recycling systems.

According to Helkama's investigations (2015, 218–222), the Finnish values placed on nature, equality, hard work, honesty, education, health, kindness and forgiving and helping others have remained stable over the years. In the Nordic countries, people emphasise cooperation over competition; the countries are high trust societies with low levels of hierarchy and a focus on individualism. The participants often referred to the values directly: 'I'm a person who helps others' (J). On the other hand, they assumed that the Finnish values are good for everyone and supported others in acting according to these values. As Dervin (2016) argues, the common narrative of a culture is to understand it as coherent and shared by everyone.

The families noticed that the students found the dark and cold winter months challenging. The students felt tired and homesick. To help with their adjustment, the Finnish friends took the students to spend time in nature, something that Finns value highly in terms of their own well-being. Most families commonly visit cottages in the countryside in their free time throughout the year, and one family let a group of students stay at their cottage by themselves. The students showed the field researcher several photos and videos of their time socialising at the cottage. The sauna became quite important and an experience that was enjoyed regularly by several students. Fishing, swimming and berry picking were other common activities when spending time in nature. One participant took a male student deer hunting with a local hunting group: 'The student noted that he just cleaned it [the animal], pulled the guts out from the deer...' (K). The participant told a long story about the hunting experience.

Introducing the students to Finnish culture by offering them the chance to attend the theatre, ballet, musicals and concerts, participate in hobbies and read *Moomin* books was common. One mother did, though, make the following observation: 'The Finnish culture didn't raise [much] interest' (E). The families spent festivals together, for example Mother's Day in early May, by barbecuing in the chilly spring weather. Christmas is a time when Finnish families gather together. The families took care of the students so that all of them had a family to stay with during the Christmas holiday (A, B, C, E, F, I). Three families attended Christmas mass with the students. One of the families noted the following: 'They all invested in clothes and a formal appearance.

The boys had black suits, and the girls had fancy dresses, and our daughter went to the church wearing her *uggs*' (A). Another added: 'There were six of them at our Christmas dinner with our relatives' and 'we made gingerbread and Christmas decorations' (F). A mother who sang in a chamber choir welcomed a couple of students to join her. It did not go well: 'They participated [only] once, well, after being a half an hour late' (A). The families also introduced the students to other free-time activities, often without success. One father had a more relaxed opinion: 'Why press adults to participate in some local hobby, like ice hockey?' (B). In contrast, the family of the field researcher interpreted activities on the ice as an essential part of the Finnish way of life, taking one student out on an ice-fishing trip.

One participant introduced several students to Finnish society by taking them to visit her father and a disabled sister at a care facility. She wanted to show them how society manages health-related well-being and care: 'It is like a normal home; there are only six, seven people, and they were sitting in the rocking chairs. It was a great opportunity for the students to see how things are organised here' (D). While the students did not share their reflections, the older people reported being extremely happy to meet the Africans and continued to speak about the meeting a long time after the visit.

### **Communication and interaction experiences**

The fact that the friendship families were expecting to meet an African group is clear from their comments. Several participants commented on the importance of their prior international experiences. One person had the following to say: 'We are used to having people from all over the world around us; it's nothing special' (E). Two of the participants reportedly kept in continuous contact with their foreign colleagues in that particular country. The participants were curious to meet the African students and experience a culture they did not know much about yet. Despite having numerous European, Asian and American friends and contacts, meeting the Africans was something new for the participating families. One family who had a son studying abroad pointed out that it was not about white people helping black people, but about supporting young students living in a foreign country (A, B).

The participants reported mixed experiences when communicating with the African students. Some interpreted the students' way of communicating with the families as 'open, free and direct, and really spontaneous', adding that 'if you compared them to Finns, they came closer and started the conversation' (A, B, H). Others, though, defined the communication as 'indirect and complicated' (G), noting that it took a long time to build enough trust

for more open communication: 'At first, there was a lot of energy and joy, but then, after a year, more honesty' (I).

