

GOLALEH MAKROONI

# First-Generation Migrant Family Students in Higher Education on Their Educational Journey in Finland



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Students in Higher Education on  
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ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

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*This dissertation is dedicated to  
my late mother and sister  
whose memories of kindness  
stay in my heart forever.*



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Golaleh Makrooni, September 2022

# Abstract

Worldwide, the number of refugees—and thus migrants—has been increasing for many years. The causes for this increase are poverty, corruption, political oppression, war, and the desire among migrants for a better life for themselves, their families, and their children. Wars and conflicts in many developing countries, and as now currently in Ukraine, create great suffering and force people to flee. As always, many families and children are among the refugees and immigrants looking for a new home. Many resulting problems, such as finding housing and jobs for migrants, confront states as well as their educational institutions and the educational system at large. Many studies (Malinen et al., 2012; OECD, 2010) have revealed significant differences in achievement between native and immigrant students. Moreover, given the increase in migration around the world and specifically in western countries, more educational studies are needed on how to better promote equity in higher education for students from migrant families.

The aim of this study is to focus on a specific group of students in higher education: first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs). FGMFSs are university students from immigrant families whose parents do not have a higher education degree. Despite the large number of studies on first-generation students, the current study is one of the first to examine the experiences and perceptions of successful FGMFSs on their educational journey, during the transition to and within higher education. This dissertation explores the factors and strategies that support and encourage FGMFSs on their educational journey and help them overcome associated barriers and obstacles in a cross-cultural context. Thus, the goal of the study on which this dissertation is based is to identify specific patterns, actions, and conditions that are central to FGMFSs' successful educational pathways on the way, to, and in higher education. By examining these students' perceptions and experiences, a theory based on the key factors that lead

to successfully accessing, attending, and continuing in higher education emerged. These factors include their experiences and perceptions as students from their arrival in Finland to their enrollment and studying at university, including their feelings, beliefs, challenges, obstacles, potentials, and successes.

The grounded theory (GT) approach was used for this qualitative study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As a data-driven approach, GT was chosen for this study to ensure the greatest possible openness to the target group. Following the GT approach, 15 FGMFSs at Finnish universities (mostly from Tampere University) were interviewed and analyzed simultaneously. The analysis followed Corbin and Straus (2015) and included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Throughout the process, the concept of constant comparison and memo writing were applied.

This article-based dissertation consists of three publications. Each article focuses on one part of the entire study. The first part of the study, described in Article I, focused on the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational path to higher education. Three categories were identified that supported FGMFSs on their path to attending college: family values, institutional values, and interpersonal relationships. The core category linking these categories was identified as openness. The second part of the study, described in Article II, focused on the intercultural experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey. Three categories—individualism and collectivism, gender roles, and critical thinking—were identified as having a strong impact on how the cross-cultural identity of these students and, consequently, their educational path from school to university was shaped. The central category linking these categories was described as empowerment. The third part of the study, as described in Article III, examined the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs in higher education that successfully supported their studies there. The associated categories were identified as academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being, which were linked by the core categories of functioning and sense of belonging.

Using a systematic GT approach to the study of FGMFSs' experiences and perceptions of educational pathways, the GT of "negotiation and repositioning process" emerged. This ongoing process of repositioning was characterized by negotiation with oneself, with people in one's environment (including family, relatives, teachers, principals, friends, and acquaintances from one's community), as well as with the context. This process of negotiation was described in terms of the core categories mentioned above and was related to one's identity and positioning. The changes in positioning were accompanied by a constant process of negotiation while FGMFSs were on their educational journey was shaped by their experiences and perceptions in cross-cultural contexts. These new experiences and perceptions that

led to changes can thus be seen as turning points that initiated and enabled a process of repositioning. This led the students to become open to new things, apply their innovative adaptation strategies, and strengthen and develop their sense of belonging to an academic community. The GT of the “negotiation and repositioning process” in this study thus refers to the core categories of openness, empowerment, functioning, and sense of belonging that emerged. The theory explains how FGMFSs’ concerns were managed through negotiations via different experiences and perceived actions and interactions along the educational pathway.

The findings of this study have several important implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, this dissertation clearly demonstrates the process of repositioning FGMFSs. This occurs through continuous negotiation with themselves, with others, and with the intercultural context in which they studied and lived. The findings of this study open new avenues for future research to further understand the relationship between the repositioning process and the successful educational trajectory of these and similar student groups. In addition, this study mapped the entire process of success, family life, initial schooling, transition to university, and study at the university itself. This was done by examining the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs and linking them to a process of repositioning. Understanding these processes can enable the development of quality support interventions for this group of students.

The practical implications first draw attention to the essential categories that will be used for further activities and support programs in the education system to improve access for and study by FGMFSs in higher education. Second, the results can be used to achieve the best possible functionality and belonging in higher education and in society. High levels of belonging in higher education reduce dropout rates. Third, the process of repositioning FGMFSs through negotiations can be better supported through targeted programs or just targeted faculty support. Thus, the findings presented here can help the education system at various institutional levels understand the critical and interrelated factors that determine the successful educational pathway of FGMFSs through a repositioning process. Understanding the interrelationships among different levels of education (school to university) allows for more targeted support. The results can also be very specific at the teacher, educator, and administrator levels to help them better understand the repositioning process for these students. Encouraging and forward-looking support is needed for these students, especially in the years leading up to higher education. Consequently, this dissertation can help educational policy makers to develop their understanding of this increasing population in higher education through these students’ perspectives.

## Tiivistelmä

Pakolaisten – ja siten myös siirtolaisten – määrä on lisääntynyt ympäri maailmaa monen vuoden ajan. Syitä tähän ovat köyhyys, korruptio, poliittinen sorto, sota sekä siirtolaisten oma toive paremmasta elämästä heille itselleen sekä heidän perheilleen ja lapsilensa. Sodat ja konfliktit monilla alueilla ja kehitysmaissa eri puolilla Aasiaa, Afrikkaa ja myös Euroopassa kuten tällä hetkellä Ukrainassa, aiheuttavat suurta kärsimystä ja saavat ihmiset pakenemaan. Pakolaisten ja maahanmuuttajien joukossa on aina myös perheitä ja lapsia etsimässä uutta kotia. Tästä seuraa monia yhteiskunnallisia ongelmia liittyen esimerkiksi asumiseen, työhön ja koulutukseen. Valtion tasolla haasteena on, miten hyvin esimerkiksi koulutusjärjestelmä pystyy mukautumaan maahanmuuttajien erityistarpeisiin. Monet tutkimukset (Malinen et al., 2012; OECD, 2010) ovat osoittaneet merkittäviä eroja natiivi- ja maahanmuuttajaoppilaiden koulusaavutusten välillä. Kansainvälisen muuttoliikkeen lisääntytyä etenkin länsimaissa tarvitaan enemmän kasvatustieteellistä tutkimusta siitä, miten voitaisiin paremmin edistää tasa-arvoa ja oikeudenmukaisuutta maahanmuuttajataustaisten opiskelijoiden korkea-asteen koulutuksessa.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tutkia ensimmäisen sukupolven siirtolaisperheiden korkeakouluopiskelijoita (FGMFS). FGMFS-opiskelijat ovat yliopisto-opiskelijoita maahanmuuttajaperheistä, joiden vanhemmilla ei ole korkeakoulututkintoa. Huolimatta siitä, että tutkimusta on tehty ensimmäisen sukupolven opiskelijoista, tämä tutkimus on ensimmäisiä, jotka tarkastelevat opinnoissaan edistyneiden FGMFS-opiskelijoiden opintopolkukokemuksia ja -havaintoja heidän siirtyessään korkea-asteen koulutukseen sekä sen aikana. Tämä väitöskirja tutkii niitä tekijöitä ja strategioita, jotka tukevat ja kannustavat FGMFS-opiskelijoita heidän opintopoluillaan ja jotka auttavat heitä selviämään opiskeluun sekä kulttuurien välisiin eroihin liittyvistä opiskelun ja opiskelumenestyksen esteistä. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on täten tunnistaa tapoja, käytäntöjä ja ehtoja, jotka ovat keskeisiä FGMFS-opiskelijoiden etenemisessä kohti kor-

keakouluopintoja ja menestymisessä opinnoissa. Tutkimalla opiskelijoiden käsityksiä ja kokemuksia muodostettiin teoria, joka kuvaa avaintekijöitä liittyen, korkeakouluun pääsemiseen ja menestyksellisiin opintoihin kohti tutkintoa. Tekijät liittyvät kokemukseen ja käsityksiin opiskelijoina Suomeen saapumisesta yliopistoon ilmoittautumiseen ja opiskeluun. Esiin tulleet seikat liittyvät niin opiskelijoiden kokemuksiin, tunteisiin, uskomuksiin ja haasteisiin kuin erilaisiin esteisiin tai olosuhteisiin, tai omiin kykyihin ja vuorovaikutukseen yhteisöissä.

Tässä kvalitatiivisessa tutkimuksessa käytettiin aineistopohjaisen teorian (Grounded Theory) menetelmää (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Aineistopohjaiseen teoriaan nojaavan kvalitatiivisen tutkimusmetodin oli tarkoitus tuoda esiin mahdollisimman tarkasti tutkittavan ryhmän kokemukset tuloksissa. Aineistopohjaisen teorian menetelmää käytettiin suomalaisten yliopistojen (enimmäkseen Tampereen yliopiston) 15 FGMFS-opiskelijan samanaikaisessa haastattelussa ja analysoimisessa. Analyysi mukaili Corbinia ja Straussia (2015) ja se sisälsi avoimen, aksiaalisen sekä selektiivisen aineiston koodauksen. Koko prosessin ajan suoritettiin jatkuvaa vertailua sekä tehtiin muistiinpanoja.

Tämä artikkelipohjainen väitöskirja koostuu kolmesta artikkelijulkaisusta. Kukin artikkeli keskittyy yhteen osaan tutkimuskokonaisuudesta. Ensimmäinen osa tutkimuksesta artikkelissa I keskittyy FGMFS-opiskelijoiden kokemuksiin ja näkemyksiin heidän opintopolullaan kohti korkeakoulua. Kolme korkeakoulutukseen etenemistä tukevaa kategoriaa tunnistettiin: perhearvot, instituution arvot ja ihmissuhteet. Näitä kaikkia kolmea kategoriaa yhdistävä piirre analysoitiin avoimuudeksi. Toinen osa tutkimuksesta artikkelissa II keskittyy FGMFS-opiskelijoiden kulttuurienvälisiin kokemuksiin ja näkemyksiin koulutuspolulla. Kolme kategoriaa – yksilökeskeisyys ja yhteisöllisyys, sukupuoliroolit ja kriittinen ajattelu – tunnistettiin voimakkaiksi vaikuttimiksi näiden opiskelijoiden monikulttuurisen identiteetin ja myös tulevan opintopolun muokkaamisessa. Näiden kategorioiden yhdistäväksi piirteeksi kuvattiin voimaantuminen. Kolmas osa tutkimuksesta, kuvattuna artikkelissa III, keskittyy tutkimaan FGMFS-opiskelijoiden kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä korkeakouluopintojen onnistumisesta ja opinnoille suunnatusta tuesta yliopistossa. Tässä osassa kategorioiksi tunnistettiin akateeminen ympäristö, akateeminen suoritus ja akateeminen hyvinvointi, joita kaikkia yhdisti käsitys toimivuudesta ja yhteenkuuluvuudesta.

Aineistopohjainen teoria, ”neuvottelun sekä uudelleensijoittamisen prosessi” syntyi, kun lähestyttiin FGMFS:ien kokemuksia ja näkökulmia opintopoluista käyttämällä systemaattista aineistopohjaisen teorian menetelmää. Tämä jatkuva uudelleensijoittamisen prosessi luonnehdittiin itsensä, ympäröivien ihmisten (mukaan lukien perhe, sukulaiset, opettajat, rehtorit, kaverit sekä tuttavat henkilön yhteisössä) sekä kontekstin kanssa neuvotteluna. Tätä neuvottelun prosessia kuvailtiin ylempänä mainittujen kes-

keisten kategorioiden termein ja se oli sidoksissa henkilön identiteettiin sekä asemointiin. FGMFS-opiskelijoiden opintopoluilla tapahtui asemoitien muutoksiin liittyvää jatkuvaa neuvotteluprosessia, joka muokkasi heidän kokemuksiaan sekä näkökulmiaan monikulttuurisessa kontekstissa. Muutoksiin johtavia uusia kokemuksia sekä näkökulmia voidaan näin ollen pitää käännekohtina, jotka käynnistivät sekä mahdollistivat uudelleenaseoitumisen prosessin. Tämä taas johti siihen, että opiskelijat olivat avoimempia uusille asioille, kykeneviä hyödyntämään heidän innovatiivisia sopeutumisstrategioitaan sekä vahvistamaan ja kehittämään heidän akateemiseen yhteisöön kuulumisen tunnettaan. Tämän tutkimuksen aineistopohjainen teoria, ”neuvottelun sekä uudelleenaseoitumisen prosessi” siis viittaa tutkimuksessa ilmestyneisiin keskeisiin kategorioihin, jotka ovat avoimuus, voimaantuminen, toimintakyky sekä yhteenkuuluvuuden tunne. Teoria selittää, miten FGMFS:ien huolenaiheet ratkaistiin neuvottelemalla erilaisten kokemusten, havaittujen toimintojen sekä vuorovaikutuksen kautta opintopolun varrella.

Tämän tutkimuksen löydöksillä on useita tärkeitä vaikutuksia teoriaan ja käytäntöön. Väitöskirja kuvaa teoreettisesti FGMFS-opiskelijoiden uudelleenaseoitumisen prosessin. Tämä tapahtuu jatkuvalla neuvottelulla itsensä ja muiden sekä sen monikulttuurisuuden kontekstin kanssa, jossa he ovat opiskelleet ja asuneet. Tämän tutkimuksen löydökset avaavat uusia näkökulmia tulevalle tutkimukselle ymmärtää paremmin suhdetta, joka on uudelleenaseoitumisen prosessin sekä näiden ja samankaltaisten opiskelijaryhmien onnistuneen koulutuspolun välillä. Tämän lisäksi tutkimus kuvaasi onnistuneen korkeakouluopiskeluprosessin tärkeät elementit, niihin liittyvät kokemukset ja käsitykset: perheen, peruskoulutuksen, siirtymisen yliopistoon sekä yliopistossa opiskelemisen. Näiden prosessien ymmärtäminen voi edesauttaa laadukkaiden tukijärjestelmien kehittämistä tälle opiskelijaryhmälle.

Tutkimuksen käytännön merkitys liittyy lähinnä havaittuihin keskeisiin kategorioihin, joita suhteen voidaan kehittää erilaisia tukitoimia että koko koulutusjärjestelmää. Toiseksi tutkimuksen tuloksia voidaan käyttää yhteisöjen toiminnan kehittämiseen toiminnallisuuden ja yhteenkuuluvuuden lisäämiseksi korkeakoulutuksessa ja yhteiskunnassa yleensä. Vahva yhteenkuuluvuuden tunne vähentää opintojen keskeyttämisastetta. Kolmanneksi FGMFS:ien uudelleenaseoitumisen neuvotteluprosessia voidaan paremmin tukea tarkkaan kohdistetuilla ohjelmilla tai kohdistetulla tuella. Työssä esitetyt löydökset voivat täten auttaa ymmärtämään koulutusjärjestelmän eri tasoilla FGMFS:ien onnistuneisiin opintopolkuihin liittyvät kriittiset sekä toisiinsa liittyvät tekijät. Eri koulutusasteiden (koulusta yliopistoon) keskinäisten suhteiden ymmärtäminen parempi ymmärtäminen mahdollistaa täten paremmin kohdennetun tuen maahanmuuttajaopiskelijoille. FGMFS-opiskelijat tarvitsevat rohkaisevaa ja tulevaisuuteen suuntautuvaa tukea erityisesti korkea-asteen koulutusta edeltävinä vuosina.

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## Abbreviations

EU	European Union
FGCSs	First-generation college students
FGMFSs	First-generation migrant family students
GT	Grounded theory
HE	Higher Education
IOM	International Organization for Migration
Karvi	Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre)
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme of International Student Assessment
TENK	Tutkimuseettisen Neuvottelukunta (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity)
UN	United Nations



## Original Publications

- Publication I Makrooni, G. (2019). Being a first-generation migrant family student in Finland: Perceptions and experiences of the educational journey to higher education. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 6(3), 157–170.  
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# 1 Introduction

Migration has always taken place in the history of mankind, its cultures, and its civilizations. Migration was historically triggered by natural disasters, which caused people and populations to leave previously settled areas (Belasen & Polachek 2013; IOM, 2021). For example, one of the largest migration movements in the 19th century, beginning in the 1840s, was the so-called “Great Atlantic Migration” from Europe to North America. From Finland, three major waves of migration to North America and Canada occurred. The first wave began around 1900, with about one-third of all Finnish immigrants arriving before the outbreak of World War I. This wave represents the peak of Finnish immigration to Canada (Schelstraete, 1982).

The world has always been on the move. However, in the context of globalization and due to population trends, migration is now taking on a new dynamic and an unprecedented scale. Castles and Miller (2014) called it the “Age of Migration” and highlighted the central dynamic of migration within globalization. People have always been looking for new ways to escape poverty, conflict, or environmental degradation. The desire for a secure life, a better education for themselves and their children, economic prosperity, and improved employment opportunities, in addition to climate- and weather-related reasons, have played an important role in triggering population migration movements, especially in recent decades. Migration is an umbrella term that encompasses labor migration, refugees, and asylum seekers. If one follows the evaluations of a UN report, there were about 244 million migrants worldwide in 2015, of whom about 20 million were refugees (IOM, 2017). Therefore, due to global dynamics, a further increase in migration is expected, on the one hand, for the reasons mentioned above, and, on the other hand, due to economic development, progress in communication technology, and transport accessibility. For example, according to the World Migration Report (IOM, 2021, p. 2), “the number of international migrants

worldwide [reached] 281 million (3.6% of the world's population)" in 2020, almost 40 million more migrants than in 2015. However, due to the pandemic triggered by COVID-19 in 2020, a new situation has arisen. Many countries and economic areas that were formerly at the center of migration movements, such as the United States or Europe, have closed their borders and limited migration. Therefore, today, it is difficult to predict how migratory movements will develop and how COVID-19 will impact the migration process. There might be a slower rate of international migration, as migration by mid-2020 was about 2 million lower than it would have been without COVID-19 (IOM, 2021; United Nation, 2020). However, in the future, it may result in even greater migratory movements due to increased political tensions, economic and environmental difficulties, and hopelessness, such as migratory movements from Central America to the United States, and movements mainly from Africa and the Middle East to Europe. According to the Global Migration Data Portal, in mid-2020, 86.7 million international migrants has been allocated in Europe (UN, 2021). Since the Second World War, Finland has become a net migration country, which has in turn made it a more diverse society. Although the immigrant population in Finland has risen slowly, in recent decades, there has been a significant increase in the number of migrants (Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018). According to Statistics Finland (2019), in 2018, a total of 31,106 people immigrated to Finland. In 2020, almost 32,900 people immigrated to Finland. The largest number of immigrants, however, was recorded in 2016: 34,905 (Statista, 2021).

## 1.1 Study context

The changes generated by globalization and migration naturally have an impact on civil societies as well as migrants. In host countries such as Finland, immigrants are provided with resources to meet their basic needs. However, in addition to meeting their basic needs concerning, for example, work and housing, current immigration has also created new challenges for the education system in Finland, as many immigrants arrive as families with children. The education system of a host society is affected by immigration. There are challenges for the education system that have not previously existed. Previous curricula or school careers were not adapted to this new generation of pupils and students. Many of the main host countries have created effective and efficient education systems and suited them to the needs of the native population in terms of language and economic conditions. Differences can be observed in the educational status of children and students who were not born in Finland and whose parents or grandparents were migrants (Airas et al., 2019; Malinen et al., 2012; Mangez

& Hilgers, 2012; OECD, 2010). Differences can be found in terms of educational attainment and performance. In a 2015 survey on standard academic skills of 15-year-olds, the OECD PISA revealed that “in most countries, both first- and second-generation immigrant students tend to perform worse than nonimmigrant students” (OECD, 2016, p. 248; see also Commission of the European Committees, 2008). The results of the 2018 PISA survey showed that the situation in Finland has also worsened compared to 2015, with a significant decline in science performance and a growing gap in reading between immigrant and nonimmigrant students, which is the largest in the EU (OECD, 2020). Since it can be assumed that the immigrant population will remain in the country and that their children will also want and be expected to contribute to the host country, it is important to study this target group, which may have faced more difficult conditions on their educational path to contribute effectively to the host society. Therefore, studying the educational path of immigrant students would help to improve the equality and effectiveness of education and build a cultural foundation in society, which has been stated as one of the goals of the Finnish government (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021).

Since the number of migrant families is likely to continue to increase, especially in Europe and Finland, studies on this group of people and this topic area are extremely important for promoting long-term sustainability in host society. According to Harri Sivula, a Finnish Ministerial Advisor, “It is clear that Finland needs migration to continue to thrive. Many studies show the important role of foreign workers, researchers, students and their family members in economic growth and the future of society” (Ministry of the Interior, 2021, p. 1). Moreover, according to Statistics Finland, an increasing number of immigrants leads to demographic change in society, which also impacts educational institutions, including higher education. Efforts in making immigrant background students access to higher education and keeping them in higher education to be graduated is of great importance for promoting a more inclusive and sustainable society. About this, Anna Rundgren, Senior Specialist at Ministry of the Interior in Finland, emphasized the need to maximize the advantages of migration and minimize the problems caused by social exclusion and inequality (Ministry of the Interior, 2021).

The OECD (2004) has shown that first-generation immigrants in Europe often experience downward mobility and work in low-skilled occupations, for four reasons: language barriers, differences in educational attainment, difficulties in recognizing their certificates, and restricted access to good jobs. A report from the Finnish Education Evaluation Center (Hievanen et al., 2020) pointed out that deficiencies in students’ language skills and ability to study in vocational training make the educational pathway

of migrant background students challenging. Yet, according to the OECD (2010), the second generation of migrants is already better educated than their parents.

The role of higher education in improving economic, social, and cultural resources for society is important and can be seen in the values and characteristics that produce these outcomes. Access to higher education for all is on the agenda for Finnish education policy: “Higher education is seen as a hope for a better future and a tool for empowerment” (Xu & Kan, 2019, p. 193). Enhancing equity by providing upward educational mobility, which leads to social and economic growth in society, makes studies on higher education students with diverse backgrounds important: “The expansion of higher education in Finland was based on and aimed at creating equal educational opportunities for all citizens independent of their gender, socio-economic background or geographical location” (Moitus et al., 2020, p. 29). However, the educational achievements and skills of first- and second-generation immigrants at schools lag behind those of the rest of the population (Finnish government, 2019; Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018).

Migration research has a strong interdisciplinary history (Greenwood & Hunt, 2003, p. 4) and, as Williams (2009) pointed out, theory and research on the relationship between education and migration is not new. A huge body of knowledge and research has been generated on first-generation college students (FGCSs) as a growing population in higher education. However, few researchers have paid attention to the conditions, problems, and challenges, as well as skills and potentials, of first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs) on their educational journey to and in higher education.

This group of students does not seem to be sufficiently addressed in higher education or in the labor market. FGMFSs are not classified as international students in higher education, and their studies do not fall into the category of international programs. They are considered national students without any special monitoring of their educational journey. These students are classified as Finnish students but, due to their migration background, their educational pathway experiences may differ from those of native Finnish students. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to examine the perceptions and experiences of these students to clarify the factors that influence their educational journey to and within higher education. This is a group of immigrants who have been succeeded in higher education in Finland. Thus, their experiences and perceptions and the ways in which they have pursued their higher education may clarify as of yet unidentified phenomena that could be useful to educational institutions and policy makers in promoting strategies for a thriving and inclusive society as well as in enhancing the visibility and importance of the role of these students in professional and economic growth in Finland. Therefore, this work focused on a very specific group of migrants—i.e., first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs)—in higher

education in Finland. This group can be defined as students from migrant families whose parents do not have a higher education degree. This study also aligned with the commitment of the Finnish government to increase the percentage of higher education graduates to 50 percent by 2030 as well as to improve the capacity of first- and second-generation immigrants to access further studies (Finnish government, 2019). This study also indirectly complements one evaluation report (Airas et al., 2019) on “the national situation of the inclusion and participation of students with an immigrant background in higher education in Finland which studies the related obstacles and the currently functioning practices” (p. 11).