The students' roles as family members were not always openly discussed, and that caused some conflicts. The students did not know if they were being treated as children of the family or as guests. The definition of a child may differ between cultures as well. To be called mother/mum, father/dad, sister or brother was perhaps misunderstood by the Finnish families. One family expected a student to behave and act as their own children did around the dinner table. The family could not understand why the student did not help with the dishes and reacted in an unfriendly manner when the mother asked her to help: 'She didn't tolerate it when I set boundaries for her behaviour' (E). After that incident, the student contacted participant H, who organised a new family for her.

Communication problems often resulted in misunderstandings. In Finland, bikes can easily be stolen, especially if they are left without a bicycle lock. To admit the loss of a borrowed bike was difficult for the students, and it took a long time for them to talk about it. It was typical for them to start the story not by describing the end result, e.g. the stolen bike, but from further back in time (A). Participant G, with a long history of housing exchange students, said that she was used to a type of indirect communication in which it took time to identify and resolve an issue. The participant told the story of a student who wanted to find somebody to fix her dress. The student just dropped the dress on the chair without a word and waited for the mother to pay attention to it. Only later, when the mother had noticed the dress, had discussed it with the student and had seen her try it on, did G notice that it needed fixing.

The students were also at times unexpectedly straightforward when asking for a favour. They might ask the family for a birthday present or for them to call a coach, which the family interpreted as being too direct or as an order. They sometimes found the task of taking care of the students' needs rather overwhelming. The Finnish family might have suggested taking a taxi or walking to the venue. Setting boundaries for how best to help the students became easier over time. The families evolved in their roles, from helpers to normal, sometimes irritated parents.

During the interactions, a couple of difficult issues emerged having to do especially with conflicts between the students based on racism or gender or else social or economic issues, personal relations and even aggressive incidents. The health issues of the students were difficult to observe, as some of the students did not want to discuss human bodily functions. The field researcher faced challenges in visiting the local hospital with students and collaborating with medical experts. It was difficult to listen to the students' strong critiques

of the Finnish health care system. How could an African complain about our medical services? For her, as the programme director, it was a surprise that the most difficult and time-consuming task was attending to health issues. Stories about the loss of close family members and violent childhoods were sad to hear (D, F, I). The more the trust grew, the more the students were able to ask for emotional support from the families.

The mothers of the friendship families reported feeling somewhat irritated by gender issues that they observed during interactions. They discussed the issue of traditional gender roles during the interviews (e.g. F). As one mother observed: 'X served portions to the boys at dinner. She was a mother and the boys were her children' (A). The family interpreted this as evidence of poor nutrition and food insecurity in Africa; a mother is responsible for the equal distribution of food. One participant compared the male students to young Finnish men: 'They are hungry to get the degree; that's something I would like to see here, too. In Finland, society supports people, especially young men; they do not need a degree to survive' (H). In that case, background inequalities were seen as a positive motivation to study harder.

The families also commented on the social and economic gaps between the students. One person put it as follows: 'A lack of basic skills, like vacuuming and changing the beds, was observed among those who came from the upper class. In Finland, academics can change their own bed linen and clean their homes' (H). It was difficult to see such inequality among the students: 'It was actually the worst thing, that there were strong, angry feelings among the students' (J). The friendship families were unaware of the history behind the tense relationships between the students, who represented different social groups.

### **Meeting the local community**

The town has a refugee centre. According to participant H, the presence of the refugees caused two kinds of problems. First, some residents of the town confused the students with refugees and were suspicious of them. Moreover, female students reported that some refugees acted with hostility towards them. Participant H made the following point: 'At the same time, we had the refugee housing here ... and there were challenges regarding people suffering from war traumas. Some (locals) probably associated the students with them (the refugees).'

When asking about having contact with and communicating with members of the local community, most of the participants used the words 'racism' or 'racist'. Racism was difficult to discuss and to interpret from the friendship families' perspective. This was because the families continued to feel a



strong need to provide emotional support and to protect them. As a result, the interviewees tended to take on the role of speaking about the student's experiences rather than speaking about only their own. Some family members either refused to acknowledge racism or pointed out that they did not know about it because the students had not talked about it: 'They didn't complain, although there could have been reasons for them to do so, and they were quiet about the issue' (F). Only one of the participants was present during a hostile situation, when a passer-by shouted 'Go home!' When one student sang at a local karaoke club, the entire bar went silent, but then after the performance the singer received a big round of applause (J). The families often asked about them about racism, but the students did not seem eager to talk about it. Depending on the relationship, the students responded in different ways. Just before their departure, one of the participants heard some stories of racism. The students had experienced hostile stares and mentioned that sometimes cars had driven slowly by them as they walked between the university and home. Some locals crossed the pavement to avoid encountering them (see Marangell et al. 2018). One physically aggressive incident, i.e. shoving, occurred in a bar where the male students were spending a weekend evening (C, I). Most of the female students never left their apartments during the evenings. They were afraid to walk in the dark. One of the families advised them on how to deal with and communicate with Finnish people. They encouraged the students to be proud of themselves and be ambassadors for their home country, to tell people who they were and to avoid going out late in the town and getting provoked: 'To be accepted in Finland, you should just be brave, join a group and not care about the stares' (J).

Two participants reported having had contact with people they defined as racists. Those participants decided to spread ideas within their circles: it would not be a good idea to touch or harass 'our students' (J, K). Guarding the students from certain members of the surrounding community was also familiar to some of the mothers, who were especially worried about the female students' safety on weekend nights. One participant speculated about the appearance of the students, pointing out issues of ethnicity and gender: 'I was not at all worried about the young Finnish men, but I was thinking about those perverse older men with images from the porn industry in their heads.' She noted how the male students tried to go on dates with the Finnish girls, without success: 'Let's imagine they were black basketball players from the US instead of skinny Africans. The situation would be totally different' (I). The participant continued by reflecting more deeply on the situation: 'I noticed that we had a certain bias; for us, it was more exciting to receive students from Africa; the culture is so different. Of course, we had that perspective ... And

to see where I am in the process (of cultural understanding) ... I mean, there are French people in the town, living by the seaside ... and the local markets arrange fancy cheese for them ... Would we place German or Swedish students in a suburb?' (I).

Three participants met people in the town who were curious about the students and had an opportunity to spread correct information about the students' backgrounds and their role as university students (G, F, K). One participant described the experience as follows: 'I used to tell people about this programme, which was a good way to get summer jobs for the boys. They were cutting the grass by N. One of the boys worked for a taxi driver, who then gave him a bike' (F). But the reactions were still not always positive. One shopkeeper asked if the students came from jungle huts. The participant was astonished to hear such an uneducated comment (G).

### **Conclusion**

The results of the interpretative analysis make it clear that volunteering as a friendship family is tied to earlier international contacts and an open-hearted and open-minded interest in foreign cultures (see Van Bakel et al. 2015). The families built a social network through many common acquaintances. Their way of communicating and the relationships changed over the two years. At the beginning of the interaction, the families reportedly viewed the African students as a homogeneous group. The local families at the same time saw themselves as broad-minded individuals. The participants described the early communication efforts in stereotypical fashion: the students were joyful, loud and straightforward in their speech. The happy Africans had arrived in this dark and silent Finland. The families became more involved in the lives of the students as mutual trust grew. To be a part of their lives was a significant experience. Sometimes it turned out to be much more demanding than they had expected. Both the families and the students began to view each other more as individuals in their daily lives and communications. Humour was an essential part of this interaction. Also, in many cases the relationship changed from one of indirect communication and a relaxed attitude to a mutual and close friendship. As Dervin (2016, 105) summarises, it is not just 'culture' that guides interactions but the co-construction of various identities, such as gender, age, profession and social class.