## 1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of FGMFSs with respect to their educational journey to attend and continue their studies in higher education. By investigating their perception and experiences, the major factors that make them successful in higher education were discovered. Perceptions and experiences were used as a tool for developing the theory that was grounded in the study. Thus, the study focused on how FGMFSs perceive and experience their education in the host society and which factors and processes they highlighted through their life story from their arrival in Finland to higher education. The main research question for this study was, therefore: How do FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational journey to and within higher education in the context of their life story. This general question was the starting point for developing a grounded theory (GT).

This study focused on the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs in order to clarify the latent patterns that shape these students' educational journey. To map these patterns and clarify how these students have shaped their education in Finland to pursue higher education and graduate study, examining their experiences and perceptions is a good way to do so. Due to differences in educational and cultural backgrounds, complex and interrelated factors can influence the educational pathways of FGMFSs. Using experiences and perceptions is a different approach for these students than measuring grade point average. This measurement can only reveal one aspect of their academic performance. Bondy et al. (2017) pointed out the importance of exploring the diversity of educational experiences of students with a migrant background so that one does not focus only on grades in enhancing success. Examining experiences and perceptions provides an opportunity to see the reality in their educational journey from their perspective and also to identify the turning points and changes during their educational journey to and in higher education. Studying experiences and perceptions enhances the

openness and possibility of revealing unknown phenomena in the educational journey of these students. Furthermore, examining the experiences and perceptions of this group of students in their educational journey not only clarifies their academic lives in Finland but also, like Gofen (2009) noted, reveals their lives prior to higher education and the process that enables these students to participate in tertiary education. Ropo and Gustafsson (2008, p. 4) put it this way: “What an individual experiences to be, wants to be or not to be, guides his learning and studying orientation. From this perspective, learning and studying... have roots in an individual’s past, present experiences and expectations for the future.” Nevertheless, as Berggren et al. (2021) also stated, “there is a continuing need for research on the experiences of immigrant youth with national school systems” (p. 324).

Investigating the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs illustrates the bottom up or, in other words, the daily life characteristics of their education journey. Through what they experienced in relation with their education, the main concern in the field can be identified. The investigation of their experiences and perceptions during their life story could identify changes, turning points, tensions, opportunities, potentials, challenges, events, situations as well as motives.

Perceptions can vary over time, and as such this study investigated the perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey while they are in higher education or graduated. Their perceptions map a part of reality that they could not previously see. Growing in the educational journey in the cross-cultural context changed their perceptions of themselves and their situation. Perceptions turn into experiences and, subsequently, new experiences influence perceptions and create new ones. As perceptions are strongly influenced by past experiences, cultures, values, beliefs, and education, among other factors, these were examined as well.

Investigating life stories provides new insights into understanding what is going on and how FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational journey to and in higher education. According to Mathias and Smith (2016) life stories can provide a good opportunity for individuals to pass on a wide range of information about who they are, how are their views of the world, what led them to carry out those actions. Moreover, life stories have proven to be a rich basis for formulating substantive theories (Bertau & Kohli, 1984), which is consistent with the grounded theory approach.

Consequently, this study shed light on the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs through their educational journey in Finland as one of several minority student groups in higher education in Finland, FGMFSs might experience and perceive their educational path differently according to their specific migrant family background. Thus, their subjective experiences and perceptions clarify not only the challenges but also the reasons and background behind their challenges as well as their strategies to

resolve these challenges, which elaborates on their abilities and potentials as well. They also clarify their feelings, attitudes, and positions on their educational journey. In this sense, then, their experiences and perceptions are as reliable as they are constructive. The results of this study can be a good guideline for migrant background students at educational institutions as well as for educational institutions and educators to enhance their understanding of the complex factors that influence the educational pathways of these students to prevent misunderstandings and presumptions.

The perceptions and experiences described by the interviewees concerned situations not subject to criticism by the researcher. I did not criticize the interviewees or doubt their perceptions and experiences. Therefore, the perceptions are neither good nor bad. I was also aware that perception of the environment leads to critical thinking and cognitive process of this different information received in educational settings and at home. This cognitive process in turn influences experiences already they had and is used to evaluate and justify new experiences (Vernon, 2017).

### 1.3 Structure of the dissertation

This article-based dissertation consists of three published articles and this summary. The summary has five chapters. Chapter 1 is a brief introduction to the research problems, objectives, and the status of perceptions and experiences in this study. Chapter 2 presents the literature review. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and research method and process. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the major findings and culminates in the GT. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the results of all articles and identifies limitations as well as implications and directions for future activities. This is followed by the bibliography and appendices. The original publications are listed at the end of the summary.

## 2 Literature Review

This chapter describes and explains the results and the procedure of the literature review in this study following the grounded theory (GT) approach. The presented literature review reveals two main developments related to the GT methodology. Thus, the literature review not only reflects the state of the literature at the beginning of this study but also describes a process, as the literature review was constantly expanded upon after the main categories emerged. The use of literature refers to the main categories that emerged in the progress of the work and thus guided the selection of relevant literature used in this review. The literature review presented in the following must also be read and interpreted in the context of the literature reviews conducted for Articles I, II, and III. Therefore, this section presents only a selection of major themes that became important during the course of this study and, as noted above, were continually added to and expanded upon in accordance with the GT methodology. This literature review was structured according to the following aspects:

- the preliminary and initial literature review, which show that the vast majority of the literature is about problems and barriers in the education of FGMFSs.
- the focused literature review, which was conducted during the GT process (writing memos, conceptualization), and the publishing of the articles.

### 2.1 Preliminary literature review

In the initial literature review at the beginning of the research project, an overview of the key terms “migration and higher education,” “first-generation migrant family students in higher education,” and “first-generation college students with an ethnic and

minority background” was performed. At this point, the intent was to conduct only a general assessment of the literature on the research area of first-generation students in higher education with and without a migrant background, not an exhaustive review. Therefore, I began to develop a preliminary theoretical sensitivity to the substantive topic area, identified gaps in the knowledge base, and determined that there was a need to conduct the study. Theoretical sensitivity is an essential concept of GT in which the researcher develops an understanding of the meaning of the data (Glaser, 1978). This approach, delaying the initial grounded literature analysis and research, as most notably described and recommended by Glaser, is used to prevent preconceived ideas from interfering with and/or influencing theory development (Glaser, 1992b, 1998, 2001).

Nevertheless, a preliminary literature review was necessary to develop the research site and broad research questions in the study’s design proposal so that they could be accepted by faculty at the university. It was thus a process of implementing, on the one hand, the scientific requirements of the faculty committee for a doctoral study and, on the other, the concept of theoretical sensitivity and thus conducting the interviews with a few general preconceptions. The formulation of the research questions was carried out within this process according to the requirements for writing a doctoral research proposal. An initial literature search can improve the research design and, at the same time, a researcher should remain open to new ideas but still remain cautious about his or her own academic and cultural background regarding the topic before entering the data collection phase. Thus, the Preliminary literature review and general understanding of the research area helped me to better form the initial broad research questions of the study. The following is a brief overview of the search methods, keywords, and databases used for the initial literature review.

Andor (the search service of the library of Tampere University) and Google Scholar as a search engine were used. Furthermore, literature databases and platforms such as ERIC, Web of Science, and Scopus were used as well. Relevant journals focused on the topics of college students, migration, and higher education were also targeted. For the first search, keywords such as “migration and higher education,” “first-generation students in universities/colleges,” “first-generation students with migration background” were used to search in the abovementioned literature databases, platforms, and related journals.

The literature found in this initial search also confirmed that the research questions of this study had not already been answered by others’ research, particularly for this target group (FGMFSs). However, it is also important to add that during the conducting of this study, more research on the experiences and perceptions of FGCSs was published,

especially recently (e.g., Ricks & Warren, 2021). In the following section, the results of the initial literature review on FGMFSs in higher education are presented.

Migrant family students in higher education have been identified as a result of global migrant movements. As mentioned earlier, this is a rapidly growing group that represents an ongoing increase in the number of students and faces new challenges on their educational path in host countries as well as posing new challenges to the host educational institutions in each country. In previous studies, FGCSs are best defined as students on track to transitioning to college, enrolled and studying in college, graduating from college, and coming from an immigrant or ethnic family. However, in the previous literature, these students were not specifically identified as “first-generation college students from migrant families.” For this study, this particular characteristic (migrant family) was added, which indicates students who are from immigrant families in Finland and whose parents do not have a higher education degree.

The target group of this study were first-generation higher education students from immigrant families in Finland (first-generation migrant family students, FGMFSs). In this study, both terms “immigrant” and “migrant” are used interchangeably to cover all first-generation students from refugee (forced migrants) and migrant or immigrant backgrounds. All participants in this study were from refugee families, and I refer to them as migrant family students as they are all citizens of Finland. They were either born in their countries of origin and moved with their families or were born in the host country (as their parents moved to Finland).

One group of students well described in the literature comes very close to this group of students: first-generation college students (FGCSs). This group differs from other groups of students at university in terms of background and educational outcomes (Coffman, 2011; Ecklund, 2013; Terenzini et al., 1996). In this context, FGCSs are defined in, for example, the United States as students who are the “first generation of their family of origin to attend a four-year institution of higher education in the United States” (Ecklund, 2013, p. 1). Initially, FGCSs are those whose parents have only a high school diploma or no diploma (Abdul Rahim & Azman, 2010; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003; Selamat et al., 2013; Stephens et al., 2012) and have also had little or no access to university education (Abdul Rahim & Azman, 2010; Choy, 2001; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ishitani, 2003; Thomas & Quinn, 2006; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Ecklund (2013) pointed out that FGCSs have a higher dropout rate and fewer bachelor’s or master’s degrees. It has also been noted that FGCSs tend to live off campus and to take active roles in their family: “First-generation students often have family and background characteristics that are associated with risk for attrition” (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998, p. 1). FGCSs need to work more (Pascarella et al., 2004), earn more money (Martinez, 2020; Saenz et al., 2007), and attend university to

change and improve their social and academic status (Abdul Rahim & Azman, 2010). They are also characterized by less academic preparedness and poorer self-confidence (Saenz et al., 2007).

These initial results of the literature review primarily identified research findings that indicate where disadvantages and barriers exist for FGCSs on the path to graduation or academic success. The body of research on FGMFSs is not abundant. Little research can be found on this target group since they are not specifically identified. However, it is reasonable to assume that there are many overlaps and similarities between these two groups (FGCSs and FGMFSs) in the issues that have already been studied.

## 2.2 Focused literature review

Based on this article-based dissertation and the results and categories found, the key terms for the literature review were expanded and continuously updated. The literature selected and presented in this section is the result of publications found throughout the period of the research project based on literature searches conducted constantly. The concepts and themes found in the literature during these later searches were selected and used only when data collection and analysis indicated that they were relevant to the development of GT in the data. Thus, the literature was not used to impact and force the data, but rather the selection of the literature was guided by the categories that emerged from the data.

This section presents and discusses only specifically selected literature found during the various phases of the literature search. An additional literature review can be found in the individual articles of this study. Nevertheless, the selective choice presented here gives a very good overview of the literature published on this research area. At the same time, I would like to point out again that the literature used in the articles (I, II, III) goes far beyond the literature discussed in this chapter. This is again due to two aspects: first, the methods of constant comparison and theoretical sensitivity and theoretical sampling in GT; and second, the structuring of the article-based dissertation chosen here.

In this part, I focus on a selection of literature related primarily to three areas: parents and their influence on the education of FGMFSs, transition to university, and study period in university in terms of achievement and well-being. This approach thus takes into account theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, and constant comparison as important components and procedures of the GT of this dissertation, which is also reflected in the method in Chapter 3 and in the theory formulated in Chapter 4 (Findings). This also considers the different phases I defined as “to, at, and

in the higher education,” which in turn resulted from the collection and analysis of data simultaneously during the research process. As far as I know, no prior study in Finland has covered the whole process of “to, at, and in higher education” for this or a similar target group. Also, at the international level, most studies have focused only on a subsection of education for FGCSs.

### 2.2.1 On the way to higher education: Parental involvement and education

The role of parents in the development of children is of central importance. They play a central role as interaction partners, as persons who at essential moments support their children in terms of values and cognitive and emotional abilities, and as those who select educational institutions and organize access to them. The influence of parents on their children in terms of success in their education is evident in many studies. According to Fan and Chen (2001), there is a positive relation between parental involvement and students’ academic achievement. Choy (2001) indicated that parents’ educational level is a factor in predicting the persistence of their children at college. If students have parents with college experience, another advantage arises because the parents can help these students manage their college life, helping them to, for example, enroll, choose courses, or apply for financial aid (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). While some research has shown that some migrant family students do as well as or better than native students and youth, this is especially the case when immigrant parents are highly educated and/or have high educational expectations for their children (Darmody et al., 2016). Overall, however, the majority of immigrant parents have insufficient education. An EU target is to reduce the average school dropout rate of migrant students to below 10 percent by 2020 compared to native students (Nouwen et al., 2015). However, according to Nouwen et al., by 2015, large gaps still remained, and many young migrants continued to leave school early. The dropout rate was still around 10 percent in 2021 (Mashhad, 2021). According to Nouwen et al., fostering trusting collaboration between schools and parents has been shown to reduce dropouts. Schnell et al. (2015) urged more studies to explore the relationship between parental involvement and success among immigrant children by interviewing those who have overcome barriers and achieved educational success. They also suggested more research on other alternative activities of family involvement, such as sibling involvement. Ecklund (2013) also pointed out that this group of students cannot be understood separately from their family context. Ecklund noted that “for FGCSs, parent and family relationships are complex and critical for success” (p. 161). One of the complexities of this relationship applies to children’s role as cultural and language brokers in their families (Bauer, 2016; Cline

et al., 2010). Difficulties in communication also arise because of differing perspectives among children, teachers, schools, and immigrant parents that go beyond language as a tool of exchanging information. This is about the extent to which one is involved in a child's schooling and interaction between school and home (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Crozier and Davise argued that "... the schools, and in particular the secondary schools, are hard to reach for many of the immigrant background parents to find the right level of involvement because of many expectations are assumed and thus hidden" (p. 311). A meta-study by Jeynes (2003) demonstrated the influence of parental involvement on all academic variables. Research findings in the Western world have shown that in almost all societies, there is a correlation between the educational level of parents and that of students (Ermisch & Pronzato, 2010). According to Ecklund (2013), "the context of the family is important for understanding the diversity of FGCSs" (p. 161). Other results, such as those by Gofen (2009), have confirmed the importance of family involvement and the social capital within the family unit as a resource for the success of FGMFSs and their upward educational mobility.

The next stage on the educational journey is the transition to higher education. This transition refers to the last years at upper secondary school, the years between finishing high school and applying for higher education, and the first year in higher education. Substantial literature exists on this process, which I briefly present in the following section.

### 2.2.2 Transition to higher education

In this section, a selection of literature references is presented that focuses on the transition of FGCSs to higher education. Transitions are often seen as a critical point in educational life trajectories, especially for this group of students. Often, no precise statements can be made about possible reasons for inequality. There are different possible reasons for inequalities in performance. Inequalities can be attributed to actual differences in performance—for example, due to language difficulties or possibly unfavorable support conditions at home rather than the host country. In any case, the results show that there are barriers and problems for FGCSs.

Berggren et al. (2021) showed that there is a lack of support during the transition to university. Kalalahti et al. (2020) claimed that the choice of upper secondary education in Finland is dependent on attitudes and previous experiences in the school system and that there is a greater need for cooperation between the whole educational system and families of students. FGCSs also exhibit lower levels of self-confidence in their abilities and a lack of self-confidence before arriving at college compared to their peers (Saenz

et al., 2007), and their graduation rates in the United States, for instance, are lower compared to students from college-educated parents (Forrest Cataldi et al., 2018). According to Atherton (2014), academic preparedness among FGCSs is different from that of traditional students in terms of standardized test scores. To improve access to college and also for the period of transition, Atherton (2014) suggested programs for first-year students that could facilitate the transition to university. Academic resources should be made available for this purpose. Such programs could reduce the difficulty of transitioning and staying at university. The transition from high school to university is a well-studied process for which a large body of data exists. Moitus et al. (2020) pointed out “that the basic competence and skills of students with an immigrant background and clarifying the division of tasks between the different forms of education in relation to this play a key role in making the educational pathways of immigrants smoother” (p. 12). A wide variety of factors have been studied, as described above; however, there is little research on the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs in higher education, a recent study by Ricks and Warren (2021) did, however, describe the experiences of successful FGCSs in their transition from high school to college.

### 2.2.3 In higher education

This section presents a selection of literature references that focus on university studies and the well-being of university students. The academic environment is of great importance to FGMFSs. This section presents research findings on academic performance, self-efficacy, and academic well-being. There is also an abundance of international studies on this area for FGCSs, especially in the US. In Finland, a study by Airas et al. (2019) assessed and described the participation of the students with a foreign background in higher education in Finland.

Different factors regarding graduation rates and academic success are cited and discussed in the research literature. In terms of dropout rates in higher education, the rates are higher for FGCSs compared to other student groups, whereas their graduation rates are lower (Ecklund, 2013). In terms of academic achievement, however, when the right conditions are met, these rates among FGCSs are comparable to those of non-first-generation college students (Selamat et al., 2013). An important factor that promotes educational success and performance is academic self-efficacy, as confirmed by Alivernini and Lucidi (2011). Academic self-efficacy is the extent to which one is confident in one’s abilities to achieve a task, and this includes, according to Bandura (1977, 2008), control over one’s own motivation, emotions, and behavior, as well as an impact on actions. Bandura (1999) posited that how much effort one expends and how

persistent one is when facing adversity can indicate the efficacy of that person. Studies show that there are effects of self-efficacy on persistence and GPA (Vuong et al., 2010), as well as positive effects on academic performance and personal adjustment (Chemers et al., 2001), and on college adjustment and persistence (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Moreover, FGCSs perceive themselves as not very well prepared or qualified for college. This is also accompanied by a sense and fear of failure (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004). In this direction, a study by Ruiz-de-Velasco et al. (2000) showed that students with immigrant backgrounds have difficulties with language and literature acquisition. The use of academic resources is not very strong among FGCSs. For example, FGCSs use less-developed strategies in interactions with faculty and staff at university than their fellow middle-class students (Yee, 2016). A study by Lipp and Jones (2011) demonstrated that regular reading practice to improve reading comprehension and vocabulary in history classes is helpful but not enough to significantly resolve difficulties.

Castillo-Montoya (2017) pointed out in her study on FGCSs that using prior socio-political consciousness is a way to support their academic learning. Amos (2010) argued that we cannot state that academic opportunities in higher education have the greatest impact on persistence in the first two years. He noted the importance of adequate academic preparation while in high school on persistence in college.

Despite all of these challenges, migrant students are successful, tending to earn more college degrees than native students (Baum & Flores, 2011). Castillo-Montoya (2019) viewed diversity by FGCSs as an opportunity for developing new teaching strategies as well as additional linguistic, cultural, and ethical diversity in schools and universities. Horowitz (2017) highlighted that it is important as a teacher to make FGCSs visible and to become their ally in the classroom. The results of a study by Airas et al. (2019) in Finland showed that students with a foreign and migratory background have problems in higher education regarding, for example, language skills. This is evident in achieving, continuing, and completing higher education.

FGCSs also face stress. This may result from too many different demands and roles due to their family situation and different cultures. For example, Phinney and Haas (2003) revealed that financial pressures and family obligations are stressors that FGCSs often face. Living in diverse contexts can also be a source of stress for this group of students. Being a member of an ethnic or social minority group also makes one vulnerable to stressful experiences related to prejudice (Green, 2006; Phinney & Haas, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). A study by Garriott and Nisle (2018) emphasized the importance of institutional support on the relationship between stress and perceived

academic goal progress. However, the study did not find a relationship between support from friends and family in relation to perceived academic progress and stress.

There is also a very useful database and many exemplary research findings on the areas of stress and emotional pressures for FGCSs. Emotional stress in the form of loneliness was covered in the present study (for more details, see Article III). The desire to belong to the academic environment is very strong for FGMFSs and can compensate for the negative feelings they may experience. Thomas (2012) viewed this as a central element for academic and social engagement in the university. At the individual level, a sense of belonging and attachment to an academic institution can develop.

There are a variety of conceptual and theoretical frames of reference that have been used by other researchers in this research area. Most articles dealing with FGCSs have used Tinto's (1993) model as a theoretical framework to explain dropout rates. Another very commonly used model is Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). These are certainly the most commonly used models. This was also confirmed in the analysis conducted by Ives and Castillo-Montoya (2020), who reviewed 473 research articles on the topic from an initial research of 1,552 articles based on terms like "first-generation college students, academic achievement, academic success, academic performance" (p. 144). Others, such as Demetriou et al. (2017), have employed Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory to examine the experiences, activities, roles, and relationships of successful students during their college graduation. Other researchers, such as Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011), used relational dialectic theory to understand the experiences of FGCSs in higher education, their tensions and struggles, and the importance of these tensions and struggles in their retention at and graduation from college.

GT was also deployed in a few papers dealing with FGCSs, such as Gofen (2009) on the topic of FGCSs and their family values, or Alvarez (2011) on the topic of FGCSs' identity. Yet others, such as Ricks and Warren (2021), employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived transition experiences (high school to college) of 10 successful students at college.

The theories and models presented here did not play role at the beginning of the study. GT was selected because little was known about FGMFSs and their experiences and perceptions related to their educational journey. This is in line with the observation by Demetriou et al. (2017, p. 35) that much of the literature "focuses on the struggles and negative outcomes of FGCSs, but not many studies have focused on the experiences and perceptions of these students who succeeded to achieve and continue their study at higher education."

## 2.3 Research questions

Based on the preliminary literature review and discussions with supervisors and experts in and outside of the field (Dunne & Ustundag, 2020) at the beginning of the study, and following the basic aim of the study, the main question “how do FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational journey to, at, and in higher education in the context of their life stories (including their challenges, potentials, abilities, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, identity, and positioning),” was framed. The following sub-research questions were derived from the main question.

- 1.1. How do first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs) perceive and experience their educational journey to, at and in higher education in Finland (including their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings)?
- 1.2. How do FGMFSs contextualize, position, and situate themselves in their educational journey to, at, and in higher education?
- 1.3. How do FGMFSs feel and think about being positioned by others (institution, family, students, teachers, etc.) in their educational journey to, at, and in higher education?
- 1.4. What problems, challenges, and potentials exist on their educational journey, and in which ways do FGMFSs integrate themselves in the new personal, social, cultural, and academic contexts?

Additional detailed sub-questions were further developed in the field and formulated according to GT through the ongoing process of comparing and writing memos in the research process. Using research questions is a possibility doing a GT study, although there have always been interesting discussions and different perspectives from GT representatives on this particular issue (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 2010, 2021). For this study, the questions were defined to study and guide the inquiry but also to generate enough flexibility and freedom to explore the topic in sufficient depth (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In addition, these questions also helped to narrow the research field and to draw boundaries. Consequently, the above research questions were broadly formulated based on the initial general literature review and developed throughout the GT research process. In contrast to other research approaches, in GT, it is the research process that generates the questions. Thus, the questions above also include this development according to the GT approach. It was very important that the questions were open-ended and broad enough to apply the flexible and dynamic nature of GT. As the study progressed, additional sub-questions were developed based on the

responses and the research process (theoretical sampling and constant comparison) to achieve the research goal.

The following chapter will focus on the philosophical stance and methodology that was applied in this study to investigate how FGMFSs experienced and perceived their educational journey to and within higher education.

## 3 Methodology

In this chapter, the philosophical stance and methodology of the research are explained. The philosophical stance in research includes the ontological and epistemological perspectives and is briefly discussed. Reflexivity in research is complemented by positionality, which is also explained. The research method section describes how the study was conducted, including sampling, memo writing, data collection, and data analysis. The chapter ends with a reflection on ethical considerations and research evaluation.

### 3.1 Philosophical stance: Ontological and epistemological perspective

Ontology, as a scientific discipline within philosophy, is the study of being, of “what can be known” (Berryman, 2019, p. 272). Ontology considers what exists or what is constructed. It is the search for objects that exist or can be said to exist: “These are beliefs about the nature of reality” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 19). Ontology refers to the “nature of being” (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p. 41), and researchers have different perspectives on reality.

According to Annells (1996), there are two important frameworks that can highlight differences in the view of reality: postpositivism and constructivism. Postpositivism assumes that there is an objective, observable reality, but that it can never be fully understood because attempts to understand it are influenced by the human mind. Constructivists and relativists question this distinction. The social constructivist ontological belief, according to Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 35), is that “multiple realities are constructed or created through our lived experiences and interactions with others.”

Relativist ontology is based on the belief that reality is a finite subjective experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

In this study, I adopted a relativistic ontological position (Annell, 1996) in order to capture the subjective opinions of interviewees in my study. Relativism rejects the concept of absolute truth and views reality as conditional, that it can take different forms depending on the perspective of the individual (Lincoln et al., 2018). For example, experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs concerning the educational journey may differ significantly from those of other students. Furthermore, complex experiences and perceptions are multi-faceted and can vary widely, encompassing a number of different elements, such as developing one's identity, gender, age, cross-cultural challenges, and conflicts within and with family. Everyone can have their own vision, and that vision is dependent on the individual's conditions and experiences. In this study, I therefore assumed a relativistic ontological position, documenting the multiple perspectives or perceptions and experiences of FGMFSs. The experiential reality of FGMFSs as a subjective interpretation of what happens to them in the context of their educational journey (host society, educational system, family, and community) and experiences was taken as the basis, which is consistent with the ontological assumptions of relativism (Lincoln et al., 2018).

Epistemology, according to Cresswell and Poth (2018, p. 20), focuses on the question of "how reality is known" and "what is the relationship between investigator and what can be known". The characteristic of a qualitative study is that "subjective evidence is obtained from participants", therefore, "the researcher should try to get as close as possible to the object or persons being studied" (Cresswell & Poth, pp. 20–21).

In terms of epistemology, we see in one of the founders of GT, Glaser, a "positivist epistemological assumption" in which "knowledge about phenomena emerges directly from such data" (Weed, 2017, p. 151). Straussian GT has yet another epistemological claim to be "an interpretive work, and ... Interpretations must incorporate the perspectives and voices of the people studied" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, as cited in Weed, 2017, p. 151). In this study, I followed the approach formulated by Glaser and Strauss, which states to simply start the work and define the topic and the target group for starting the study. For this study, the target group were FGMFSs in higher education in Finland. My philosophical perspective can be characterized, following Annells (1996), as a relativistic ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. During the research process, it became clear that everyone sees reality from their own perspective in relation to their experiences and surrounding environment. There is an interest in the discovery of reality for everyone, but there are many interpretations of this reality, which culminates in the assumption of the existence of multiple realities. "Discovery of knowledge" is linked to conditions. These conditions were interpreted by the participants and me during the

analysis of the data. In doing so, these interpretations are important in contributing to scientific understanding in a specific area. Interpretations are important because they lead to growth in understanding and knowledge. Knowledge and understanding were thus generated through interactions between me and the participants, both subjectively (in the interpretation) and objectively (in the collection and analysis of data). Research findings thus revealed what was happening to the object under study (the target group) and what has shaped and influenced their educational journey to and within higher education. Thus, my epistemology is subjective (interpretive), and the approach to objectivity was achieved through theoretical sampling, theoretical sensitivity, and constant comparison as suggested by GT.

There has been an extensive discussion in the scholarly literature about to which research paradigm GT should be assigned, as there is nothing in the early and foundational works of both authors (Glaser and Strauss) on issues of epistemology and ontology (Bryant, 2002). Weed (2017) assigned the following theoretical frameworks to the three main variants of GT: the realist-positivist tradition represented by Glaser (1992b), also referred to as classical grounded theory, the realist-postpositivist tradition of Corbin and Strauss (1990), and the interpretivist-constructivist tradition of Charmaz (2006).

I did not necessarily adopt a pure form of a traditional research paradigm in this study. The lines between classical (Glaser), Straussian, or constructivist GT cannot always be clearly drawn. For this study, the process began with a focus on Glaser's GT. This was evident in my work by defining and beginning with the target group and setting following the theoretical sampling, constant comparison, theoretical saturation, and memo writing. However, in the data analysis and especially in the coding, Strauss's GT was used as the guiding interpretive methodology. This had the advantage of being a clear and easy-to-follow approach, moving from the description of phenomena to their conceptualization. This is also consistent with Corbin and Strauss's (2015) statement that their guide can be used flexibly and adapted to the dynamics of a research project.

### 3.2 Methodological perspective

In order to examine the complexity of the subject area or phenomenon under study, it became clear that a methodology, defined by epistemology, was also needed to capture and interpret the underlying patterns of the target group's experiences and perceptions during their educational journey to, at and in higher education. Carter and Little (2007) defined "methodologies as the reconstructed logics that justify, explain, and help us understand research methods" (p. 1323). Thus, in this study, the use of qualitative

research methods was chosen to understand the phenomenon under investigation. Furthermore, the advantages of qualitative research in studying the experiences and perceptions of individuals were obvious, and this was also confirmed after an initial general review of the relevant literature, as well as my own professional background, that the use of a qualitative approach is promising. Qualitative research also offers flexibility in research design because it does not prescribe specific, distinct methods, paradigms, or procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

It was essential to develop a research framework that was appropriate to the specific substantive area and understanding of what was happening for FGMFSs during their educational journey to, at and within higher education through the investigation of their experiences and perceptions. Based on these preliminary considerations, GT was chosen as a central approach for this research to determine “what is going on” for this target group. Glaser (1998, p. 40) also pointed out that “GT is general method to use on any kind of mix of data and is particularly useful with qualitative data” and, he continued, GT is an approach to derive a practical theory through the systematic analysis of data that are “grounded” within complex social phenomena. GT is defined by Glaser (1992a) as:

A general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area. The research product constitutes a theoretical formulation or integrated set of conceptual hypotheses about the substantive area under study. (p. 16)

On the other hand, the GT methodology, according to Corbin and Strauss (2015, p. 11) “provides a tried-and-true set of procedures for constructing theory from data.” Further, Corbin and Strauss noted that GT helps researchers to examine issues from different angles, to identify new views on old problems, and can be used for both individuals and organizations, and to develop a substantial theory. Both definitions by Glaser and by Corbin and Strauss essentially agree here, as they define their respective understanding of methodology. Abstract wonderment is the key difference between GT and other types of methodologies since GT research starts with a general interest area without focusing on a well-defined special issue or variables and is opposed to testing and verifying hypotheses.

Both Glaser’s and Strauss and Corbin’s methodologies were used for this research. Glaserian GT was used to explore and elaborate the social phenomenon underlined educational journey of the target group through their experiences and perceptions. Glaser’s statement to determine “what is going on” was implemented in this study

insofar as I wanted to know what was happening with FGMFSs in relation with their education and what they experienced and learned on their educational journey.

No presuppositions or hypotheses were formulated, and I did not seek to make assumptions or test hypotheses according to a specific theory. Rather, the aim was to investigate how first-generation university students from immigrant families experience and perceive their education in Finland. It was hoped that doing so could clarify what happens to FGMFSs on their educational path to and within higher education. The research commenced without conducting an extensive literature review to prevent the integration of insights derived from such a review prior to completing the data collection and analysis stages (see Chapter 2). The research questions were broad; however, they provided a framework for starting the study based on the initial literature review and consultants with supervisor and experts. The concept of constant comparison and theoretical sampling and saturation was applied in a parallel process of data collection and data analysis. The data analysis and coding followed the concept of Corbin and Strauss (open, axial, and selective coding), as it delineated a clear instructional set of methods and tools.

### 3.3 Positionality

I would also like to make clear my own position on this study regarding the topic and method. I am from a multicultural and multiethnic country in which several languages are spoken. A multicultural society offers many opportunities, as different cultures can support and learn from each other. However, certain structures, often traditional ones, sometimes foster but often also hinder such learning. In my experience as a student and as a teacher, I became increasingly interested in how learners with different biographies (ethnicity, language, family, and gender) experience and perceive their education. I became interested in how these culturally diverse backgrounds and differences affect the learners' education, how they are taken into account in the education system, and how their educational success can be ensured. But also, the question of how to get educational institutions more interested in this social phenomenon became increasingly focused. So, these personal, cultural, and academic experiences enhanced my interest in which factors can influence the educational success of students who belong to a minority in society and in the educational system.

These connections fascinated me, and so I set out on an educational journey along which I had the opportunity to study these phenomena. I had this opportunity in Finland. In Finland, I was able to study the educational journey of first-generation university students with an immigrant background and different cultural backgrounds.

The goals in which I was most interested were learning how their educational journey to, at and in higher education was experienced and how this journey can be better accompanied and supported by the educational system, if necessary.

Glaser (1998) pointed out that grounded theorists should set aside their professional assumptions when conducting research. Researchers are not unbiased and naturally have their own experiences and philosophical assumptions. However, they should be skillful and open themselves up as much as possible to understanding the participants' main concerns and to discovering the patterns they use to address these concerns. I have interpreted my role as a researcher in a metaphorical way as an astronaut traveling in space to gather information. The astronaut must be able to move and act without gravity in space. Without gravity, one can move freely in any direction and see many things from different angles. This metaphorical image helped me to observe, compare, and conceptualize the categories that emerged.

Getting access to the data for this study was the first challenge for me as a new international student. I had defined the target group as first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs) in higher education in Finland. My focus was to uncover and investigate what happened to them as FGMFSs in Finland in terms of their education, how they experienced and perceived their education at the university, and what and how they study there. So, understanding their experiences and perceptions as FGMFSs in relation to their education was my initial goal. As the research process progressed, it became clear how important prior experiences and perceptions were on their educational journey toward higher education.

At this point, I would like to explain my own role in the research process and the complexity of insider/outsider positionality during the research process: "Positionality is also determined by where one stands in relation to others" (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411). Moreover, "Insider/outsider positions are relative to the cultural norms and values of both the researcher and the participant" (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 416).

So, in explaining my positionality, I must clarify that I was both an insider and an outsider due to different levels and different conditions in this study. That is, I was an outsider and also often felt like an insider. On the one hand, I was an insider in the sense that I am from the same university where this research was conducted, and at which most of the participants studied. Moreover, I have been in Finland as a foreigner and studied at the university in Finland as an international student. Thus, familiarity with the environment helped me to understand the context of the interviews. I am also from a country and ethnicity that matched the background of some of the participants, and as such I was familiar with their cultural norms and values and had a deep understanding of what they were saying and trying to explain. There have been situations in the interviews especially in the interviews with the female participants, we had the same

understanding about gender roles and power relations in families and the community at large. In some of the interviews, they used the phrase “Well, you know” or “Well, you probably know that ...” at the beginning, but more explanations always followed, which prevented the intertwining of my preconceptions or misunderstandings. When I recognized the similarities and familiarity of the situation mentioned by interviewees, I asked for further explanations and elaborations through why and how questions in order not to rely on my own assumptions and interpretations. In this way, I tried to maintain a distance while conducting the interviews and to constantly check my own thoughts and experiences. I was aware of my preconceptions and experiences, noted them all separately, and compared them to participants’ expressions so as not to influence the data and to remain objective in recording and analyzing. On the other hand, I was an outsider because I do not have a refugee or immigration background and, unlike them, I have not been educated in Finland or know of any educational institution other than the university. My questions to them were developed to learn more about their educational background in Finland and to understand their experiences from their own perspective on their educational journey. As an outsider, I also wanted to use my curiosity to uncover invisible factors that insiders might not notice or find very difficult to notice.

### 3.4 Research method

This study employed GT, which was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a research method. GT is used to generate a theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For this, data are systematically collected and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). In GT existing conceptualizations and theories at the early stage of study should not be used and effected on researcher primarily interpretations. This method allows researchers to generate data without involving prior assumptions.

GT provides a continuous alternation of data collection, data analysis, and theory building. The main characteristics of this method are theoretical sensitivity, data collection, theoretical sampling, the use of systematic and analytical coding procedures, the writing and use of memos and diagrams, constant comparison, and conceptualization. For example, Glaser (1998) referred to the coding steps as substantive coding, including open and selective coding, and theoretical coding. Corbin and Strauss (2015), in contrast, described these coding steps as open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 1998). There have been ongoing debates and discussions about the correct use and implementation of different variations of GT for decades. Many of Glaser’s ideas and suggestions, such

as theoretical sensitivity, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling, were adopted for this study, whereas Corbin and Strauss' coding method was chosen for the coding procedure.

The GT research approach was chosen to explore the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey through constant comparison and theoretical sampling. GT was also chosen for this target group because it guarantees the greatest possible openness toward the target group. In this context, GT was used as a general inductive method "possessed by no discipline or theoretical perspective or data type" (Glaser, 2005, p. 1), which means that hypotheses could be derived during the research process from the given statements and examples in the study. The statements, descriptions, and narratives of the FGMFSs were considered as their real experiences and as their constructed perceptions. Their statements were considered relevant data for the development of GT. The statements made by the FGMFSs about their perceptions and experiences were neither discussed nor rejected by the interviewer during the interviews. However, to maintain accuracy and to prevent any misunderstandings, the GT methods were used during the interviews and after the transcriptions.

### 3.4.1 Theoretical sensitivity

The basic requirement of GT is that the beginning of research and the research field should be considered as unbiased and unprejudiced (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, this is not always possible in practice. For example, a researcher's own biography plays a role in any research project, including this research project. Thus, it does not mean that the researcher is empty minded but instead suspends his or her preconceptions and remains open-minded (Glaser, 1978). Every researcher has perspectives, biases, and assumptions that they bring with them to the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These perspectives can be harmful, but questioning and analyzing individual words, phrases, or sentences, and comparing them, have been cited as techniques for promoting theoretical sensitivity. I used these techniques in this study.

When one begins to work with GT, no fixed theory is at hand with which to analyze the data. Rather, the researcher is operating in an open field of inquiry with many unclear aspects. In order to make sense of the data, an important skill of the researcher is required, which is called theoretical sensitivity in the methodological toolkit of GT. Theoretical sensitivity is closely related to GT (Glaser, 1978). Corbin and Strauss (2015) described sensitivity as "having insights as well as being attuned to and able to pick up on relevant themes, events, and happenings during data collection and analysis" (p. 78).

I have these requirements for sensitivity because I have had experiences with different cultures and ethnicities in my country of origin. But these personal and professional experiences can be helpful and can serve as important assessments of the research subject (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Indeed, they can often be the starting point of interest for a research question or project. Another aspect is to what extent an intensive literature review is necessary at the beginning of the research. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 37) rejected the use of intensive literature reviews. The rationale for this requirement of Glaser and Strauss was to provide space to allow categories and interpretations to emerge from the empirical data during the analysis and not be influenced by extant theoretical frameworks and hypotheses.

Glaser (2013) maintained this position, whereas Holton and Walsh (2017), who were representatives of a purist tradition, pointed out that they would not reject existing literature but instead recommended considering it only after the main categories have been discovered. Strauss changed his stance on these issues, while Corbin and Strauss (2015) no longer take a purist stance on this issue. In this study, I only conducted a preliminary review of the literature at the beginning to get an overview. The literature review described in Chapter 2 was conducted after the major categories had emerged. I did not make any prior assumptions or use existing theories about the phenomenon being studied. The research process diagram following the GT methodology is provided in Appendix A.

### 3.4.2 Data and data collection process

The decision about the choice of data type was based on “which data have the greatest potential to capture the type of information desired” (Corbin & Straus, 2015, p. 142). For data collection, the target population (first-generation higher education students from immigrant families in Finland) was identified and higher education was selected as the basic context for starting the study. In this study, the term “higher education” refers to both research universities and universities of applied sciences, which were established in Finland in the 1990s.

Therefore, in order to recruit participants from this group of students, an announcement for participation was disseminated in spring 2017 through the registration office of the second-largest university in Finland (enrolls about 14,000 students) to all students on the intranet page of the university, the Facebook page of the student union, and the Facebook pages and email lists of some faculty of the university. In addition, I distributed the announcement poster manually to different faculty and on different parts of campus, as well as at some popular places on campus,

such as restaurants, libraries, and hallways, on information boards. The target group (FGMFSs) was specified in the announcement. Precise information about the objectives of the study was provided in the announcement. This is consistent with Buchanan et al. (1988), who suggested that the process of giving precise information is confidence building. Five responses were received from this initial announcement, of which three were in line with the target group.

In order to reach more participants, data collection was expanded to include off-campus locations, such as the office of the Migration Information Service, soccer and handicrafts hobby clubs, Finnish language courses, and centers and clubs working with adult and youth migrants. In addition, some staff and lecturers at the university as well as some immigrant friends were personally contacted with the request to pass on the research announcement to their circle of acquaintances in order to attract additional participants. This resulted in the recruitment of four additional participants.

The second official announcement was sent out, six months after the first, to all students at the university via the Registration Office email list; unfortunately, no additional participants responded. Eight other participants were identified through snowball sampling, which also involved other Finnish universities. It is notable that participant recruitment was initially difficult but became easier when I sought the assistance of immigrant friends and of those with whom the first interviews were conducted. Ultimately, the data collection process lasted for one year (Table 1).

Table 1. Data collection process.

<b>Data collection</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Time</b>
First announcement through university (UTA)	A1, A2, A8	Spring 2017
Second announcement through university (UTA, TUT, TAMK) and searching outside of the university	A3, A4, A7, A12	Autumn 2017
Asking university staff and lecturers for help in searching	A5, A15	2017–2018
Snowball sampling	A6, A9, A10, A11, A13, A14	2017–2018

Ultimately, 15 FGMFSs (eight females and seven males) from different Finnish universities were interviewed for this study. Most of the participants (n=8) were from the second-largest university in Finland. The participants represented different disciplines, from engineering to natural sciences to social sciences to medicine. Four

of the participants had graduated, 8 were studying at the master's level, and three were studying at the bachelor's level.

No specific effort is made in this study to cover migrant students from a particular country but, based on data from Statistics Finland, the participants in this study can be considered representative of the majority of migrants in Finland in 2017. Iraqis (2,369), Syrians (1,422), and Russians (1,420) are considered the three largest groups of immigrants in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2018).

Eleven of the study participants were from Middle East countries, of whom eight were ethnically Kurdish. The majority of Kurdish background among the participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Two participants were from Africa, one was from Russia, and one was from Vietnam. The migration year of the participants to Finland varied from 1991 to 2007. The participants' age ranged from 25 to 38 at the time of the interview. One of the participants was born in Finland, four had migrated to Finland between the age of 1 and 5, three between the age of 10 and 13, and seven between the age of 16 and 18 (Table 2).

Table 2. Participants' characteristics.

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Gender	8	7	-
Age	25—38	27—33	-
Age of arrival	Born—18	5—16	born: 1 <6: 4 10—13: 3 16—18: 7
Origin country	Asia, Far East, Middle East	Asia, Middle East, Africa	
Research university	7	4	7 from the second largest university
University of Applied Science	1	3	3 from the second largest university
Bachelor's degree	1	2	---
Master's degree	5	2	---
Doctoral degree	-	1	---
Graduated	2 (1 master's and 1 doctoral degree)	2 (master's degree)	---

### 3.4.3 Interview process

Before conducting the interviews, I conducted three pilot interviews with three international students at the university. The feedback from the pilot interviewees was helpful and I took into consideration when designing the questioning techniques for the subsequent interviews. The data from the three pilot interviews were not considered in the main study.

In this study, data were collected based on interviews with FGMFSs who agreed to participate. At the beginning of the interview, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, both verbally and in writing, and that their data would be anonymized. To ensure this, the interviewees' names were also anonymized, and the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board for Research Integrity and the Principles for Responsible Conduct of Research were followed. At the end of the short briefing, a mutual agreement was also signed (see 3.10 Ethical consideration).

The interviews were conducted between spring 2017 and autumn 2018 and lasted between 90 and 110 minutes. Most of the interviews were conducted in English. For three participants, however, the mother tongue language was used. This was necessary because I was not fluent in Finnish and these participants were not fluent in English.

The conduct and time of the interviews were adjusted to the availability of the participants and sufficient time was allocated. Twelve interviews took place at university facilities, and three were conducted via Skype. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were welcomed and informed about my personal and academic background verbally and via a written consent form. After the interviews, I made sure to stay in contact with the participants in case any further clarifications or questions were needed during the transcription or analysis of the data. Moreover, participants have been asked for consent to review the interviews after transcription. This was also done with participants if more clarifications on their quotes were needed.

Personal stories and data were collected through comprehensive, semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The initial data, memos, and results of the open coding were used as a framework to guide the development of questions for the remaining interviews. Due to the widely varying experiences and biographies of the participants, some interview questions were adjusted accordingly. More focused questions were then asked during research depending on the participants' inputs and how the conversations proceeded. According to the nature of GT, questions were developed during the research process, and emergent concepts from previous interviews were considered for subsequent interviews.

During the interviews, I tried to stay open to what the interviewees brought up by listening carefully and paying attention to what they were saying: "Interview questions

have to relate directly to what the interview is about empirically, so the researcher maximizes the acquisition of non-forced data” (Glaser, 2021, p. 1). As Glaser mentioned, “think theory, talk everyday common sense English” (p. 1).

During the interviews, questions arose about topics such as mothers’ roles, teachers’ roles, and friends’ roles, how and what kinds of friendships were formed, identity development, cross-cultural experiences in the host country, learning and performance, challenges and potentials, and strategies to deal with their challenges. The participants were asked about who has had a significant influence over their decision to go to university. This was done by asking focused questions about actors such as teachers, friends, and parents, what role they played on their way to university, and how if they were not mentioned. For details, they were asked about their experiences and perceptions during school years, about their teachers, staff, and their friends, and about their communication with their parents, siblings, and relatives. They were asked about their beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and feelings, and about what challenges they had to address that resulted from differences between the culture of the host country and that of their country of origin. They were also asked about what potentials they had and what they had learned and applied in adjusting to their cross-cultural situations.

The interview questions covered the influence of school and university on their attitudes, perceptions of themselves, and performance during their studies. All questions consistently targeted their perceptions and experiences in their educational journey before, during, and after their transition to university as FGMFSs, how they positioned themselves, and what strategies they used to succeed in dealing with and navigating some of their challenges during their journey according to two different cultures and values.

Each article of this research reflects only a subset of the total GT in this PhD thesis. Table 3 shows the main initial research questions and sub-questions in each of the three articles. More details can be found in Appendix B.

Table 3. Research design and research questions

**Aim of the study:**

To study the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey to, at, and in higher education in the context of their life story.

**Main research question and sub questions:**

1. how do FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational journey to, at, and in higher education in the context of their life stories (including their challenges, potentials, abilities, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, identity, and positioning)?
  - 1.1 How do first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs) perceive and experience their educational journey to, at and in higher education in Finland (including their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings)?
  - 1.2 How do FGMFSs contextualize, position, and situate themselves in their educational journey to, at, and in higher education?
  - 1.3 How do FGMFSs feel and think about being positioned by others (institution, family, students, teachers, etc.) in their educational journey to, at, and in higher education?
  - 1.4 What problems, challenges, and potentials exist on their educational journey, and in which ways do FGMFSs integrate themselves in the new personal, social, cultural, and academic contexts?