Studies conducted among international students in an educational context show that positive interactions between students from different cultural backgrounds and local students is often minimal (Mendoza, Dervin, Yuan & Layne 2022). Students tend to remain within their own groups and only communicate with persons from a similar background. The lack of sat-

isfactory contact between local and international students is a well-known phenomenon in all major English-speaking countries hosting international students. International students face challenges in understanding the host culture. The new situation may cause uncertainty in terms of behaviours and values and anxiety related to communication. Additionally, interactions with people from different cultures with members of a local community often involve high levels of uncertainty and heighten individuals' anxiety levels (Chuah & Singh 2016; Marangell et al. 2108; Pritchard & Skinner 2002; Rienties & Nolan 2014; Rui & Wang 2015; Shirazi 2018; Summer & Volet 2008; Woods et al. 2013).

For the students, the lack of local friends and limited connection with Finnish students were compensated for through their interactions with the families. It is obvious that the families were important to the students. The family members generally took three main approaches to the interactions and activities: accepting the students as family members, introducing them to Finnish culture and providing them with emotional and instrumental support. The goal of the education programme was not to integrate the African students into Finland, nor was that the goal of the families. Still, an ethos was present among the participants supporting the superior nature of Finnish education. In addition, they wanted the students to note how a 'well-being society' is an essential part of Finnish culture (see Dervin 2016). Participants constructed cultural values around an appreciation for nature, equality and cooperation with low levels of hierarchy (see Helkama 2015). The participants introduced students to literature, theatre, music and family festivals that they considered typically Finnish; to some extent, these activities represent high culture. Hunting and fishing experiences reflected the Finnish relationship with nature.

The interactions took the form of an evolving process, with participants encountering some difficulties in terms of interpreting indirect communication. There was an instability in terms of the feelings between families and students, a realistic process for intercultural activities (Dervin 2016). The intercultural competence of the friendship families grew over time, as a learning curve, with a focus on respect, openness, curiosity, discovery and cultural self-awareness and knowledge, while participants developed their skills at listening, observing and evaluating (see Bolten 2020; Deardorff 2015).

During the international study programme described in this article, the university staff maintained contact with the local community. Such efforts were not well organised or planned, despite the researchers' suggestions (Bennet 2009; Marangell et al. 2018; Rollie Rodrigues & Chornet-Roses 2014). Nevertheless, the social network was an active part of the project and included many

organisations, such as an adult education centre, a library, sports and art clubs, a student theatre, charity organisations, the police, Finnish-African friendship societies, a Lutheran church, religious groups, schools and preschools. No training was provided for the contact person of the friendship families or for the families themselves. Based on the findings of the article, more and scheduled support should be offered for the families. Discussions regarding where to set the boundaries for the help provided, especially financial help, would be necessary. The local community, with regard to the participants' abilities to activate their networks, was an important resource, although threats in the form of racist harassment was also always present within the local community. The frameworks provided by Chuah and Singh (2016) and studies by Van Bakel et al. (2014, 2015) are based on the interactions between international students or expatriates and host nations, mostly from the viewpoint of the visitors. Our motivation, however, was to explore the experiences of the local friendship families. The results of this study indicate that local communities can be used more effectively and be better organised as a part of support programmes for international students.

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### Fieldwork material

The fieldwork material is in the possession of the authors.

Interview A and B. 18 November 2019. Female and Male. 41 min. Interviewer XX (field researcher).

Interview C. 2 December 2019. Female. 18 min. Interviewer XX.

Interview D. 26 November 2019. Female. 29 min. Interviewer XX.

Interview E. 12 November 2019. Female. 23 min. Interviewer XX.

Interview F. 26 November 2019. Female. 33 min. Interviewer XX.

Interview G. 11 November 2019. Female. 33 min. Interviewer XX.

Interview H. 16 December 2019. Female. 25 min. Interviewer XX.

Interview I. 26 October 2020. Female. 54 min. Interviewer XX.

Interview J. 29 October 2020. Female. 38 min. Interviewer XX.

Interview K. 25 November 2020. Male. 12 min. Interviewer XX.

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