**Research method:** Grounded theory (GT)

Article I	Article II	Article III
<p><b>Focus area:</b>            – How FGMFSs perceive and experience their educational journey to higher education and which factors and processes do they emphasize and point out in their life story that affects their higher education success?</p> <p><b>Further sub questions:</b>            The respondents were asked about:            – their school days, their teachers, their friends and classmates, their relationship with their parents and family, and episodes that had an important influence on their decision to go to university.            – challenges and their strategies to deal with these challenges, if any.            – their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, as well as their experiences due to differences between their country of origin and their host country's cultures.</p>	<p><b>Focus area:</b>            – How do FGMFSs perceive and experience their cross-cultural context on their educational journey to and in higher education?</p> <p><b>Further sub questions:</b>            The respondents were asked about:            – details related to their cultural experiences at school and university and their culture at home and with family and relatives.            – their learning, skills, thoughts, and perceptions on their educational path in a cross-cultural context.            – factors that had an important influence on their decision to go to university in a cross-cultural context.            – challenges and also potentials and skills, and strategies to deal with these cross-cultural challenges            – their thoughts, values, feelings, and emotions, as well as their experiences due to differences between their country of origin and their host country's cultures.</p>	<p><b>Focus area:</b>            – How do FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational careers in higher education and which factors and processes do they emphasize and point out in their life story that affects their higher education success?</p> <p><b>Further sub questions:</b>            The respondents were asked to relate details about their experiences in higher education, such as;            – their feelings when they entered university,            – their experiences with staff, lecturers, and friends, their study experience at the university,            – their challenges and the strategies they used to deal with these challenges,            – their learning during their studies at the university,            – their suggestions for other FGMFSs for being academically successful,            – their suggestions for universities to help other FGMFSs be successful</p>

### 3.4.4 Theoretical saturation and theoretical sampling

Theoretical saturation is an important building block in the application of GT. Aldidabat and Le Navenec (2018) pointed out that the number of samples needed for saturation is around 10—15. However, this also depends on the level of complexity of the research project. In addition to the pure number of samples, however, it is also important in GT to ensure that categories are defined well in terms of their properties, to show how these concepts and different conditions vary, and to relate the categories to each other. To accomplish this, data must be collected until the theory is condensed and logical and no contradictions appear in the explanation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Theoretical saturation is very closely related to theoretical sampling. According to Corbin and Strauss (2015, p. 147), the basis for sampling is “concepts, not persons.” Concepts are elaborated and integrated in an ongoing process. New groups or places can contribute to an improvement of the concepts. In this study, the theoretical sampling certainly led to new groups, such as teachers, family members, or friends. Although collecting data from new groups is an important factor, due to the lack of time and financial resources, data collection was limited to the original target group of this study. However, to verify the statements of the FGMFSs in higher education, conversations were held with teachers and professors at the university. For this, I searched for and found three teachers and professors of three FGMFSs among the participants. I asked them some questions in order to determine whether their viewpoints could verify the statements made by the FGMFSs. Their statements were consistent with the findings and statements of FGMFSs.

In this study, theoretical saturation was achieved after 15 interviews. No additional categories were added after the 10th interview. To ensure data saturation was achieved, five more interviews were conducted. These data further compacted the results and reinforced and confirmed the categories found up to that point through adding properties and variations. Theoretical saturation also involves constant comparison of conceptual indicators (Holton & Walsh, 2017). This was also done constantly by comparison among codes and data, codes and categories, categories with categories, data with data, and memos with memos.

### 3.4.5 Data analysis

The steps of data analysis are described comprehensively in Articles (I–III). Generally, the data analysis included transcriptions of audio files into written versions in English,

and continuously writing memos. Coding followed the approach of Strauss and Corbin (1994), which included open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Data analysis was done simultaneously with data collection. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed, and memos were written after conducting each interview as well as when coding after transcriptions. Memos were written to establish GT in the long term and to determine appropriate relationships for the interviews. Memos, according to Corbin and Strauss (2015), have the function of marking concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions. This is necessary to define, refine, and densify concepts. At the same time, diagrams were also created and developed to show the relationship between concepts. The memos and diagrams had quite different meanings throughout the research. This was also the case in this study. Sometimes, the memos were reflections on the interviews, after which brainstorming occurred to find more dimensions or to develop new questions for the next interviews. The memos were also used to allow for constant comparison of data and to find similarities and differences among data, codes, and categories. Memos were used in different periods, after interviews, after coding for conceptualizing, and before the final draft of theory. Thus, the memos were used in different forms and variations throughout the research process.

An important element of the GT methodology are memos: “Stop coding and record a memo on your ideas,” as Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 113) put it. Memos are a form of written notes because they record the analytic process and instructions for the researcher. They describe, analytically and conceptually, the phenomenon at issue. The researcher can step back from the material to view it from an analytic distance (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For Holton and Walsh (2017), memos show the connections between categories and their dimensions. As Glaser and Holton (2004, para. 61) state:

Memos are theoretical notes about the data and the conceptual connections between categories. Writing theoretical memos is the core phase in the process of theory building. If the analyst skips this phase by going directly to sorting or writing down after coding, he/she is not doing GT.

According to Glaser (1998) “a memo is for moment capture” (p. 178). Memos were written in this study after the interviews and during the coding of the interview transcripts to further enhance the understanding of the data. This was a constant process between transcribing the data, coding, reading, and writing memos. The process of coding, constant comparison, and reflection for the next interviews was necessary to develop the codes, their meanings, and the categories. Some codes were merged, others were added, and this process continued and was ongoing until the last interview.

Comparing the different interviews to each other was also an ongoing process. This process was maintained and carried out in all 15 interviews. Each memo was accompanied by a brief commentary describing the research activities. Sorting and organizing the memos also helped with this process of analysis and reflection when important concepts and theory building were involved. One example (an interview) was chosen to show the function of memos in the data collection phase after transcription and coding (Table 4). Memos do not have to follow any particular structure but can be written in a wide variety of ways. “Memos can be a sentence, a paragraph, or a few pages” (Glaser, 1978, p. 84). Memos can contain diagrams or unstructured notes at different stages of the research. Glaser posits that “The freedom of memoing allows analyst to work faster, by only having to think of the idea, not its presentations” (p. 85).

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Table 4. Memo writing

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Memo

Interview A 1: After transcription and coding

Date 12.05.2017

This interview shows interesting themes, the importance of networks and social skills, and how to interact and communicate with others. Besides, it shows how it is important how FGMFSs see themselves and how their own mindset about themselves could act as an obstacle for their integration and how negative perceptions about themselves and their background and also their ability leads to a kind of fear and stress to not integrate in class and during their study. Lack of self belief leads to isolation and not integration and not enjoying study. The question is how this fear could be recognized by educators and how educational institutions could help in enhancing the positive self-perceptions of these students. It seems that this kind of thinking and perception about oneself might be culturally and comes back to this issue of how the viewpoints of people are more important than your own opinion and thinking. This interview shows low self-confidence and high self-efficacy. He had a lot of energy to do what he learnt and to make his learning applicable; however, he still did not see himself as fully functional and he liked to use all of his energy on a target and to concentrate all of his energy for that. He wishes to learn how do learning in a relaxed way and not to get stressed easily.

It seems that to be open-minded and open to the new culture and new people is one of the important things that is necessary to be integrated, concentrating and putting time on their study. Besides, it shows that learning to be relaxed is another important issue for him because they have this stress, and it might come back to their negative perception of self or to equality in society that they see themselves as the same as others but they know that they are different but there is no space for this to be understood to prevent this stress and to relax.

Emerging concepts:

Social skills, equality, self-perception, self-confidence, self-efficacy, value of education, individual relationship with teachers and professors, pedagogical studies

Appearance of further sub-questions and further focus:

This interview made me as a researcher ask more questions in detail about the reasons for being alone and not integrated during the educational path. This interviewee had not integrated culturally and socially, and he suffered from loneliness; could this thus be the case for others? It made me think of how this communication and social skills have been experienced and perceived by other FGMFSs?

Also, the fact that he had a hard time in high school compared to university drew my attention to the years before university and led me to ask more about their experiences in school before entering university. He also emphasized more the importance of supportive programs for students before higher education.

Interestingly, no challenges in the Finnish language were mentioned in the interview, only a few comments about writing academic essays in school. I wanted to know more about the challenges in different skills in the Finnish language, which made me think whether writing is more problematic, and if so, why?

Entering university was expected and easy for him—is this also the case for others? In this interview, he did not feel successful because he was not yet fully functional. This prompted me to ask other interviewees how they perceived success?

There is no communication or feedback from home, except for some emotional feedback from the mother. How will that be with others?

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The ATLAS.ti software was used in part to sort and structure the data material and for coding. ATLAS.ti makes it easier to find related quotations and to recode them easily and quickly later. Holton and Walsh (2017) pointed out that software should not be used without constant comparison and conceptualization, as is required in GT. What is often missing in computerized analysis is not just writing a code name, but thinking, reflecting, and conceptualizing beyond the code name. In this study, I used the Atlas software to link the individual inserted quotes to open codes and axial codes which proved to be helpful at the beginning. Even though this method has also been used for analyzing memos, however, it is also a significant challenge in conceptualizing the various codes. Therefore, I found using the paper-and-pencil method more helpful for conceptualizing the codes and building theory.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were done. Open coding was done through line-by-line coding to identify the key meaningful expressions (concepts) from the empirical data. This process was accomplished in a reasonable time frame and without hurrying to avoid unintentionally overlooking important concepts in the data. Which code the incident indicates was used as a question when processing the open coding.

The axial codes compared and connected the open codes and reached the higher conceptual level inductively. Selective coding was used to integrate the axial categories. Examples of coding are presented in detail in the published Articles (I–III). For the purpose of completeness, the coding process is described in Table 5 with examples. The examples of detailed open and axial coding can be found in the tables of Articles (I–III) and in the data analysis sections of each article.

Table 5. Inductive coding process.

<b>Interview A12</b>	
<b>Quote</b>	“... teachers especially who are in vocational school motivated me a lot ... I remember they were always, you know, supporting me... they were talking, walking, and telling me what to do . . . they know that there are these language issues ... and they always made sure that, if it is about group work, there is someone who is with me so I was not staying alone, ...”
<b>Open coding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Encouragement</li> <li>– Supportive teachers</li> <li>– Teachers know the language issues</li> <li>– Not feeling alone</li> <li>– Teacher responsibility and taking care</li> <li>– Relationship between teachers and students</li> </ul>
<b>Axial coding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The role of teacher</li> <li>– Equity</li> <li>– Encouragement and motivation</li> </ul>
<b>Selective category</b>	Institutional value
<b>Interview A8</b>	
<b>Quote</b>	“...I like to analyze many things specifically analyzing myself. Most times I like to think about my actions, why I do and how I react to something.”
<b>Open coding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Willing to analyze many things</li> <li>– Assessing oneself</li> </ul>
<b>Axial coding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Self-questioning and evaluation</li> <li>– Self-correction</li> <li>– Searching for a solution</li> </ul>
<b>Selective category</b>	Critical thinking
<b>Interview A4</b>	
<b>Quote</b>	“I learned ... what will be a solution or what can I do to be better.... I just encouraged myself, or I told myself that maybe I could do something in a different way and work harder, and I do not give up on myself ... and I did it, and I felt I got better...”
<b>Open coding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Self-encouragement</li> <li>– Self-questioning</li> <li>– Not giving up</li> <li>– Finding a solution</li> <li>– Self-evaluation</li> </ul>
<b>Axial coding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Self-efficacy</li> <li>– Persistence and perseverance</li> <li>– Adaptive strategies</li> </ul>
<b>Selective category</b>	Academic performance

The emergent categories have been overlapped at some cases and one statement identify more than one selective category. Table 6 shows some of these overlapping as examples.

Table 6. Overlapping of categories.

Interview	Quote	Selective Category
A14	"...in secondary school I had an amazing and smart teacher; he cared about the immigrant's children and mostly about the girls, ... and told me girls like you with education do not need anyone ... you have the power when you have the education, and that stuck in my mind ... that was like really a changing point of my whole school years..."	– Institutional value – Gender role
A13	"... university in Finland try to concentrate on questioning everything, ... I question everything at the beginning, ... I look at things from many different perspectives and not having the absolute answer. ... when I got to the university, I think I learnt to discuss, ... accept the fact that something disagrees with me ... accept the fact that we think differently ..."	– Critical thinking – Academic environment

The process of constant comparison (comparing statements to statements, codes to codes, and codes to statements) was used for shaping the axial codes and selective categories. Table 7 shows one example for the selective category of "critical thinking."

Table 7. Constant comparison.

A4	"... I have problems with [learning] stuff ... I did not get a good score ... and asking myself is it because the language? ... I came to the solution just by myself that to do something better ... get a good score and continuing schooling, encourage myself, ... worked harder and I do not give up myself..."
A6	"... I had some challenges during my education, ... I always knew that anything like that, the only solution is myself and my behaviors, solution is myself and my efforts..."
A11	"... here education made me think you know thinking about information that I got, vs my previous education that we just repeat the materials without understanding..."
A13	"... university in Finland try to concentrate on questioning everything, ... I question everything at the beginning, ... I look at things from many different perspectives and not having the absolute answer..."

All nine emerged categories were linked to the three core categories that have been theorized or conceptualized in each of the three articles (See Chapter 4). Integrating categories according to the GT is important because they shape the structure of the theory. The linkage between emerged categories in all three articles of this research has been made through constant comparison, sorting and reviewing memos to see what happens. “Bringing process into analysis is essential for developing a theory” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 163). I asked myself, what makes these categories unified and how different actions/interactions under each category evolve (Strauss& Corbin, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This in turn helped me conceptualize the categories even better.

### 3.5 Ethical consideration

Research ethics encompasses ethical principles that must be considered throughout the research process, from data collection and analysis to the presentation and reporting of results. If research is not conducted correctly and is not based on ethical principles, it can be destructive. In addition, there are many benefits to considering ethical principles in research. According to Allmark et al. (2009), one of the main things to keep in mind during in-depth interviews is “to be relatively objective or to be involved”, to “use counselling techniques, ... to protect and reinforce the participant” but also to “challenge the participant” during the interview (p. 52).

In this study, the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) (2019) were followed. The TENK contains all of the principles and instructions that researchers should follow when conducting research in Finland. In this research, following the GT methodology, several steps were taken to ensure that the ethical guidelines were followed: (a) the privacy file specified what should happen to the data after the articles were published. I chose to keep the transcript data after the study and use it for further research, but to delete the recorded audio files after the study was completed; (b) an informed consent form was sent to the participants to familiarize them with the research objectives, significance, voluntary nature of participation, and confidentiality of the data, and to give them the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participation in the interviewees was voluntarily and when I asked participants why they participated in the study, it was often mentioned that they were happy that their voice would be heard. They were all interested in the outcome of the study and were also happy to participate in such a study.

The preservation of the anonymity of the data was taken into account during data collection, presentation, and publication. I was aware of my preconceptions and

repeatedly questioned them during the process and reflected on the memo writing. Interviews were conducted according to the interviewees' responses, and further questions were formulated to clarify and explore the topic in detail from their perspective. Sensitive information and any information that could identify an interviewee was secured through coding. Thus, all names and other identifying elements were replaced by, for example, A1, from xxx. The names of special and sensitive places, such as refugee camps, were also replaced by XXX, and the name of a third person with sensitive information was removed and replaced by XXX.

All participants agreed to participate in the interviews and signed the consent form. They agreed to use their contact information (emails) for further questions and clarifications related to the information provided in the interviews. My contact information as a researcher was also provided to all participants.

### 3.6 Research evaluation

To achieve credibility, an essential feature of GT is the process of constant comparison, which was achieved by the literature review and theoretical concepts in this research. Corbin and Strauss (2015, p. 342) mentioned some characteristics for validity, reliability, credibility, and rigor. For example, to establish the validity and reliability of the results, the constant comparison method (comparing one case with another) and the "comprehensive data treatment" or the "search for deviant cases" (Silverman, 2005, as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 342) can be used. These methods and strategies for obtaining validity and reliability were used in this study. According to Morse et al. (2002, as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 343), other strategic methodological measures to ensure validity and reliability include "methodological coherence, theoretical sampling, and saturation." The review of the current literature, in combination with the points briefly listed above, was also conducted here in an ongoing process to ensure validity and reliability.

Glaser and Straus (1967) used credibility instead of validity. They pointed out that "the researcher's conviction about his own theory will be hard to shake and that this conviction does not mean that his analysis is the only plausible one that could be based on his data, but only that he has high confidence in its credibility" (p. 225). Thus, the theory presented for this study is one possible theory, but a logical one that followed systematic data collection and analysis. Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasized that the application of the GT method increases the credibility of a study in its various steps, including theoretical sampling, theoretical sensitivity, constant comparison (to improve the accuracy of the data), memo writing, and the integration of the literature review in

the development of core categories. All of these steps bring enough confidence to the developed theory to be published. However, to check the credibility of the information given by participants, I intentionally asked follow-up questions to make sure I understood their message, and they responded by confirming their statements, or it was adjusted. They were also asked for further clarification via email after the interviews. In order to convey the results and theory credibly to readers (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), all three articles explained the data collection (theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and member checking), the presentation of the data, and the use of a codified procedure to illustrate how I arrived at the core categories and developed the middle range GT.

## 4 Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of FGMFSs in higher education on their educational journey in Finland. More specifically, the goal was to investigate which factors significantly influenced their educational journey, which obstacles and challenges were encountered, which potentials and skills they have, how they finally achieved their goal of studying at university as a first-generation migrant student, and how they continued their studies in higher education. With the help of GT, nine categories were found, each referring to three aspects. The first aspect described their experiences and perceptions in relation to their journey to higher education (Article I); the second aspect described the challenges that had to be overcome in relation to the intercultural context on their educational journey (Article II); and the third aspect described their experiences and perceptions as students in higher education (Article III). Although each article focuses on a specific aspect of the experiences and perceptions of FGMFS on their educational journey, all of these aspects overlap in their totality.

Table 8 provides an overview of the three main focuses and the respective findings (categories) on the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey.

Table 8. Overview of findings.

Article	Main focus	Selective category
I	On mostly prior experiences (at school but also at university) and influential factors in achieving higher education and studying there	Family Values Institutional Values Friendships
II	On cross-cultural experiences and influential factors in successfully continuing studies in higher education	Individualism-Collectivism Gender Role Critical Thinking
III	On experiences in higher education and factors influencing educational success in higher education	Academic Environment Academic Performance Academic Well-being

The findings of the three articles are summarized and presented below and in Tables 9, 10, and 11.

#### 4.1 Article I: How do FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational journey to higher education?

For the first article, three key categories were identified that support FGMFSs in being successful on their educational journey to and at university. These include family values, institutional values, and friendships, and the key subcategories associated with each that emerged via axial coding (see Table 9). The first article clearly focuses on the initial circumstances on their journey, which, after all, does not begin with entry into university but rather with the foundations and patterns for the educational pathway to higher education, and thus success or failure is determined much earlier. This study focused primarily on the educational journey to higher education and targeted the key factors influencing the educational pathway before higher education, and the transition to higher education.

Family values have emerged as an important category in this context. Based on the basic values formulated by Schwartz (2004), these values are also present in families, including the value of achievement, which can be seen as an important value for personal success. But what is the importance of these values in families that do not have higher education and whose children are the first in the family to strive for a higher or better education? As mentioned above, there are these basic family values—but beyond that, many also see the value of education very clearly and want to pass this on to their children. Even though parents often cannot achieve even basic education because of social and cultural contexts, they very well recognize that the new environment in Finland offers

different and promising opportunities for their children. They also support their children emotionally and mentally, pointing out the importance of learning for a good and better life. Mothers play a stronger role in encouraging and emotionally supporting their children. Students are often realizing the personal dream of their parents, who did not have the opportunity to go to school or pursue an education due to financial, social, or political reasons. However, they are often given this opportunity because of the prevailing educational system in Finland, or they are encouraged to pursue this path because of outstanding achievements by dedicated teachers, mentors, and friends. Socialization in the family is very important and plays a central role. In every family, new routines, behavior, habits, and conventions are learned; this is part of socialization within the family. This socialization naturally includes, in addition to cultural techniques such as cooking traditional dishes, communication about various life issues, such as future careers and education and what one can achieve in life. However, the role of children is not passive in families. Depending on the situation, they also play an active and responsible role in their family. This is especially evident in the area of language. Children are also referred to in the literature review as “language brokers” (Bauer, 2016). They are often translators of the new language for their parents and help with visiting administration offices, but also criticize their parents in terms of their passivity in language learning.

The role of institutions, where students have important encounters and experiences with values such as equity, respect, and trust, played an important role. These institutions are embodied by teachers. With the exception of two respondents, the teachers were unanimous in showing respect toward them. This could be related to the motivation that the teachers were able to give regarding the students’ abilities. All in all, most of the teachers were experienced as helpful; however, only one or two teachers had a strong influence on the participants’ perceptions of themselves and their abilities to continue their higher education. A “positive” and “negative” side of equality was also elaborated. The positive side was that the teachers did not treat students in the classroom differently; but the negative side was the stress the teacher caused via equal expectations of students, especially concerning language. Equal expectation can make one stressful while one was well aware that he/she still had difficulties for example with the language. Moreover, the discussion at school about further education and their future with teachers or consultants was not always free of problems and arguments. The teachers did not always recommend (whether consciously or unconsciously) more theory- and knowledge-oriented education but vocational school with a higher practical component. The reason was usually to be found in the students’ lack of dominance over the Finnish language; however, it also happened for those who could speak the

Finnish language fluently and who showed high interest in continuing their study in high school.

The institutions of school and university were experienced and perceived as equal but mostly in relation with the way they were organized. Treating everyone equally might not match the needs of FGMFSs according to their different cultural and language backgrounds. FGMFSs attempted to demonstrate their ability (academically and linguistically) and readiness to attend higher education by choosing high school rather than vocational training school. This readiness was sometimes perceived differently by teachers or counselors. Their guidance seemed to aim at getting these students to choose the safest path to success and attend vocational training. However, it was perceived differently by participants, and they did not know exactly why these teachers and counselors recommended a path they did not desire. Therefore, equity in schools could also be seen as a barrier to recognizing the potential of FGMFSs in continuing their studies at postsecondary institutions.

As a third category, friendship emerged. Friendship was a significant category across all themes. Friendship was considered central to all areas of integration. Friendship is central to participation and access to social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The range of this category was also evident in the different expressions. Some have many Finnish friends or few or no friends. For participants who experienced their education in Finland from earlier ages making Finnish friends has been easier. Whether one was able to make friends easily or with difficulty, friendship was seen as important and valuable for FGMFSs and their integration academically, culturally, and socially. In addition, it was confirmed in some of the interviews that making close friends was especially difficult in Finland. This referred to the differences in cultures, habits, and norms, but also to the perception of oneself that one might have because of one's background. For some, it was difficult to make friends in high school, and the reason for this was explained by the course-based system and the few interactions between students that allowed them to make friends there. Therefore, they found friends mostly through after-school activities and hobbies.

Table 9. Article I: Axial codes and selective categories.

Axial code	Selective category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encouragement,</li> <li>- Achievement,</li> <li>- Motivation,</li> <li>- Role of the mother,</li> <li>- Value of education</li> <li>- Language broker,</li> <li>- Children responsibility,</li> <li>- Role model</li> </ul>	Family Values
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Equality policy,</li> <li>- Equity,</li> <li>- Culture of trust and respect,</li> <li>- Teachers and support,</li> <li>- Teacher encouragement,</li> <li>- Teacher and identity agent,</li> <li>- Teacher–student interaction,</li> <li>- School and home interactions,</li> <li>- Flexibility in educational institutions</li> </ul>	Institutional Values
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Challenges in friendship,</li> <li>- Cultural barriers and friendship,</li> <li>- Friendship meaning,</li> <li>- Role model,</li> <li>- Friend and integration,</li> <li>- Academic performance and friendship,</li> <li>- Language and friends,</li> <li>- Collectivist, and individualist culture</li> </ul>	Friendships

#### 4.2 Article II: How has the cross-cultural context been experienced and perceived by FGMFSs on their educational journey to and within higher education?

For the second article, three key categories were identified that FGMFSs needed to master in order to be successful on their educational journey and in higher education. These include individualism and collectivism, gender roles and critical thinking, and their respective subcategories that emerged via axial coding (see Table 10). This second article clearly focused on finding one's own identity and one's own position in the span of cross-cultural experiences and perceptions. Basically, one can almost say that these cross-cultural experiences and perceptions are also central to the educational journey of these students that leads to entry into higher education and also determines success or failure as well. In contrast to students who have lived in the host country for

generations, FGMFSs have to deal with new specific requirements of the host culture in many different ways. This is necessary and cannot be explained away or denied.

Since the majority of the interviewees came from collectivist societies in the Middle East and Asia, differences from an individualistic society were abundantly clear. However, the demands placed within a collectivist society on children, adolescents, and one's own family are different from those of an individualistic society. This became clear in points such as an important harmony within one's own community, the priority of fulfilling group expectations, the individual rights of children, such as making decisions and being independent and free. Friendship outside of one's own community can be perceived as a threat to established power relations in the family and traditional ideas such as getting marriage. Parents and one's own community expect the adoption and adherence to traditional values. However, learning the Finnish language and the influence of educational institutions and Finnish friends help to understand the tensions, to deal with them, and to initiate a process of change. It is notable that the participants in this study viewed Finnish society as individualistic, with the perspective that individual rights are paramount. Thus, everyone is responsible for themselves. This causes difficulties and challenges for the FGMFSs, as they very much experience a collectivist culture at home.

Gender roles was the second major category in these studies. A traditional understanding of roles for women and young girls was prevalent. Women and girls need to be protected and freedom applied differently. This has a concrete impact on everyday life, where one must be home in time in the evening and therefore other activities with peers, such as spending time with friends and going to a concert or a party, are not possible. A traditional understanding in terms of housework, marriage, and taking care of children is also part of this. However, traditional role understandings do not only exist for the female gender, as men are affected by them to the same extent, only expressed differently in everyday life. One is often proud of the achievements of young men but also they cannot simply make their parents dissatisfied with, for example, getting a girlfriend or even the fact that they want to move out and live alone. Family dissatisfaction in meeting cultural demands leads to feelings of guilt. They are also not supposed to show feelings and emotions (because they have been perceived as strong), which in turn increases the distance to the parents while they have challenges on their educational journey. Family control of men also depends on family values and may vary from one family to another. There are also certain expectations by parents of males related to getting a job and having their own family. Most male participants expressed that their parents cultivated a culture of caring, emphasizing above all the value of education, a good job, and a better life. However, a complete break with traditions and values was not seen in the interviews with the male participants, as

they did not experience gender inequality in the same way as the female participants. They did, however, perceive the importance of the issue in their migrant and refugee communities. Males also wanted change, they wanted to develop, they wanted to find new roles for their lives. In the institutions of school and university, they learned a lot. They experienced gender equality and carried this back to their families. Overall, the opportunities for first-generation female students in terms of gender equality and gender roles were considered stronger by the female interviewees.

But finding and trying out the new roles, the confrontation with one's own culture would probably not work without the third major category, critical thinking. Critical thinking requires open discussion and the asking of "critical" questions. In turn, the interviewees perceived and experienced this in many different situations along their educational journey. It was emphasized that in Finnish educational institutions, asking questions is always present, from kindergarten to university. The ability to ask questions, to discuss, is then seen as an advantage at some point in the socialization process. It makes one able to formulate and express new and better arguments than many family members or relatives. Asking questions, evaluating oneself, questioning one's skills and opinions to develop personally and academically has led them to find new solutions for challenges.

It was also pointed out that education and study increased their self-confidence and self-efficacy, particularly in higher education. Critical thinking in the form of arguing, reasoning, and discussing was therefore considered important by the interviewees. The critical thinking category supports and helps to develop one's own cross-cultural identity in order to determine and find one's own position in society and in the culture from which one comes. The cross-cultural context they experienced and perceived made them look at problems from different angles and try to compare and analyze them. The simultaneous contact with different cultures led them to develop a new understanding of their position and identity.

Table 10. Article II: Axial codes and selective categories.

Axial code	Selective category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Individual rights versus group demands,</li> <li>– Parents' expectations and demands,</li> <li>– Community expectations and judgments,</li> <li>– Following one's own cultures and roles,</li> <li>– Dependent versus independent,</li> </ul>	Individualism-collectivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Gender and following traditional roles,</li> <li>– Gender inequity,</li> <li>– Changing patterns of life and thinking,</li> <li>– Gender and independence,</li> <li>– Higher education and changing roles</li> </ul>	Gender Role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Self-regulation,</li> <li>– Asking questions,</li> <li>– Self-confidence,</li> <li>– Self-efficacy,</li> <li>– Development of one's own cross-cultural identity,</li> <li>– Finding one's position in society</li> </ul>	Critical thinking

### 4.3 Article III: How do FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational journey in higher education?

For the third article, three additional important categories were identified. These categories also played an important role for FGMFSs to be successful in their educational journey at university. These categories relate to what FGMFSs experienced and perceived during their studies at university. The following three selective categories were identified: academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being, each of which was associated with key categories that emerged via axial coding (see Table 11). This third article places a very clear focus on students' experiences and perceptions of the university.

The first category, academic environment, plays an important and significant role for FGMFSs than is often assumed. For this group of students, who are the first in their family to attend university, there is also no academic help from the family. Many rules and conventions are completely new. The main results of the academic environment category were discussed using the three subcategories academic work, academic relationship: teacher–student, and academic climate. The requirements for academic work are a major challenge. These include new requirements for mastery of the Finnish language, which includes an expansion of colloquial language to academic terminology, and academic writing. In addition to these skills, there are further requirements in

terms of independent and self-reliant work that go well beyond the requirements they knew from high school. The academic relationship between students and faculty, which is very complex in terms of experiences and perceptions, is best described in terms of support and feedback. Support in terms of assistance related to the subject was desired more. The desire for more individual feedback and help was also expressed. Teachers were perceived as people who were not interested in knowing who the students were but were mainly only concerned with study requirements. At the same time, it was also pointed out that the teachers showed a high degree of equality and that no one was treated differently. Equality can therefore also lead to a contradiction. If everyone is treated equally, it can be perceived as unfair; if everyone is treated fairly, this can in turn lead to inequality. Especially in the context of learning and teaching, not everyone is aware of the fundamental conflict that arises when applying these two principles. The relationship between students and teachers was different depending on the subject and the number of students in the class. It was also noted that teachers did not start asking questions, and it was assumed that students should ask their own questions. The academic climate refers to university life in terms of other students, staff, cultural offerings, and organizational structures. Most of the participants did not experience any cultural program or course in their subject curriculum. Specific cultural offers for enhancing a sense of belonging and involving migrants in higher education were rare. Openly presenting one's own culture was associated with feelings of shyness, but the students were happy to discuss their culture when asked. The overall atmosphere was seen as positive and, for many, it was the first time they had experienced such a climate, marked by openness and equal treatment. This positive climate also amounted to efficient and successful learning.

For academic performance, important subcategories, such as self-reflection, self-discovery, persistent self-efficacy, and attitude toward work, among others, emerged and were coded. The focus was also on various skills that the students had learned. These included identifying important work and study methods, taking responsibility for one's own actions and thinking, not comparing oneself to Finns in terms of applying the Finnish language, and, as a central point, questioning everything, understanding and developing new perspectives, and basically not giving up when there were obstacles to learning instead of trying other ways. This persistence combined with hard work was a central point for success in studying, and was emphasized by almost all of the interviewees. This goes hand in hand with the subcategory self-efficacy, which is the knowledge that one will accomplish a job and a task and is responsible for one's own success or failure. Failure or success is not sought in external circumstances, but one takes responsibility for it oneself.

The academic well-being category can best be divided into three areas: psychological well-being, including personal mastery, finding one's position, making decisions and setting goals, changing attitudes, the feeling of how one is perceived, and the feeling of being different; emotional well-being, including pride, happiness, fear, loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, motivation, and otherness; and social well-being, including friendship and interactions with others at the university. Participants saw higher education as helping them to broaden their horizons of thought and self-awareness, as helping them to learn how to set step-by-step goals and make a plan and decisions for their own lives. The interviewees convincingly expressed that they were happy to be at the university, to start a new life, and to be the first to make it to university. However, this was also accompanied by feelings of anxiety, stress, helplessness, and loneliness. This was caused by a lack of support and help, particularly at the beginning. Stress was also created by the feeling of having to perform the same as the other students because they were not treated differently precisely because of their background. Making friends and starting new friendships were also mentioned as an important factor in their well-being. Here, there was a wide spectrum, from having no problems making new friends and feeling integrated to having substantial problems starting or maintaining close friendships. All of those who did not find it easy to make new friends reported making concerted efforts to do so anyway. However, not all were equally successful in doing so. Another challenge was that friendships could not be maintained outside of the university environment and were limited to academic tasks. This was mostly explained by different cultural habits and norms.

Table 11. Article III: Axial codes and selective categories.

Axial code	Selective category
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Academic work (Academic requirements from the university)</li> <li>– Academic relationship: teacher–student</li> <li>– Academic climate (university-based offerings and impact on students' thinking)</li> </ul>	Academic environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Self-reflection</li> <li>– Self-discovery</li> <li>– Different perspectives and thinking</li> <li>– Perfectionism versus letting things go</li> <li>– Persistence and hard work</li> <li>– Motivation</li> <li>– Self-efficacy</li> </ul>	Academic performance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Psychological well-being (personal mastery, finding one's position, making decisions, and setting goals, changing attitudes, feeling of how one is perceived, and the feeling of being different),</li> <li>– Emotional well-being (pride, happiness, fear, loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, motivation, and otherness),</li> <li>– Social well-being (friendship and interactions with others at the university)</li> </ul>	Academic well-being

#### 4.4 Core categories and conceptualization

Most FGMFSs had two cultures (worlds)—some even more—and, accordingly, they saw many cultural contexts from different perspectives, which they perceived according to their cultural background. Thus, they moved between these cultures and carried different cultures within them; and, based on these cultures (worlds), they kept repositioning themselves in relation to different contexts and their identity.

The description of the process of experience and perception during the educational journey for FGMFSs was elaborated in this study using nine emergent categories. All nine categories were linked to the three core categories that have been theorized or conceptualized in each of the three articles to respond to the research questions according to the GT method. How FGMFSs experienced and perceived their educational journey on the way to, in transition to, and within higher education was the main focus of this research, which followed GT. According to the article-based nature of the study, I divided the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs into different foci, which indeed overlapped in many directions as well.

The first article highlights three important categories as vital elements that FGMFSs experienced and perceived during their educational journey to higher

education but were also linked with their time at the university. The three categories of family values, institutional values, and interpersonal relationships (friendships) were identified as significant factors that played a main role in moving FGMFSs forward in their educational path. These emergent categories revealed the invisible part of their educational journey as pieces of a puzzle that implied that all of the identified factors under these categories could be more supportive if family, institution and friends had a window to contact and learn from each other. The best linkage for these categories was identified as openness to help the movement of these students with better orientations forward in their education (Figure 1). The students were different, and these individual differences should be handled professionally in collaboration with these three categories to help in shaping a successful educational journey for them. No one factor or effort worked for all students, even though values such as equality were dominant. However, without openness, equity cannot be implemented. Openness makes visible and understandable the different parts of reality or different realities. Individual see the world through his/her understanding and interpretation. Thus, human encounter with multiple realities which get in close through openness.

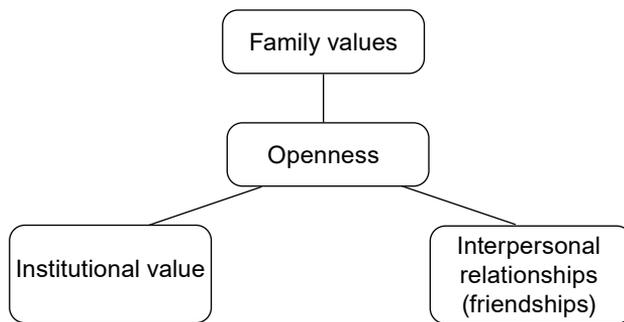


Figure 1. Core category (Article I).

For the second article, which focused more on the cross-cultural context of these students’ experiences and perceptions, three main categories were identified: collectivism-individualism, gender roles, and critical thinking. All three categories and their dimensions illustrated the impact of being in two different cultures and facing different values, norms, and roles. Their cross-cultural experiences shaped their perceptions, which led them to questioning, comparing, analyzing, and evaluating issues in a way that made them capable of making a decision and being efficient in using what learned from these different cultures. For FGMFSs, this could be strengthened by continuing in higher education. Higher education was seen as a tool by FGMFSs to achieve their goals, one shaped through their cross-cultural experiences during their

educational journey. Therefore, these three categories led them in a way that they wanted to be empowered through continuing their higher education and achieving a more stable and stronger position to not only prove themselves but also to be good role models for other students from their own community. At the same time, it dramatically shaped their cross-cultural identity (Figure 2).

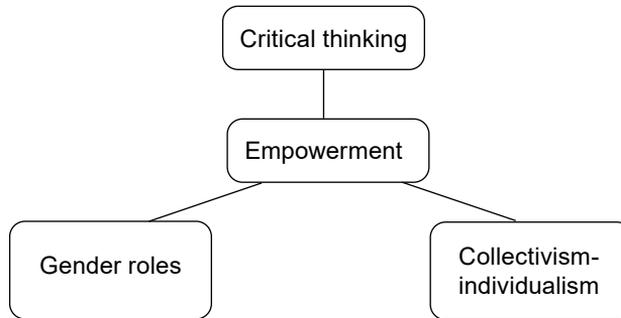


Figure 2. Core category (Article II).

For Article (III), three major categories were identified: academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being. These categories emerged according to what the FGMFSs experienced and perceived while in higher education and continuing their studies there. The academic environment and all of its characteristics enhanced their self-efficacy while they found solutions to face different challenges with their hard work and persistence, which was rooted in enhancing their self-belief. Even though their well-being was countered by uncertainties, particularly in their first years, they could manage and deal with all of their challenges by learning and doing. All three categories were well linked with functionality and a sense of belonging (Figure 3). In a way, they wanted to be efficient in what they were learning and studying.

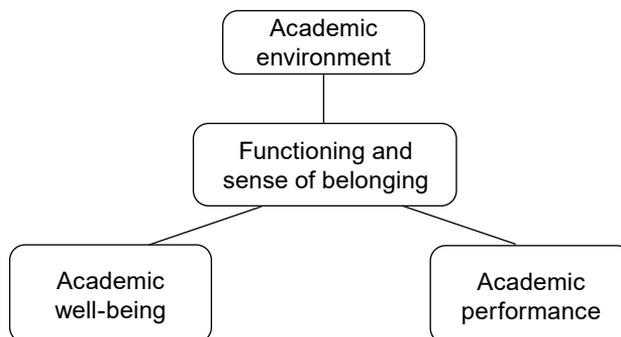


Figure 3. Core category (Article III).

## 4.5 Grounded theory in this study

Using a systematic and flexible GT approach for this study on the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey, the “negotiation and repositioning process” theory emerged (Figure 4). This theory was grounded in data and shed light on what was going on for FGMFSs during their educational journey to and in higher education. I addressed the integration of the three core categories of openness, empowerment, and sense of belonging and functioning as a process of repositioning. Repositioning was therefore indicated as a solution strategy for their concerns that was clarified in the details under the emergent categories in this study. The repositioning process through negotiations shaped their educational journey to and in higher education successfully. Positioning theory (Harre & Langenhove, 1999) was employed in the constant comparison process to explain the GT of how FGMFSs changed their positioning through negotiations with themselves and other actors. A position can be taken by oneself, it can be offered by someone else, or one is simply positioned by conditions and contexts without explicit choices made by oneself or others. Ropo and Gustafsson (2008, p. 11) described this as follows: “Individuals look in the light of the stories, take clear positions in relation to themselves, their bodies, their feelings and their own history, other important people, contexts, cultural movements, groups and the values they represent.” According to Harre et al. (2009), “positioning theory illuminates the normative frames of how people live their lives, how they think, feel, act, and perceive” (p. 9). Positioning takes place in life story: past, present, and future (Harre & Langenhove, 1999). Studying the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey illustrates how they positioned and repositioned themselves through negotiations during their educational journey since their arrival in Finland up until the moment they enrolled in higher education and were close to graduating.

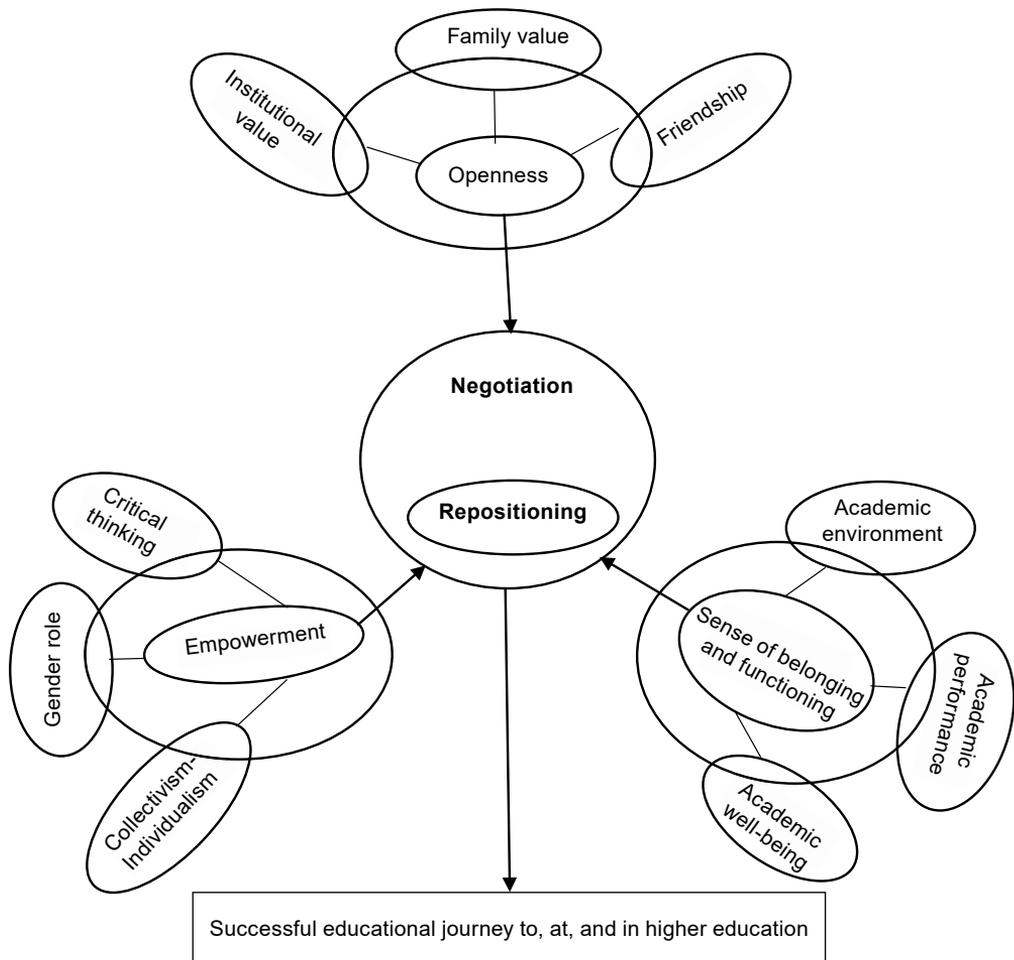


Figure 4. Negotiation and repositioning process for FGMFSs on the educational journey.

The repositioning happened through a continuous negotiation process with oneself and with other people from the environment (families, relatives, teachers, consultants, principals, friends) as well as with context. The process of negotiation that emerged in relation to one’s own identity and position was described and made clear with the help of the core categories. Negotiation is always part of the discursive practices between speakers and hearers: “In this discursive practice they can negotiate new positions” (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 62). Ropo and Gustafsson (2008) also pointed out that even when a person is having a conversation, he or she can change his or her positioning several times. This process may in turn depend on whether the other person is trying to move one to a different position. In the narratives of the FGMFSs, it was clear that

their positions had changed as a result of the processes of negotiation during their educational journey to and in higher education.

The process of repositioning occurred as a result of the experiences and perceptions they had on their educational journey in different contexts. These experiences and perceptions and the turning points (changes) can indicate a negotiation toward opening the process to repositioning and made them open and empowered as well as functional, which enhanced their sense of belonging to an academic community. FGMFSs positioned themselves in the cross-cultural context, which helped them to move toward the cultural ideals that they desired on their educational journey. According to Moghaddam (1999), “the cultural factors affect their positioning practices” (p. 80). In this process, they became aware of many things, such as different cultures they experienced and lived in and that this led to different rights, roles, and expectations for them. These differences and intercultural experiences were negotiated and led them to see themselves as living in a hybrid culture that they created and managed as a result of their continuous negotiations and intertwining their different experiences.

The ability to take into account different perspectives in relation to the different cultures was part of the negotiation process during their years of studying in educational institutions in the host society. This negotiation process led to repositioning, which in turn influenced the decision to continue studying. The actions and interactions assigned to the nine categories describe this process of reflection and negotiation in relation to the social and cultural patterns of the home and host countries.

This led them to reconsider and change their position in relation to themselves, to others, and to their environment. This was done through changing beliefs and attitudes, behaviors, habits, and expectations through the negotiation process. The study of the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs was conceptualized and addressed by identifying the process of repositioning through negotiation as a latent pattern that clarified the major concern in the data. This is the theory grounded in the data. Glaser (1998) pointed out that “grounded theory generates a theory of how what is really going on is continually resolved by participants in the substantive area” (p. 236).

The repositioning process theory in this study refers to the main concerns that emerged under the core categories of openness, empowerment, functioning, and sense of belonging and explained how these concerns were managed by FGMFSs through negotiation with self, significant others, and context on different experiences and perceived actions and interactions on their educational journey.

Opportunities and challenges were experienced in very different contexts, which were classified into the main categories in this study. These contexts created the space for FGMFSs to reflect on, question, compare, analyze, and evaluate the situation they experience and perceive from multiple perspectives. However, a variety of intersecting

factors played an important role in this process. An important context in which they had experiences were the values in educational institutions, family, and friendship. The students recognized and appreciated the values in educational institutions, family, and friendship. This made them open to looking at the phenomena they were confronted with from a different perspective and helped them to rethink their identity and their position in relation to what they actually wanted and what they could do and how. They engaged and repositioned themselves with these values during their education. Another context were their intercultural experiences, which served as an important pillar for shaping their intercultural identity and their new position by allowing them to acquire the ability to internalize two cultures through critical thinking, which in turn helped them to continue their education. They developed an innovative adoption strategy not only to overcome their own challenges but also to use their strengths and new positions to pave the way for other students.

At all stages of their education, as a result of negotiating with themselves and others, they found answers to their questions, uncertainties, thoughts and challenges about what they wanted to be and how to achieve it. This process of repositioning that supported their success is explained in a well-reasoned and relevant way in the categories and subcategories that emerged in this study. This process is described in more detail below.

The starting point of the repositioning process is the realization of one's situation, which serves as the basis for creating a new position in the intercultural context. During the process, various aspects of the new position are constructed and practiced, tested in a variety of interactions, and often discarded. The foundations for the new position as FGMFSs in higher education were laid early, when they arrived in Finland, studied and graduated from high school, and found their way into higher education. They recognized the different cultures, values, and norms with all associated opportunities and challenges. They noted differences and began to think and address those differences by questioning and evaluating themselves. Overcoming these challenges in this process depended on several factors, such as the value of education and success present in the family, emotional encouragement from parents, especially mothers, and offering a new position to them. For example, interview A10 pointed out that:

To be honest, someone that always encouraged me to study and gave me the feeling that studying is good, and that I should study after my vocational school, was just my mother. It is true that she is not literate enough, but always she liked that I studied ...

The role of institutions and their values, the role of teachers in recognizing their achievements, teachers' cross-cultural knowledge and competence, and their strategies

to effectively/strongly stay in touch with FGMFSs meant that the teacher(s) in this negotiation process offered a new position to them and even with their parents during their schooling. For example, interview A14 pointed out that:

... In secondary school ... an amazing and smart teacher ... cared about the immigrant's children and mostly about the girls, ... and told me that girls like you with an education do not need anyone .... You have the power when you have an education, and that stuck in my mind ....

Another important factor is the role of Finnish friends, who, although also facing many setbacks for some, were considered by all to be very helpful for academic adjustment and cultural and social integration. However, the quality of the friendship (close friend from the institution) is also highly dependent on the age of the arrival as well as the individual personal social skills in the context presented here. The friends as also offered in their encounters a new position for them. For example, interview A2 said that: "... my childhood friends are from families with doctors, lawyers and ... like that, so being with them, I wanted also to go to university and like ... to be with them and be like them in a same level ...".

What they experienced and what helped them to negotiate was openness and being open-minded. The openness to see other perspectives on the issues from all participants in the educational journey facilitated this negotiation in such a way that these students were able to think, to change their perceptions, and to build on their academic futures. Recognizing that openness is a vital component in this process of repositioning was significant.

Building up through continuous education and learning helps to strengthen one's position. One needs perseverance and strength in a figurative sense to keep moving, and also to overcome challenges. Experiencing differences between one's own culture and that of the host society (different expectations, values, norms, and roles) raised many questions for FGMFSs, and one wanted answers to these questions. They tried to find and readjust their own perspective and position. This always happened in negotiations with themselves, or with others, or they were simply positioned by the conditions and context without explicitly desiring it. According to Harre and Langenhove (1999), identity is actively negotiated and achieved by persons. How the person perceives her/himself and is perceived by others constructs the identity of the person. This dynamic process for FGMFSs happened through negotiations on their educational journey.

Cross-cultural experiences and continuing negotiations with themselves and others made them look at themselves in a new way (who they are, what they want and can do, and how to do it) and find their own way to be able to make a choice, set goals, and achieve their goals and shaping a new position. Equality in educational institutions,

the role of teachers, and skills such as reasoning and communication, freedom, and decision-making help to acquire critical thinking skills. For example, interview A13 pointed out that:

... There are some structural atmospheres in the culture that have been created throughout the years ... . People (own community) do not have explanation for [many things] ... like this, and we should always do like this rather than questioning it ... they [community] are not willing to change their opinion, ... so based on that what they know as right (fact) it makes you be wrong ... that is what I want to prove, like not accepting my position just because someone says that, I am earning my position as an equal human being ...

The cross-cultural experiences from collectivist and individualist cultures, the experience of gender role differences, and critical thinking helped FGMFSs find space and time to form and construct their new identity and position to empower themselves by continuing their studies in higher education. For example, interview A14 pointed out that:

... People told me ... going to high school that is so hard .... You are not going to make it. I have good grades ... and I am going to try. ... My friends are going there ... people told me you cannot do it ... because you are a girl, ... that gave me more power to show them or show myself that I can ...

This is a good example of counter positioning related to negotiation, a new, already existing position that empowers the person. New positioning empowered FGMFSs to change social and cultural patterns through continuing their education.

The strengthening, motivation, and proving of one's own identity and the awareness of the new position and reflection happened mainly during the university studies. Here, further space and time was needed to strengthen one's new position, to come to terms with one's studies, and to deal with the new expectations of oneself as an FGMFS versus one's own community as well as the host country. While they reached higher education, they needed to achieve what they planned and made efforts to do that; however, new academic and cultural experiences and newly learned skills, including self-responsibility, independent learning, decision-making, communication skills, reasoning, and academic skills, should be practiced and achieved.

The new realities of the environment were perceived as a new world that opened their thinking horizons to broader social, economic, and political issues and subsequently changed their position. Strengthening their newfound position required strong self-efficacy to overcome all academic challenges as well as the challenges they experienced related to their social and cultural integration in the new environment. To do this,

they must have had a new perception of themselves and others. This was accomplished by negotiation with oneself, becoming clear about the questions concerning what one wanted, why one wanted it, and where the journey was going, and this was also expressed in the following examples. For example, interviewee A6 pointed out that: "... I had some challenges during my education. ... I always knew that the only solution is myself and my behaviors, the solution is myself and my efforts ...". Or, as interviewee A10 said: "... To be successful depends on how much a human believes in himself and his abilities ... his interest in doing what he wants to do ... and how much they are ready to do that ...", and, as interviewee A8 argued:

... Reading and academic writing was not my [strength] ... I was never a good writer, and it was very difficult for me to write essays or to do some homework [assignments] ... so I stopped and for half a year I just thought about that— why, really, do I want to do? And after a half year, I thought, I have to work harder ... I had to believe in me that I can make it ...

Furthermore, their negotiation with teachers played an imperative role in this process and showed the importance of individual dialogue between teachers and students for interactive positioning. How teachers perceived one's effect on the understanding of oneself and the positioning oneself was important. For example, interviewee A4 pointed out that:

... I remember that one teacher wanted to talk to me and ... she said I could not know that you came here at that age ... and I have thought that you were born here ... she said the language and the way how you write is very good ... and those comments affected me positively ...

Thinking, questioning, and analyzing in negotiating with oneself and others led them to change their views and develop or improve their own strategies to advance and succeed in their education. At the same time, this helped them to further strengthen and develop their own identity through functionality and sense of belonging to the academic world and society as well as being a good role model for other students with an immigrant background. For example, interviewee A13 highlighted that:

... When I got to university, I felt very proud because I wanted to achieve, and I achieved, and it was not very normal for immigrants to be at higher education. ... I was the first to get to the university, and it was a big thing for my family ... and it creates a responsibility to do things well because it's like you are paving the path for the next generation.

They wanted to be functional by continuing their learning and changing their perception of themselves. They sought to change themselves and begin to believe more in their abilities and continue to learn in order to achieve a more sustainable position as a functional academic learner. They wanted to feel they belonged and were a functioning part of society. They wanted to use all that they had tried and learned and to be effective in the long run through their academic contributions to the society. Therefore, teachers, friends and peers, and the higher education environment, with its features, all acted as factors that encouraged these students to continue through their strong commitment.

Thus, the study of the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs elaborated the process that they positioned themselves and others on their educational journey to and within higher education in Finland. Moghaddam (1999) discussed the “I” position and the “me” position and interpreted the behaviors, thoughts, and actions of “me” in the past, which can then be repositioned by “I.” They (FGMFSs) interpreted and positioned themselves (in the past, present, and future) subjectively and objectively, and this identified the repositioning process through different negotiations that they had all the time with self, others, and context.

Negotiation, therefore, took place in the interplay of family, institutional, and interpersonal interaction (friendship) factors that were created and nurtured by openness. Negotiation also took place in a cross-cultural context where different cultures, roles, norms, and values were experienced and a context for critical thinking was created. This allowed them to reach a point where they were able to choose, differentiate, and set goals that led to the construction of their new position, strengthened by empowerment. This ongoing, challenging process of reorientation and positioning also strengthened their self-efficacy. They developed a great deal of perseverance and often worked harder and longer, at least in their perception, than others to overcome these challenges. This led to further experience in an academic world that they all valued very much, belonged to, and wanted to function in.

The process of repositioning was seen with success in higher education and the development of a new identity that drew from two experienced and perceived cultures and was driven by different, interrelated factors. Finally, the FGMFSs perceived themselves as citizens of the world. They did not emphasize who they were based on their nationality, but instead on their functions and attitudes. Their new intercultural identity helped them to reposition themselves.

In the following chapter, I discuss the findings in relation to the context and results of other studies in the field.

## 5 Discussion

In this chapter, the emergent theory “negotiation and repositioning process on the educational journey” and its core categories as well as the categories significant for success on the educational journey for FGMFSs are briefly discussed and compared with relevant academic literature. Moreover, the metaphorical concept of the educational journey of FGMFSs to, at and in higher education is employed to explain and conceptualize the process this group experienced and perceived. Next, the role of the core categories of openness, empowerment, and sense of belonging and functioning in building the GT are discussed, as they are instrumental in framing and explaining the “negotiation and repositioning process” for FGMFSs that occurred on their educational journey to and in higher education. The connection between the core categories was conceptualized through a negotiation and repositioning process. Harre’s (2015) positioning theory serves as a starting point to describe the construction of new positionings of FGMFSs on their educational journey. The conclusion shows how the GT used in this study explains how, for FGMFSs, the process of repositioning through negotiation was crucial to their success on their educational journey to and in higher education and was, ultimately, important for the development of their own identity. At this point, I would like to note that the focus of the study was not on the self or the identity in detail, but rather on the processes and categories mentioned above. This study identified how their negotiation successfully worked for their repositioning. This is followed by a conceptualization of the practical and theoretical implications, limitations of the study and methodological considerations, and finally some recommendations for future studies.

As shown previously in the literature review chapter, there is a large amount of research, especially in the US (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020) on the target group of first-generation college students, but, specifically, little to no studies on the target group “first-generation migrant family students (FGMFS).” Especially in Finland,

there is no systematic research regarding the perceptions and experiences of this target group. However, there is one study by the National Centre for Educational Assessment (Karvi report) in Finland that examined the inclusion and participation of foreign and immigrant background students in higher education (Airas et al., 2019). Moreover, few studies on FGCSs have applied a qualitative approach, and mostly quantitative methodologies have been used to produce generalizations about this diverse group (Orbe, 2008).

Through the literature review, a gap in the knowledge base was also revealed and justified the need for research as well. However, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967), starting the investigation of a phenomenon under study is not necessarily tied to an extensive literature review. A brief review of the literature may be quite sufficient to begin a GT study. This was the approach taken in this study. An initial review in the literature review (Chapter 2) showed and justified the need to openly explore the perceptions and experiences of FGMFSs in this study to discover unknown phenomena in their educational journey in Finland, with the subsequent detailed literature review also confirming this initial impression. The detailed literature review was conducted in accordance with the recommendation for the use of literature in a GT study, which suggests that the literature review should be withheld until the core categories have been drawn out (Holton & Walsh, 2017, 49).

This dissertation continues this effort by using GT to discover how the educational journey/path (in a metaphorical sense) of FGMFSs to, at, and in higher education was experienced and perceived. This dissertation thus contributed to the debate about the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey and was intended to discover “what is going on” for FGMFSs on their educational journey in Finland, what main concerns exist, and how these concerns were solved by them. Subsequently, this study shed light on essential factors that educational institutions can and, if necessary, should consider in order to also constructively and effectively support this target group in their educational path from school to higher education and their transitions.

I used the metaphorical concept of the educational journey of FGMFSs to explain and conceptualize the process this group experiences and perceives. In doing so, the term “experience” was used in this research in a very broad way. Experiences included all social interactions by FGMFSs during their educational journey. Thus, this included all interactions during their educational path with friends, families, students, teachers, and professors on and off the premises of educational institutions. This also included all of their actions, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes as migrant family students on their educational journey in a cross-cultural context. The term “perceptions” refers primarily to the perceptions of FGMFSs on their educational journey, and thus included mainly impressions and reflections about themselves (reflective positioning), friends, family,

students, and teachers from school to higher education as well as context (interactive position).

This educational journey is a courageous and complex act of new orientation and position. On this journey, many original certainties of everyday life, such as family structures on which young people rely, will be put to the test. This new position must be mastered in a new country and in a new educational system. Consequently, these new positions, with their associated challenges and opportunities, must be practiced and carried forward through negotiations with self, others, and context. These challenges and the associated negotiations that lead to the construction and strengthening of a new orientation and position were grouped into several categories: values of institutions, family, and interpersonal relationships (friendship), described in Article (I); collectivist and individualist cultures, gender roles, and the development of critical thinking, described in Article (II); and academic environment, achievement, and well-being, described in Article (III).

I have argued in these three articles that family values, institutional values, and friendship are linked and conceptualized by openness, individualism/collectivism, gender roles, and critical thinking that are linked and conceptualized by empowerment, and academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being are linked and conceptualized by functioning and sense of belonging. Using the data collection and analysis procedures of the GT methodology, a theoretical frame emerged that included the integration of all categories under core categories of openness, empowerment, functioning and sense of belonging. The “negotiation and repositioning process” was discovered as a main pattern in this study.

This GT emerged from the perceptual and experiential context of FGMFSs and effectively and comprehensively explained and captured the pattern in this research in terms of the positioning and repositioning that shaped their educational journey successfully to and in higher education. This was explained through the main emergent categories, which made the theory dense and explained how these students positioned, repositioned, and situated themselves in the research field. Thus, the framework of theory, integrating and linking all selective categories, emerged around three core categories. These included openness, empowerment, and functioning and sense of belonging.

In the following, the main categories, their conceptualization, and their meaning and standpoints within emergent theory are explained and discussed. In the following section, the findings and their contributions to previous research and literature as well as the emergent theory and its structure are discussed. The discussion of the importance of theory in the context of the literature refines the understanding of the categories that led to the emergence of a new position, shaped the successful educational journey for

FGMFSs, and also provided implications for the management and support of this group of students for the future. This chapter, therefore, justifies how the theory that emerged from this research study contributes to new knowledge and how the repositioning took place.

In Article (I), the categories of family values, institutional values, and friendship have been influential in shaping the educational journey for FGMFSs to, at, and in higher education. The family values category was an important outcome that emerged during the research process. Initially, this study was planned to look only at the time in higher education. But very quickly, it became clear in the interviews that all experiences and perceptions on this educational journey had a very important meaning long before, starting in their family. In the literature, values are considered cognitive, deep-rooted, meaningful beliefs, and attitudes (attitudes), ideals, and needs that are usually shared individually by individuals or the members of a society indefinitely (Oyserman, 2015). The family creates the foundation and generates core attitudes and beliefs for children. The great importance of the family in terms of education, setting goals for life, and thus striving for success was consistently mentioned in the interviews as a core value. Accordingly, these attitudes and values are passed on to the children. These findings are consistent with the foundational work of Schwartz (1992, 2014), who indicated that success is a central, fundamental value for people and thus inevitably appears in the value system of families. The value of education begins in the family but also continues in institutions and in the corresponding educational institutions (Yasaroglu, 2016). Values are acquired through parents and through school education and are important for the repositioning process. New positioning has been offered and negotiated through emotional support and encouragement of family, particularly mothers. The attitudes and inspiration toward education among family supported the repositioning for FGMFSs, while parents wanted a better future and education for their children. Other values, such as mutual responsibility and taking care in family, were evaluated positively. That said, there were some critical comments of the interviewees regarding their parents. This became clear, for example, with the topic “language broker,” which also corresponds to the results of Bauer (2016). This includes the task of actively helping, e.g., translating forms, or visiting administration offices (for example, at social and health services, hospitals, or banks). On the one hand, this has led to feelings of guilt for not being able to help the parents sufficiently; on the other hand, these experiences led the students to perceive themselves differently than their peers. These differences also included the fact that they matured earlier than other children their age. But, overall, helping each other and getting emotional support was very important in the family, which overlapped with the category of “individualism and collectivism” in Article (II).

This process of the “language broker” is a very good example of how these students experienced a new position for themselves within the family and toward their friends.

The results found here are also in line with other research findings for FGCSs— for example, Bergerson (2007) and Coffman (2011) pointed out that a strong social network consisting of families and friends can help to be successful. While in the interviews presented in this study, families were seen as a strong support system for the situation that FGMFSs found themselves in; however, their support was not academic. Coffman (2011) also highlighted that many FGCSs feel that the support they receive is too general and insufficient, and that they would like more concrete advice from their parents. Other challenges experienced by FGMFSs in this study referred to the strong monitoring and social control that young females in particular are subject to rather than males by the family or family community. The struggles they had were mainly due to different norms and values that mismatched those of the host society. This is also consistent with the findings from Article (II) for the category “gender roles.” These struggles, however, always gave room for new negotiations and thus repositioning in relation to different values of the home and host country. The values are discussed with self and others (family, friends, teachers), then questioned and evaluated, after which one learns to find one’s own new position. The acquisition or development of how to interpret the world includes learning one’s own positioning as a person in relation to the different groups, such as father/daughter, parent/child, etc., and also participating in the different discursive practices (Davies & Harre, 1999). The reflections and interpretations of these negotiations have been influenced by the cross-cultural context, which provides them with the potential to see the world from two perspectives and be able to think and decide what they need and how they should position themselves to achieve what they want to achieve.

But not only family values can be identified; also, values of educational institutions are considered as important factors for achieving higher education and being successful in continuing to study there. However, according to Yasaroglu (2016), it is important that a coherence of the values of family and school are necessary and important for corresponding values through education to be successful. This coherence, it can be argued, is provided to a good degree by Finnish educational institutions. If education is a high value for the parents of FGMFSs and they transfer this to their children, they can expect (without presumably knowing it) that values and principles will also be reflected in school, as they are described in the fundamental principles of Finland’s education policy outlook (OECD, 2020). Students experienced and perceived values such as equality, taking care from teachers and trust within the school system and during instruction. This is consistent with Mäkinen’s (2013) and Sahlberg’s (2012) evidence that the Finnish school system associates achievement with equality and

justices. Teachers were perceived as helpful and fair. It was emphasized that no reference was made to personal or cultural background in class. But of course, there were also difficulties, misunderstandings, and problems. And three of participants have been mentioned their experiences regarding their transition to upper secondary school that have been forced to go to vocational school, however, the reasons for that have been partially interpreted as their perceptions of teachers and consultants on the secure way for students or their presumptions about the abilities of students.

Reference was made with great frequency to the language problems, particularly for those who moved to Finland at the age of 17 and 18. Language problems have been shown to be related to the age of arrival of participants. Article (III) discusses language challenges at the university as well. Language and communication apprehension has been and remains for many years the central key to success or failure on the educational pathway for FGCSs (Francis & Miller, 2007). However, it is not only success that is significantly influenced by language but also positioning. This is shown by the results of Cassar and Tonna (2018), which indicate that the positioning of students with an immigrant background in the schools of the host country is closely related to the language of instruction used in these schools. This was then, unfortunately, often the teachers' justification for making recommendations for vocational schools rather than making a recommendation for continuing study in high school and university. However, it also remains the case that there are still too many unnecessary misunderstandings between institutions, FGMFSs and families. In particular, parents or families are unfamiliar with how different educational institutions function and operate. Vice versa, educational systems are also not familiar with the cultural and educational context of families. Openness from all involved, families and institutions, is needed to find and try out the new orientation. But, understanding these important facts, another major challenge occurred, which for many Finns may not a problem. A major challenge was making friends or maintaining friendships.

This third category was a constant theme throughout all of interviews for all stages of the educational journey. This aspect is very important for cultural and social integration. Making friends in Finland can be challenging. The University of Jyväskylä, for example, offers a friendship program for foreign students with Finnish families. Moody (2001) found that in a less heterogeneous school context, adolescent friendships are more segregated. According to Smith et al. (2014), "Often friendships of adolescents are segregated along ethnic lines in many countries as in the United States and the Netherlands" (p. 33). In contrast, the interviewees did not talk about segregation of friendships in terms of ethnic groups. The interviewees often were the only one of their ethnicity in the class—or if there were other students or pupils with an immigrant background, they had a different ethnic background (This is, of course,

because the experience of the target group goes back many years, when there were not many migrants in Finnish schools and universities). It was clearly about making friends with Finnish students inside or outside the institutions. The range in this area was very wide, some had no problems others were just lonely and suffered as a result. Friendships at school and university were experienced differently, for example, it was difficult to make friends at school compared to university. The friends they had in high school time were mostly from outside the school. Therefore, after-school activities and hobbies are a good approach to make friends. The importance of friendship was considered high by all of them. Migration background or different values were mentioned as reasons for the difficulty in getting close friends. Friendship in this context is seen as a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Stuart, 2006). Friendship and communication with friends are also an important factor in deciding to study in higher education (Stuart, 2006), enhancing academic self-efficacy and contributes to successful study (Cheong et al., 2019). Friendship is also evident in the categories of gender role (see Article II) and academic performance and academic well-being (see Article III). For example, friends and their function at school and university have implications for the realization of a new self and repositioning for FGMFSs, especially for women when it comes to equality and their roles in host cultures. Working in groups and with peers helped them complete assignments and homework and study at the university, creating a space for FGMFSs to actively participate in each other's learning. Friends helped them integrate better academically, linguistically, socially, and culturally. Having friends and friendships reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation. It was noted that it is challenging for some to form close friendships among Finns in educational institutions. However, the importance of friendship with Finns for social and cultural integration has been confirmed by participants in this study. It helps them to position themselves as a part of Finnish society.

The connecting element of the categories; family values, institutional values and friendship, I described as openness. Openness is therefore an important process involved in positioning and repositioning FGMFSs in their educational journey. Hermans (2008) identified two factors that can make the dialogic self open to newness and initiate a process of repositioning. First, this can occur when existing or already known positions come under the influence of dialogic exchange and initiate a process of repositioning. Second, when positions change in direct exchange with the social environment. Both factors are present here. Firstly, already known positions in relation to values are renegotiated and are under the influence of dialogue. Secondly, FGMFSs are also in direct exchange with the environment through educational institutions and friends. They cannot escape this dialogue and negotiation. In particular, dialogue

within educational institutions (school and with faculty) is central to positioning and repositioning FGMFSs.

Openness means also a dialectical tension with closedness, according to Orbe (2008), indicates students' desire to be open, to share their experiences, to socialize, and to build relationships. However, there is also a need to not share all matters while at the same time keeping personal things to themselves so as not to make themselves vulnerable, however, FGMFSs should also negotiate which aspects of their study experience they disclose and which they keep to themselves.

Openness to new circumstances in contact with Finnish friends, schools, and institutions is key to FGMFSs' integration as well as their repositioning during their educational journey. However, one-way openness is not enough to support them on their journey through higher education. It also requires two-way openness. What they experienced and perceived during their educational journey according to the emergent categories demonstrates the importance of multiple supportive factors (family, teachers, and friends) in motivating these students along the way to see their future and realize that it is possible to pursue higher education. For FGMFSs, each individual supportive resource without links with other resources might make the effectiveness of support neutral. Thus, cooperation between family, educational institutions, and Finnish friends and their families can only happen through openness.

In Article (II), the three categories individualism-collectivism, gender roles, and critical thinking are elaborated, each of which appeared in the process of coding and memo writing. Following GT, these three categories emerged and revealed another interesting picture of the perceptions and experiences of FGMFSs on their educational journey to developing their own identity and new position in the cross-cultural context. Of course, these categories overlapped with other emergent categories in Article (I)—family, institutions, and friendships—in shaping their cross-cultural identity during their educational journey. The statements made on this topic were described within the dimension individualism-collectivism. For a child, the first years of life in the family are manageable. This is the context in which they acquire their first fundamental experiences, also in relation to their culture. However, as they get older, they are also increasingly faced with the culture of the host country. The confrontation with the wider, new culture naturally becomes very complex very quickly and happens, at latest, when a child first attends an educational institution. The resulting challenges, tensions, and contradictions were reflected in the statements of all interviewees, but especially among females. This has and had a great influence on the development of one's own cultural identity. This was also emphasized by Gonzalez et al. (2014), who noted that children's identities are shaped by the dual influence of home and host cultures. In relation to the family, the essential points mentioned included meeting the expectations

of the family and community, not disappointing parents in any way, helping parents (see also Article (I), the family value dimension, and the role as language broker). According to Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015), helping family members reduce family struggles culminates in the reduction of family guilt. In contrast to the findings of Covarrubias and Fryber, which stated that FGCs from ethnic minority backgrounds reported significantly more family guilt related to their college attendance than non-FGCs, FGMFSs in this study did not show guilt about pursuing higher education.

The importance of the dimension individualism-collectivism regarding positioning was emphasized by Moghaddam (1999). He described the individualism-collectivism dimension as cultural differences between the self and the other. Culture, he continued, defines the boundaries of the self and exposes a dividing line between the self and the social and/or natural environment—but, at the same time, it is ambiguous. In an individualistic society, a person can make a clear dividing line from the social relations of others. In collectivist societies, on the other hand, the group is the most important unit, and there is no clear boundary between the self and others. If one wants to understand the positioning and repositioning of FGMFSs, one must take these two dimensions into account. Thus, if one wants to properly assess the educational journey and describe the causes of failure or success, one should also consider this dimension to see how FGMFSs position and reposition themselves in their negotiation with the self and in relation to their community.

In terms of friendship, there were arguments about which friends are accepted by the family and which are not. The importance of friendship was also pointed out by Burgos-Cienfuegos et al. (2015), who considered peer-peer interactions to be important among Latino students because they are exposed to different cultures during their transition to college, which may in turn affect their social life at college and thus their adjustment to college. In terms of marriage, it was expected from FGMFSs to meet the traditional perceptions of the culture. By perceiving and questioning their own family values and culture, due to the cultural dimension individualism-collectivism, new and different values emerged and were adopted and learned. All of this in turn has an impact on one's own behavior, on the way one communicates and develops a new identity and a new role. At the same time, however, this often tough or challenging process can be seen as cultural richness brought about by two cultures. But it is not only the dimension individualism-collectivism that describes the challenges experienced when finding their identity; gender roles are also of great importance and has a tremendous influence on the process of finding one's own identity.

Gender roles was the most significant, sustainable, and central theme, particularly for the female interviewees in this study, and therefore played a central role in the repositioning process when they negotiated their position in the cross-cultural context

with different cultures, values, and expectations and roles. The statements made in the interviews by both genders are also consistent with research findings that suggest that young migrant women compensate for their parents' earlier lives within a generation (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Zhou & Bankston, 2001), that machismo is very prevalent in boys (Cervantes, 2010), and that migrants' daughters achieve better school results than boys (Dale et al., 2002). Quin (2006) highlighted why girls are more successful at school. The reasons given were "the expectations of parents after migration, socialization at home, relationships at school and the gender-specific processes of acculturation and identity formation" (Quin, 2006, p. 8; see also Bakhshaei & Henderson, 2016). The determinants of outcomes are significantly gender-based, meaning that the educational pathway is not segmented by ethnicity and class (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005). In summary, for the female interviewees, all were exposed to many common traditional role models and stereotypes in their socialization within their families. These included women having to be protected, being at home at a certain time, and getting married and having children as a stable future. This naturally led to the struggle to always depend on the degree of education openness and tolerance of the family. While the family played a central and positive role in training in terms of values and support (Article I), the different understanding of roles developed by the female interviewees was a starting point for many conflicts but also for reorientation and repositioning and a new understanding of roles. The confrontation with the different roles and expectations placed on them as women led them to search intensively for answers and to try to find their own way in a free society where democracy is highly valued. It made them think not only about how to deal with cross-cultural situations but also about how to bring about change through their education and further studies. The reorientation and repositioning was possible because they perceived different ways of life for women in Finnish society and equal treatment in school and other educational institutions. This is where Finnish educational institutions make a valuable contribution (Article I). Young girls and women experience equality there, described in detail in the institutional value dimension (Article I). It is important that educational institutions continue to maintain these values. However, more connections with family could help in decreasing struggles in families. Frazer (1990, as cited in Davies & Harre, 1999) pointed out that:

[A]ctors understanding and experience of their social identity, the social world and their place in it, is discursively constructed. By this I mean that the girls' experience of gender, race, class, their personal-social identity, can only be expressed and understood through the categories available to them in discourse (p. 35).

It is clear that the female interviewees found their new social identity in the discourse with self, family, friends, teachers and the cross-cultural context. The results show very clearly that this discourse, and thus the negotiation process for the new role and new position, took place in a very dynamic process with self and significant others.

The male interviewees were also confronted with their role as a man and with having to establish an identity and a new position. There are traditional expectations for them as well, including protecting their sisters, meeting their parents' expectations of having a good job and having a family, and respecting rules and culture, such as relationships with the other sex and having a girlfriend. The male interviewees did not make any statements regarding gender inequity directly on their behalf, which means that they did not experience or perceive it in this way. However, they were aware of gender inequality in the context of their own community and other migrant communities and made statements (they were not asked about it directly, it just emerged based on their interviews) about their sisters or women in the migrant community.

Besides individualism-collectivism and gender roles, another category emerged, critical thinking, which was also an important category for repositioning. The findings from the critical thinking category are consistent with those of other studies on FGCSs coming from a marginalized culture that point to the relationship between critical consciousness, success, and impact on the development of one's identity. In this context, for example, Castillo-Montoya (2017) referred to "critical consciousness" in order to be able to analyze social and societal structures. Students are also able to reflect on their personal experiences in an academic context (Castillo-Montoya, 2019) and use this for their own personal development. Critical thinking skills, such as asking questions, explaining, arguing, analyzing, comparing, and adapting, as described by Facione (1990) and Facione et al. (2000) were evident in this study. This is also in line with Demetriou et al. (2017), who highlighted that successful FGCSs are flexible, independent, accept challenges as opportunities, and are risk-averse which show how they use dispositions to critical thinking. In terms of challenges during the educational journey, critical thinking skills and dispositions (Facione, 2013) make an important contribution to the development of thinking and finding one's cultural identity and helped them to negotiate and find a new position. critical thinking enabled FGMFSs to compare and question their perceptions and experiences in the family and educational systems and to develop new options and courses of action for their lives. This process again showed the discursive elements of negotiation with the use of these skills. This was again very strongly emphasized by the female interviewees in relation to traditional understandings of women's roles and values. Another point with which the findings were consistent with those of other studies is that critical consciousness (Castillo-Montoya, 2017) helps to support and give back to one's community because

of critical engagement with social structures. This was also evident in the interviews when looking at the family as social structures where daughters suddenly could disagree with parents, join in the discussion, and introduce new views and knowledge, as well as new behaviors, such as questioning and openness, into families and communities. This new knowledge was contributed in a discursive way to the families and helped them to negotiate their new position. In addition to reflecting on cultural and social aspects, FGMFSs also reflected on how to cope with their studies in higher education. They tried to identify and analyze problems, looking for the reasons first in themselves in order to improve their academic performance (Article III).

All three categories described in detail in Article (II) impacted the shaping of a successful educational journey for FGMFSs through empowerment. These three categories impacted their decision and goal to continue their studies in higher education. They realized that higher education is a tool to achieve their goals and strengthen their empowerment. Likewise, individualism-collectivism, gender roles, and critical thinking affected the development of their own social and cultural identity and helped them find a new role and position and to broaden their perspective and horizons on their situation and position regarding themselves and others. In Article (II), I explained this an “innovative adaptive strategy.” This should be interpreted as not only overcoming or “enduring” different obstacles but developing and adopting new behaviors and skills to discuss and, if necessary, challenge values, roles, and norms from two perspectives in order to develop something new—or, as I put it, from being weak to being a person with superpowers, from being indifferent to being someone who plays an active role in society and gives something back to their own community and to the host society that will ultimately lead to a better society. This was mentioned by many interviewees when they mentioned “being different is my superpower” or “what matters is humanity.”

Article (III) summarized the three important categories that described the time spent at university, the academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being. The three categories are all interrelated and interdependent in their impact on their identity and success in relation to their educational journey. There is extensive literature on these emergent categories for FGCSs with and without an immigrant background in the US. There is not a lot of literature in Finland that directly examines this target group in higher education. An important exception is the Karvi report from the Finnish Education Evaluation Center, which examines the educational situation of students with foreign and immigrant backgrounds and the importance of monitoring these students in Finnish higher education institutions (Airas et al., 2019).

I described the academic environment on the basis of three further subthemes: academic work, academic relationship, and academic climate. Academic work includes all of the basic skills and abilities needed to work and study academically. The lack of

these basic skills was often acknowledged by the interviewees, some of whom spoke of a “shock” when they realized the high degree to which learning was suddenly placed in their own responsibility in comparison with high school. This was often not what they experienced at school. An essential element and a basic tool for academic work is the language, the learning of the academic language. Mastering the academic Finnish language was considered a major challenge by 73 percent of the interviewees. The first in their family often come not only from a cultural context where a different mother tongue is spoken but also where no academic language prevails. Thus, it takes a great deal of effort to meet the expectations of university. The results found here are consistent with Stebleton and Soria’s (2012) study of 58,000 students, which showed that inadequate study skills and weak English and math skills are a major barrier to FGCSs being successful. It is notable that the existence of two official languages in Finland was also a challenge for FGMFSs, as they did not realize the importance of Swedish language during their school years. This makes their later employability more difficult in some fields, as they have little or no knowledge of the second official language.

However, despite all of these difficulties, the realization of the student status is an important aspect for self-perception and for the repositioning of this group of students. They are the first within the family to visit a university. Orbe (2008) pointed out that this fact causes other identity markers, such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status, to be considered less important. Being the first initiates a sense of pride and purpose and is evident in the students’ statements in the interviews. This is also consistent with the findings of Putman and Thompson (2006, as cited in Orbe, 2008). Being at the university leads to a dramatic change of their identity and their positions. This can lead to tensions with the family, and they have to negotiate these changes (Orbe, 2008). For example, more freedom and independence is required to be a student at university.

Academic relationship is defined as the quality of interaction with teachers at the university and was rated between adequate and inadequate. These experiences and perceptions were directly experienced and connected with many personal experiences. The teachers were rated as helpful and supportive, with the role of feedback being especially very helpful. Nevertheless, almost all of them wished that more attention had been paid to their personal background and that they had been encouraged to learn more about themselves and their personal and cultural background. Although they valued equality, they wished that their differences were better perceived by teachers and that they had more courage to complete their studies with more confidence. The role of feedback could be crucial in this case, as individual feedback could also be used as a way to get to know students’ backgrounds better and to talk to them. Feedback compensates for the lack of asking questions and asking for help, which is common among people

with immigrant backgrounds or even FGCSs. The importance of personal interactions is in line with other research findings that indicate how interactions of all types with respect to all subgroups with faculty are extremely important to good academic performance (Kim & Sax, 2009). Wang (2014) showed that FGCSs have, and are aware of, strong benefits from their interactions with their teachers and faculty. Soria and Stebleton (2012) found that FGCS have less engagement than the other groups of students at the university which they see this in a context of lower performance. Tinto (1993) pointed out the importance of multiple contacts between faculty and students socially and academically. This is also evident in the study by Hutchison (2017), who advocated for students to have contact with college faculty at a very early age so that they are equipped early to succeed in college.

The academic climate as the last subtheme in this part refers to the quality and character of university life, which includes students, staff, cultural offerings, values and organizational structures. In terms of cultural offerings, no offerings were known or addressed. Cultural offers including their cultural background in classroom and in the content, level is rare and depends on the subject of their study and the pedagogical approaches that have been used by teachers. Offering programs especially for the freshmen has been discussed in the literature for a long time (Tinto, 1993). This point is then also of great importance for teacher-student interaction. Stebleton and Soria (2012) indicated that FGCSs interact with faculty less frequently than their peers. Overall, the atmosphere at the university was described by FGMFSs as positive, a place where one is treated equally, is open-minded, and learning new content, learning about the world through a new perspective in terms of values and knowledge. However, more cultural inclusive programs and pedagogy would be desirable to not only engage FGMFS culturally and socially, but also to enrich and apply the existing resources of the multicultural climate in higher education curriculum and policy.

Academic performance shed the light on strategies that they employed to manage their studies successfully. In this emerged category, persistence and self-efficacy are of particular importance, in addition to the codes self-reflection and self-discover. These results are in agreement with the research literature. Here we found in the relationship between self-efficacy and academic motivation, level of effort and persistence (Zimmermann, 2000) and resilience (Martin & Marsh, 2009). For the current study group, high levels of student self-efficacy and persistence were found from the interviews, although how this group studies seems to be a blind spot for universities. The understanding of how students are performing seems simplified with the credits and the degree that they achieve. Since one of the participants said:

[W]e cannot actually judge people by the level that they have but we should consider them by the efforts that they do ... for somebody getting bachelor might have to do a thousand fold time more effort than another person has done for his/her bachelor”.

Universities seem to systematically neglect the challenges that FGMFSs have in the academic environment. This is also evident in the communication between teachers and students, which, although often evaluated good, but can also be improved. As one of the participants points out that” I put this effort to study at university, but there was not consideration and attention from teachers to try to know what problems might be and which helps might I need ...”

According to the suggestions of participants more individual support in this area, especially from the beginning and first year at higher education is needed (see the implications section).

The results of psychological, emotional and social well-being are consistent with the results in the literature, with exceptions. The results related to emotional struggles of fear and stress in relation to not disappointing the expectations of families and successfully obtaining a degree, not failing, getting a task done on time are consistent with the results of different authors, such as Bui (2002), Demetriou (2017), and Conley and Hamlin (2009). Another important feeling that was mentioned is loneliness which was explained in the context of difficulty in making friends. The importance of friends also for success at university is evident. This was discussed in detail in the friendship section. Friendship is a good example of how the categories overlap and complement each other, thus strengthening GT. However, in addition to these negative feelings, positive emotional feelings such as pride and happiness, satisfaction were also expressed. For example, 13 out of 15 interviewees were satisfied with their choice of field of study. The results found here regarding positive feelings are in contrast to other research findings for example from Magallanes (2020) which refer mainly to students’ emotional challenges and difficulties related to stress, fear, and anxiety. Spengen (2013) also reported predominantly negative accounts related to the FGCSs’ experience, whereas their experience was overwhelmingly positive. Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) indicated that first-generation college students have significantly more depressive symptoms than non-first-generation college students. This relates to a higher level of guilt towards family when being successful. Positive feelings such as pride, happiness, or satisfaction related to psychological, emotional, or social well-being are not discussed in detail in any papers other than this one.

According to Davies and Harre (1999), demands that contradict each other provide the opportunity to take action and make a choice:

In making this choice, there is a complex weaving together of the positions ... available within any number of discourses; the emotional meaning attached to each of those positions which have developed as a result of personal experiences of being located in each position or of relating to someone in that position ... (Davies & Harre, 1999, p. 49)

This complex web of positions then determines the choices in these conflicting possibilities. These conflicting possibilities are also evident in the emotional struggles described by FGMFSs, such as feeling lonely, confused, stressful and shy. There were many such emotional “battles” to be overcome, possibilities to be renegotiated, and a new position to be constructed.

Functioning and a sense of belonging linked and conceptualized these three selective categories. All are interrelated and complementary. According to Tay (2021), “Optimal functioning which has been emphasized in a broader sense of well-being involves not merely feeling good but doing good, and determining the ways toward positive action” (p. 2). Thus, a supportive and encouraging climate in an academic environment can positively influence academic performance and well-being. Academic environment can provide such a space to promote optimal functioning for all students. Functionality plays a central role in strategies to overcome obstacles on their performance through hard working and persistency educational journey with the goal of a better life, success, and a good career. They want to be functional and use their full potential and capabilities. Therefore, they work harder, learn new methods for themselves and develop new strategies to overcome the challenges. In the long run, they want to function not only as FGMFSs but also as a helpful and functioning member of the host society. They also want to be a good role model for their own community what will at the same time change their position in their community. Functioning leads to belonging. The process is interdependent, as functioning leads to sense of belonging and sense of belonging leads to functioning. The importance of belonging has positive effects on the intention to persist (Hausmann et al., 2007) and reduces retention (Hoffmann et al., 2002) and a sense of justice (Teng et al., 2020). Orbe (2008) also pointed out that “FGCSs need negotiate communication systems that reflect their old as well as new identity in an adequate, authentic, and effective way” (p. 88). Recognizing that one belongs to the world in a certain way was described by Davies and Harre (1999) as one of the important reflexive concepts in personal discourse about oneself. This reflexive concept is very evident for a sense of belonging and functioning and is another central pillar of negotiation and repositioning.

## 5.1 Theoretical reflection

The GT “negotiation and repositioning process” of FGMFSs on their educational journey based on core categories was described above. The linkage among core categories has been conceptualized through negotiation and the repositioning process. This provides a framework for understanding the complex processes by which FGMFSs negotiate and represent various aspects of their identity and position. In particular, openness, empowerment, sense of belonging and functioning are presented with their respective associated categories as pillars for negotiations leads to repositioning. All of these categories are important and relevant to understanding students’ repositioning process and how this repositioning happen on their educational journey that leads them to study in higher education. In this study, conjunctions of contradictions led to creating spaces for negotiations, and this was supported by self, significant others, and the context (environment). In these negotiation processes, it was possible to reposition oneself. The process of negotiation, repositioning, and decision-making is a circular model, in the sense that it is an ongoing process.

Openness is important for the dialogical self (Hermans, 2008) to be open to newness and to initiate a process of repositioning. At this point, I would like to point out that the purpose of the study was not to study self or identity issues in more detail. Instead, this process of repositioning takes place in direct exchange with the social environment, which is primarily characterized by dialogue and exchange with educational institutions, especially teachers, friends and parents. However, this process cannot take place without the openness of supportive resources such as friends, family, and teachers. As a result, they are also automatically confronted with the values that dominate there, which leads to a process of negotiation with both family values and institutional values and underlying expectations. This in turn leads to a repositioning.

Empowerment also plays an important role in this process of reorientation and repositioning and cannot be overestimated. The culture in which one grows up also provides sharp boundaries (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) of the self and indicates dividing lines (consciously or unconsciously). It is certainly easier in an individual society to draw a clear dividing line in the social relations to the others than a more collectivistic oriented community. Therefore, this achievement is to be estimated incredibly highly and to be appreciated like it succeeds to overcome borders in a discursive negotiation process and to work out and sometimes also to “fight” for accepting a new position. Girls and women in particular have to overcome many boundaries here. This is also happened through critical thinking skills that are learnt in the institutions and applied and practiced in the cross-cultural context. This played a significant role in their identity development and repositioning.

Sense of belonging and functioning in higher education strengthened the transformation of a new position for FGMFSs. The emotional meaning of “belonging” is central. This was also confirmed by Orbe (2008). Thereby, these emotions are, on the one hand, dependent on a complex web of positions (Davies & Harre, 1999) and surrounded by contradictory possibilities that are expressed very clearly in the interviews in this study. Once again, a decisive step toward repositioning takes place “at the university,” favored by the “new learning liberal atmosphere” at the university and by multiple encounters with teachers and other students. Functioning is characterized by great efforts to master the material and the subject requirements, to maintain the status as a student that has been gained with a great deal of energy and effort. But also to be a sustainable contributor of the Finnish society and a good role model for others from their own community. All of these negotiated and strengthened their repositioning process.

All three core categories are interdependent and complement each other. Overlapping cannot always be avoided; nevertheless, the distinguishing of the essential processes from each other generates a better understanding of these processes. The theory grounded in this study depicts that, for FGMFSs, the process of repositioning is crucial to success on this educational journey to, at, and in higher education and is thus ultimately central to the development of identity. This sheds light on how repositioning occurred through negotiations and how these negotiations successfully led to repositioning in a way that kept these students moving forward in continuing their studies at a higher academic level efficiently. The results found here are consistent with other scholarly work on the role and performance of migrant students (Demetriou et al., 2017; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Lowery-Hart & Pachecho, 2011; Orbe, 2008) and adds additional important findings related to the negotiation and repositioning process of FGMFSs on their successful educational journey.

## 5.2 Implications

This research provides insight into how the educational journey of FGMFSs to and within higher education is experienced and perceived in Finland, what tensions, adjustments, and innovative strategies for FGMFSs are needed to successfully continue their education at higher levels. All of these details can be used to design or develop programs that incorporate the repositioning process through academic support and well-being for FGMFSs and immigrant background students in general during their education in the host community.

The findings of this research suggest a number of theoretical and practical implications for further supporting, encouraging, and motivating FGMFSs on their educational journey and their success and new positioning in the society. From a theoretical viewpoint, this dissertation:

- is an attempt to develop a better understanding of FGMFSs' education in higher education through their experiences and their perceptions on their way to and in higher education. It adds new findings that we cannot find nor are deeply discussed in the literature. If we look at the literature about the target group, they are normally described as students who are having deficits theoretically explained by Bourdieu's concept of not having access to social or cultural capital, which includes having fewer material resources, lack of knowing language, not possessing many other necessary skills that are important for school or college. Although these results were also confirmed in the interviews, they were deemed more positive. This study showed that the interviewees were proud, happy, showed perseverance and development, faced their problems, got involved, and changed their perspectives and position, as one interviewee put it very clearly: "Do not make or stay yourself as victims!" This study elaborated and demonstrated the process of repositioning FGMFSs that happened through negotiation with themselves, others, and the cross-cultural context in which they studied and lived. The findings of this study may open new avenues for other researchers to better understand the relationship between the repositioning process and the successful educational journey for these and similar student groups.
- adds new findings also for the context of values in relation to family. For family, there is little to no research or effort to capture family values and use them for education. The same is true for the connection for values that are implicit in the institutions and were recognized and appreciated as such by the interviewees. Nevertheless, there are no or only few studies in Finland that systematically look at the importance of values for this target group. The importance and connection between students' education and their parents' cultural background and integration was also highlighted in this study in order to find out how we can reduce family struggles and pressure on students in their educational journey.
- adds new findings for the great importance of critical thinking for the development of cross-cultural identity and shaping the successful educational journey for FGMFSs in this study. Critical thinking includes important skills and dispositions, especially for systematically questioning one's own position and role in different cultures and, if necessary, repositioning oneself in the family, and in the community. They have changed their perception of themselves and others and

see themselves in a new way. Again, these findings could also open new avenues for researchers to better understand these relationships and make them useful for good programs in the educational institutions.

- maps the entire process of success, family life, initial schooling, transition to university, and study at university itself by examining experiences and perceptions and linking this to a process of repositioning. This added value to the study in this field since there are no or few studies that cover the whole educational path of this target group. The exception to this are studies of academic preparation, such as that of Atherton (2014), whose project built on earlier research on academic preparation and thus mapped one aspect of the entire educational journey.

- provides new insights into understanding the core categories that emerged through GT for a successful negotiation and repositioning process for this group of students. There are few studies that have examined the educational trajectory of FGMFSs using positioning theory and identity negotiation in a cross-cultural context. For example, Orbe (2008) is an exception, using dialectical and cross-cultural adaptation theories as a basis to examine how first-generation college students show that the successful negotiation of identity tensions can be seen as a key factor in academic success. Likewise, Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) used relational dialectics theory and showed that first-generation college students often have to deal with a tension between living on campus and losing family and working-class identities.

The practical implications can be used for further activities and support programs in the educational system to improve not only access for and study by FGMFSs in higher education but also for the best possible functionality and belonging in higher education and in society. Therefore, the findings can help the educational system at various levels to understand the interrelated factors that determine the successful educational journey of FGMFSs through the repositioning process. The results can help teachers, educators, and administrators better understand the importance of key categories and the conceptualization and linkage of these categories for the development of new positions that are the result of ongoing negotiations in this process. More encouraging and future-oriented support is needed for these students particularly the years before higher education. The following section divides the impacts according to the three articles.

1. Openness connects the emergent categories in Article (I) with each other. To achieve this, the following points should be considered.
  - Empowerment of parents (education and awareness) so they realize the importance and necessity of supporting their children’ education and that this is a feasible step toward success for participation and access to society. Support should focus on parents’ own educational efforts. Here, the learning of the Finnish language is a good example.
  - Reinforcing and discussing institutional values like equity for parents, students, and teachers at every stage of the educational journey. It is important to note that equity is an important aspect. It should also be ensured that values are implemented, lived, and respected.
  - A better consideration of values in the development of training programs or policies that seek to support this target group.
  - Promoting more strategies and activities inside and outside institutions to make friends between peers and build relationships with society.
  - Promoting various programs for Finnish parents to enhance their intercultural competence and encourage their children to be an agent for more solidarity and unity in the diverse society.
  
2. Empowerment connects the emerged categories in Article (II) with each other. To achieve this, the following points should be considered from the perspective of empowerment.
  - Encouraging and strengthening critical thinking skills and critical thinking dispositions for students. This can be done at any stage of the educational journey—however, the sooner, the better.
  - Developing curricula that connect issues in a cross-cultural way to enhance critical thinking and decision-making skills for students.
  - Developing training for teachers to specifically strengthen critical thinking in teaching and learning through raising cross-cultural contexts.
  - Continuing efforts to promote and train the intercultural competence of teachers to learn more about the cross-cultural differences of students and their impacts on students’ education.
  - Involving the importance of role models in the different stages of the educational journey.
  - Promoting strategies and activities for enhancing intercultural communication and relationship in educational institutions.

Overall, institutions can play an important role in supporting students through offering programs that empower them to overcome the challenges when the tension in the family in relation to the values in society is concerned.

3. Functioning and a sense of belonging connect the emergent categories in Article (III) with each other. To achieve this, the following points should be considered from the perspective of a sense of belonging and functioning. In Article (III), several activities were presented for a micro (teachers and professors) and macro level (administration). The activities presented there will be summarized and extended.

**a) Micro level:**

- Incorporating students' prior knowledge and experience of their cultural backgrounds into the classroom
- Fostering friendships and friendly relationships between peers
- Promoting group work and cooperation inside and outside the classroom
- Promoting self-efficacy for better performance
- Promoting effective individual work habits
- Promoting personal and informal communication between teachers and students

**b) Macro level:**

- Support courses at the beginning of studies for better orientation of studies.
- Organizing and offering courses on academic skills, such as writing and critical thinking
- Organizing of informal activities for students
- Offering intercultural programs, seminars, and courses in collaboration with students
- Considering a culturally inclusive approach in curriculum development through organizing different sustainable program and activities

Overall, university should recognize and further encourage the efforts of these students in their educational journey and their willingness to belong and function. The way their cultural background is viewed can further encourage their strong commitment and participation in a culturally inclusive university. They can be seen as an important asset to Finland, because of having successfully completed their educational journey in Finland. They can combine and negotiate two cultures, which could lead to unique innovation in their field of study. They can promote equity and solidarity in society through their role modeling and support in academic and professional life.

### 5.3 Limitations and methodological consideration

This dissertation, in addition to its strengths and innovation in using GT to examine the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs in higher education on their educational journey, also has some limitations of which I am aware. The limitations are pointed out below:

The participants did not come from all universities in Finland, but mainly from one university, and very few from other universities. Therefore, their experiences and perceptions might have been influenced by different Finnish higher education environments. Further studies could examine a broader range of students from Finnish universities. The specific migration background of the participants and also the ethnic background of some participants could influence the results. Most participants are from Middle Eastern countries. Further studies could consider a broader range of countries of origin when selecting students. The age at arrival varied. Study participants included those who were born abroad and arrived at early ages, as well as those who arrived as teenagers or adolescents. Further research could consider the age of arrival more as an additional criterion. The diversity of disciplines could influence the results, e.g., experiences and perceptions in individual departments or faculties, such as engineering, may be different from those in the humanities or medicine. Further studies could include enough students from one discipline or faculty to allow for this variable to be included in a study. Most interviews were conducted in English due to my limited knowledge of Finnish to conduct a sophisticated study. A few interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, which were translated into English. All translation processes present additional challenges and information can be misinterpreted even though this has been controlled through member checking. Furthermore, there was a lack of time and financial support to conduct GT in a way that would have allowed for the study of other additional stakeholders such as friends, families, and teachers. Further studies could consider these important additional target groups when conducting another GT study. Last but not least, my cultural and experiential background was controlled, but cultural background cannot be completely ignored when interpreting data.

### 5.4 Future research

For further studies, research on the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs in their educational journey could be conducted in relation to the following points:

- Gender differences and impacts: This is an important criterion as gender inequality is crucial in most regions where migrants (refugees) come from and may have an impact on migrant students' educational pathways and their experiences and perceptions of gender. Therefore, comparative studies would be needed to analyze and tap into these effects in detail. This could then play an important role in organizing supportive education and programs that take gender sensitivity into account.
- Families: Family background, including cultural background (country of origin, ethnic background) and educational attainment of parents and siblings, could be analyzed specifically in the context of FGMFS training. Collecting data from families could help identify other categories that play a critical role in addressing family challenges related to education. This can be considered when designing education for FGMFSs and other immigrant students.
- Friends: This specific research would be conducted in relation to friendships and their importance to FGMFSs and immigrant students to identify the factors that friendships and social capital may influence in shaping successful educational journey for these students to higher education. The study can be conducted by collecting data from Finnish friends to learn their perceptions and experiences with FGMFSs and immigrant students in general.
- Teachers in schools and universities: Collecting data from teachers at different school levels could help to learn about their perceptions and experiences with FGMFS on their educational path to university. This would help identify factors to consider in educational settings. In addition, the perceptions and experiences of faculty and professors regarding these students should be collected to learn more about how FGMFSs are perceived by them at the university and how are the visibility of students there.
- Repositioning: Further studies are needed for the development of a better understanding of how the negotiation on the educational journey to, and in higher education work successfully for repositioning in different contexts. This can also help us better understand FGMFSs on their educational journey and support them appropriately.

Furthermore, the GT in this study can be tested and studied with other students with an immigrant background and for different further educational institutions. Likewise, the relationships between different levels of education in the repositioning process and shaping successful educational journey to higher education for these students can be studied in the future. In addition, future studies can be conducted to track the educational trajectory and employability status of FGMFSs after graduation.

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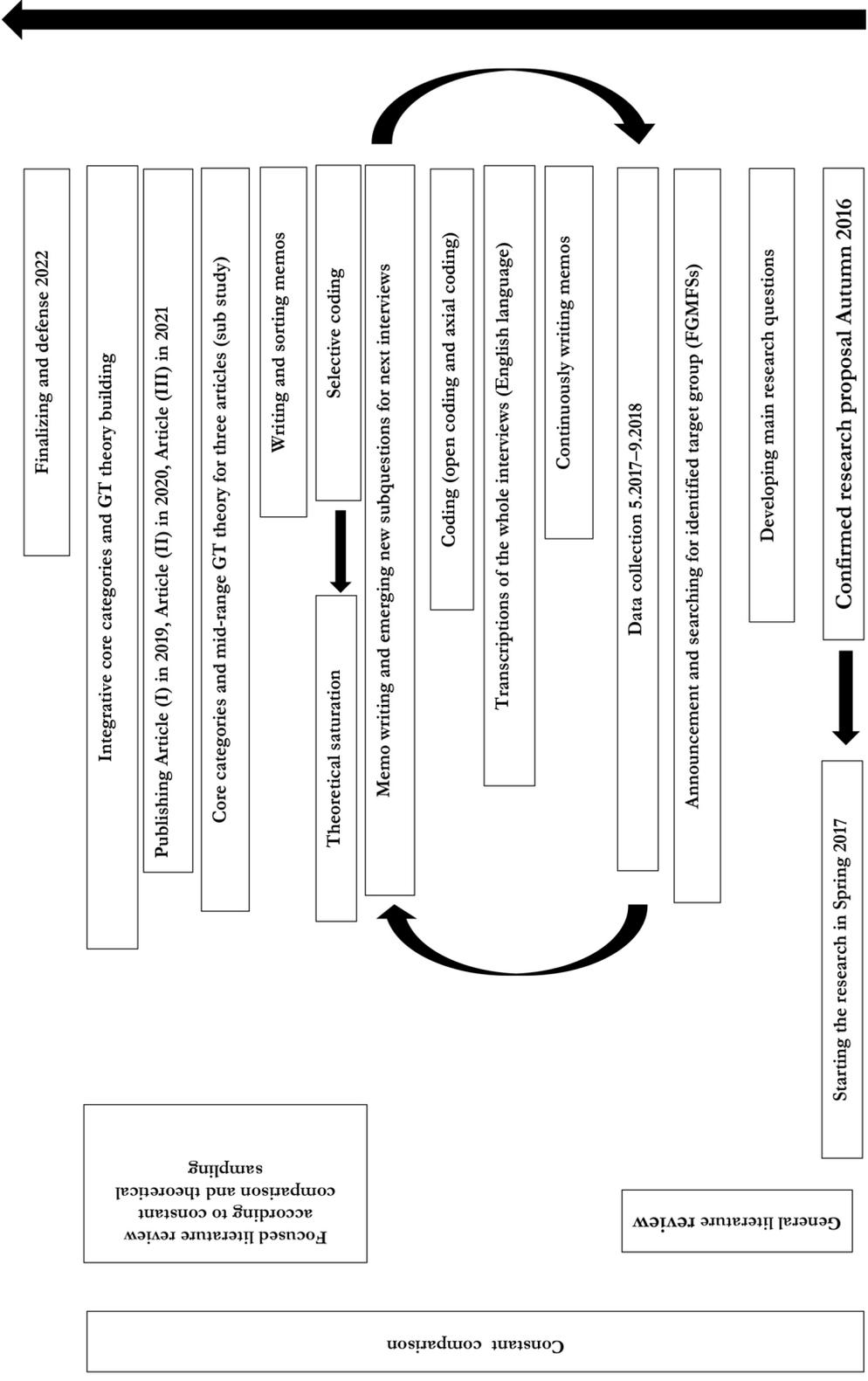
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# Appendices



# APPENDIX A. Research Process



## *Appendix B.*

### Research Questions

This section shows the main research questions and sub-questions following the grounded theory (GT) approach. In this study, the sub-questions under each research question were developed during the research process.

#### **Main research question:**

How do FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational journey to, at, and in higher education in the context of their life story (including their challenges, potentials and skills, attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and identity, and positioning)?

#### **Background questions:**

In the first part of our interview, I would like to have some information about your family, your parents, your age, and so on. All of the answers will be anonymized, so don't worry, the second part of the interview will be a sample of questions where I want to talk with you about your experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings according to your educational journey in Finland. I would suggest the following procedure. I will ask you a question, and you will give me some answers. I will not make any valuations. I am just listening and asking.

- Do you have any questions concerning the procedure?
- Okay, so let us start with introducing yourself and your academic and family background.
- Please introduce yourself (name, age, and marital situation) and tell me about your educational background and your major.
- As you told me, your parents are migrants from ...
- When did they move to Finland?
- Were you born here, or did you migrate here?
- Do you have any brothers or sisters? How many?
- What is your sibling's education?
- Do you have relatives here?
- What are your parents' education?
- What is your parents' occupational status (including their income)?
- Did your parents talk about education back home? What was your first reminder on education?

**1.1 How do first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs) perceive and experience their education to, at, and in higher education in Finland (including their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings)?**

- If you have been to school in Finland, which schools did you visit in Finland after migration? How was it? How were your experiences?
- Tell me more about your school life and your experiences there?
- Do you remember some experiences regarding going to or the first day at university during your childhood?
- When did you know that you wanted to go to university? And why?
- What's happened and how did you find your way to university?
- When you were in high school, what happened to you and what was your experience that made you decide to go to university?
- Can you describe your attitude and thoughts toward higher education?
- Can you describe your experiences at university, what was new for you, and what challenges you experienced, if any?
- Can you tell me more about your feelings during your time at the university?
- Did you see some differences in comparing yourself and other students?
- Do you think you were welcomed there?
- Did you have friends? Are these friends from Finland or from other countries?
- What kind of changes did you feel from moving until now during your study, and how did you overcome these challenges if you had any?
- What did you learn during this period that you have been at university?
- Did you want to finish your studies prematurely once? If yes, why? If no, why?
- What is your plan for the future?
- Can you tell me about linguistic issues that you experienced before at school and after entering university?

**1.2 How do FGMFSs contextualize, position, and situate themselves in their educational journey to, at, and in higher education?**

- What was your understanding of yourself and your feelings and thoughts at school and before university\_?
- What is your understanding of yourself and your feelings and thoughts at university and regarding your activities and the people you have contacted?
- What was and is the perception of your own situation as a FGMFS?
- What was and is your feeling of your own situation as a FGMFS?
- Do you like to get more engaged in the university? Why? And what did or do you do in this case?
- Have you tried cultural activities and programs at university?

**1.3 How do FGMFSs feel and think about being positioned by others (institution, family, students, and teachers, etc.) in their educational journey to, at, and in higher education?**

- How have you been seen by teachers, friends, or classmates at school and at university? Which kinds of comments and treatment did you experience from them?
- When you visited the university, was there a change in your position in your family?
- Which comments did you get from your family or relatives?
- Did or does your family support you? How? And why?
- What are your family expectations due to different cultures between them and new environments at the university? Please explain.

**1.4 What problems, challenges, and potentials exist on their educational journey, and in which ways do FGMFSs integrate themselves in the new personal, social, cultural, and academic contexts?**

- Can you tell me more about how you got along with the different people/staff at the new environment?
- Can you tell me more about the process of integrating yourself in the new cultural context? How have you experienced having two cultures at home and at school, and later at university?
- What was your biggest challenge in integrating yourself in higher education and in the new environment in Finland, if any?
- Did you feel any change in your conceptions, thoughts, and perspectives? Which kinds of change and how?
- How do you perceive yourself? How do you want to introduce yourself?
- Do you think you could affect your family integration in Finnish society or vice versa?
- Have you been interested in sharing and introducing your culture at university? Did you find an opportunity to share it? Yes or no, and why?

**Suggestions for FGMFSs and higher education:**

We were talking a lot about experiences, feelings, beliefs, challenges, and problems you have faced in this process. Let us talk now about what higher education can do to make FGMFSs more successful and efficient.

- What is your suggestion for first-generation migrant family students that can help them to be more successful academically and also make them happier and more integrated at university?
- What would you suggest higher education institutions should provide to improve the success of FGMFSs?

**Finalizing the interview:**

Thanks for participating in this research interview and I would be happy if you let me know about your impression on this research interview.



## Publications



# PUBLICATION

I

## **Being a First-Generation Migrant Family Student in Finland: Perceptions and experiences of the Educational Journey to Higher Education**

Golaleh Makrooni

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies, 6(3), 157–170

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## Being a First-Generation Migrant Family Student in Finland: Perceptions and experiences of the Educational Journey to Higher Education

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**Abstract:** This research aimed to investigate the situation of first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs) in higher education in Finland and determined how FGMFSs experience and perceive their educational journey to achieve higher education. The study focused on the factors that support students to be successful in their education. Fifteen first generation students in higher education who belong to migrant families in Finland were surveyed utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews. In this qualitative study, grounded theory (GT) was used to identify emerging latent patterns from data. Three main categories family values, institutional values, and interpersonal relationships were identified to support students to be successful in their education and enter higher education. The results of this study can help educational institutions, educators, and policy makers understand what factors are important in improving educational success for migrant students.

**Keywords:** family values, first generation migrant family students, friendship, grounded theory, higher education, institutional values.

### Introduction

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018), there were 21.6 million third-country nationals in the European Union (EU) in 2017. Because of war, poverty, corruption, political persecution, oppression, or the desire for a better life in another society, people are migrating and, in some cases, have been forced to migrate. The increasing migration causes challenges for the host countries and their educational systems that they have not previously faced. Many of the countries in the Western world to which immigrants are immigrating have efficient education systems. These education systems have been developed over a long period of time and adapted to meet the needs of the local population. Findings from comparative studies (Malinen, Väisänen, & Savolainen, 2012; Mangez & Hilgers, 2012; Marque et al., 2018; OECD, 2010) provide information on the educational status and performance of children not born and raised in the respective country, and on children and students who were born in the country but whose parents or grandparents were immigrants. These results show some differences between the native and immigrant populations in terms of educational attainment and performance. Considering the contribution of the migrant families' children in the further development of the country as workers or entrepreneurs, various aspects of their lives seem worth investigating.

First-generation immigrants in Europe often experience downward mobility. According to an OECD study (2004), the phenomenon of downward mobility of immigrants is mainly attributed to four factors: language barriers, differences in educational attainment, difficulties in the recognition of their certificates, and access to good jobs. Second-generation immigrants—a rapidly growing part of the population in many countries—are significantly better educated than their parents (OECD, 2010). Nevertheless, the educational level of many children in this second-generation population group is not equal to that of the local population.

Some countries are trying to develop the long-term support for the predominantly young second-generation migrant population through a range of educational programs, from early childhood education to formal schooling and then to the subsequent transition into the labor market. Due to the fact that the number of migrant families is exponentially increasing throughout the world, especially in Europe, and because of the importance of generating potential successful workforces, education studies in today's world, particularly about migrant-family students, are vital. However, the majority of programs offered to migrant background youth are vocational, thus most follow-up and evaluation studies focus on them and only a few researchers have focused on the conditions, skills, and problems of FGMFSs in higher education. The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of FGMFSs in respect to their educational journey to achieve higher education. The study focused on

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how they perceived and experienced their education in the host society, and which factors and processes they emphasize and point out in their life story.

### **First-Generation College Students**

There are interesting findings on different aspects of becoming and being a first-generation college student (FGCS). Most of these studies have been done in the United States. Initially, FGCSs are those whose parents have at a maximum educational level of a high school diploma (Abdul Rahim & Azman, 2010; Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Selamat, Taib, Hshim, Mohd-Zaharim, & Karupiah, 2013; Stephen, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012) and have had little or no access to a university education (Choy, 2001; Dumais & Aaryn, 2010; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ishitani, 2003). Socioeconomically, FGCSs generally come from low-income families (Ceja, 2001; Dooley, Payne, & Rob, 2009; Selamat et al., 2013); therefore, they have a tendency to manifest low aspirations (Abdul Rahim & Azman, 2010; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001), so they are more at the risk of dropping out of higher education (Abdul Rahim & Azman, 2010; Selamat et al., 2013).

Academically, FGCSs have higher attrition rates and are underrepresented in graduation rates at the bachelor, master, and doctoral levels of education (Ecklund, 2013), and they do not complete bachelor or higher degrees (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). However, some perform as well as other students academically, which shows their great potential and could provide an opportunity to access higher levels of education if the conditions are favourable for them (Selamat et al., 2013). FGCSs are likely to work more hours per week than their fellow students, stay less connected to campus and university life, and actively maintain the roles and responsibilities connected to family and community (Ecklund, 2013). Fiscal matters (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Thomas & Quinn, 2007), and their parents' education level (Saenz et al., 2007) often hinder first-generation students from attending universities and have a significant impact on the academic success of FGCSs. One of the most important predictors of persistence in attaining an education among college students is the educational level of their parents (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Moreover, relative to their peers, FGCSs have distinctively lower self-confidence and less academic preparation prior to arriving at college (Saenz et al., 2007). Despite the difficulties described above and the related experience on the way to graduation, these students visit universities to improve their social and academic status (Abdul Rahim & Azman, 2010). Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) also found that students with parents who have college experience have an advantage over FGCSs because the parents can help their children manage college life, how to register, how to select courses, and how to apply for financial aid.

According to Williams (2009), many studies have considered educational attainment and its positive effects on the tendency toward migration while others have pointed at the negative effects. FGCSs have many problems attaining, continuing, and finishing higher education. For example, they demonstrate lower academic and social integration, lower enrolment rates, lower rates of graduation, and they face governmental, legal, instructional, and financial barriers (Baum & Flores, 2011; Chen, 2005; Ersoy & Uysal, 2018; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Despite these problems, FGCSs tend to attain college degrees more than those who are native (Baum & Flores, 2011), which shows their ability to attain, continue, and finish higher education if their basic needs, such as financial situation are provided for. As a result, it appears that there is a lot of information and knowledge about the circumstances of FGCSs. However, little is known about their experiences (Quinn, Cornelius-White, MacGregor, & Uribe-Zarain, 2019). Furthermore, even less is known about what the FGMFSs have perceived and experienced during their journey to higher education.

### **Method**

In this context, the students who are in higher education or graduate from university and belong to an immigrant family whose parents did not do so are referred to as FGMFSs. They developed this desire at some point in their development and school career, or because they were encouraged by the outstanding achievements of dedicated teachers, mentors, and friends. FGMFSs have to cope with new situations in an unfamiliar educational system, and many conditions and challenges can complicate their adaptation. In order to understand how to facilitate their integration into school and higher education, the conditions and challenges they have to overcome must be identified and examined. This should benefit both the students concerned and the educational system as well.

This study aimed to identify the specific patterns, actions, and prerequisites that are crucial to the success of FGMFSs in education. Access to higher education is an integral part of improving the lives, opportunities, and possibilities of FGMFSs, which will subsequently affect their well-being and improve their social mobility and success in work and life. Success is a basic general value for people (Schwartz, 1992). Due to the lack of knowledge on this issue, this study investigated the factors and strategies which have supported and promoted the educational performance of the FGMFSs. It questioned how they perceive and experience their educational path to the higher education and aimed at identifying obstacles or patterns of social interaction which should be overcome in order to be successful on this path.

This qualitative study was conducted based on the grounded theory (GT) approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Strauss & Corbin, 1998). GT was also chosen for this target group because it guarantees the greatest possible openness toward the target group. Often, there are prejudices against this particular target group, or the researcher is not knowledgeable enough about the group. GT is a simple way to discover emerging patterns in data which are derived from systematic collection and is analyzed without being constrained by an underlying theoretical frame of reference. In this study, which is part of a doctoral thesis, emerging theory is limited in the domain of understanding the investigated phenomena, and is conceptually extended by the entire doctoral thesis process.

## Data Collection

In order to find the participants for this study, an announcement was sent by the registration office to all students of all levels at the Finnish university (about 14,000 students) to the intranet webpage, the student union Facebook page, and to some faculties at the university. Posters were printed and distributed for the different university faculties and the snowball system was effectively used, which also resulted in data collection from other universities. The detailed announcement and the explanations were intended to satisfy the need for the respondents to understand the purpose of the interview and to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the researcher (Buchanan, Boddy, & McCalman, 1988).

A total of fifteen FGMFSs (eight females and seven males) from different Finnish universities were interviewed for this study. Most of the participants were from the second largest Finnish university. The participants were from Iran (seven), Iraq (four) and of mostly (eight) Kurdish ethnic origin, four from Africa, one from Russia and one from Vietnam. Although according to Statistics Finland (2018), Iraqi, Syrian, and Russian immigrants respectively with 2369, 1422, and 1420 persons were reported as the three largest group of immigrants in 2017, however, it was not concretely considered to be a factor for reaching the specific common immigrant group for this study. It is evident that the results might be different if the composition of the informants varies. However, in this case it was considered important that there were interviewees from the most common groups immigrated to Finland in 2017. The majority of Kurdish Iranians and Iraqis among participants was due to the use of snowball method. Four of participants had graduated, and the rest were studying various subjects at the master and bachelor levels. One of the participants was born in Finland, and the others had moved to Finland at different ages—from early childhood to adolescence to young adulthood. The 90 to 110 min interviews were all recorded and transcribed. The English language was used for the interviews. ~~the mother tongue (Kurdish) was used for three participants.~~ To guarantee that the names of the respondents would remain anonymous, the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Council on Research Integrity were followed.

One of the essential principles of GT is that no pre-existing hypothesis is attempted to be verified: rather, “a theory should be emerged from empirical data” (Rupsiene & Pranskuniene, 2010, p. 10). For data collection, questions should be simple and open-ended. Simmons (2010 cited in Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 68) called these “grand tour” questions. The questions focused on how the FGMFSs perceived and experienced their education in the new country, from their childhood up to their current position, in respect to their migration background. What emerged during each interview was considered when conducting the next interviews in order to determine the relationship among salient themes; memo writing was used during this information gathering process. Some of the questions asked were as follows: How did you perceive and experience yourself on your educational journey? What is your situation regarding friendship with others, and how does it affect your integration into school and society? How did your family, friends, and teachers perceive you? How did you experience your education in different phases? What helped you to study at university as a student? How did you manage to master the challenges?

In this extensive, semi-structured in-depth interview, personal stories and data were collected. For this purpose, a rough guideline was developed with questions to serve as a framework. The type of questions varied, and more specific questions were asked in the interviews depending on the course of the interview. During data collection, some further questions emerged for the participants about such topics as the role of their mothers, teachers, friendship, their transition process, identity development, and cultural integration. The respondents were asked to relate details about their school days, their teachers, their friends, their relationship with their parents, their relationships with relatives, and episodes which had a lasting influence on their decision to go to university. They were also asked about their values and emotions, as well as the challenges caused by the differences between their country of origin and the host country’s cultures. If the participants did not mention the actors and people who influenced them in the first interviews, such as teachers, mentors, friends, etc., they were asked what role such persons played in the success of their training. According to the GT methodology, broad questions were asked at the beginning of the study and each interview was conducted based on the previous interview. This process was repeated several times until no new relevant topics were discovered.

An important question when using GT is from when are enough data collected to achieve theoretical saturation? The numbers of data required for saturation is given as 10 -15 in the corresponding literature and depends also on the degree of complexity of the research project (Aldiabat & Navenec, 2018). According to Weller et al. (2018, p.18) “in general, probing and prompting during an interview seems to matter more than the number

of interviews". In this study, theoretical saturation had been achieved after 15 interviews, as no new outstanding concepts or other related data on the case of the study emerged (Holton & Walsh, 2017; Weller et al., 2018). After the interview 10th, no new key themes were added. However, to ensure that data saturation was achieved, and to avoid early completion of data collection, five more interviews were conducted. The researcher stopped collecting further data after being convinced that the theory has arisen, and the categories were saturated. Continuous memo writing helped researcher to foster the saturation as well.

## Data Analysis

Written transcriptions of the audio files were created as well. The interviews were all transcribed in English. After each interview, interview memos were written. Collecting and analyzing data were done simultaneously by memo writing. Memos were generated constantly according to the GT method as an important iterative process. According to Strauss and Corbin (1994), open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were done. Analysis of the data started with the first step of open coding, for example, one interviewee (see Table 1) mentioned "always my parents told me you should go to university and they wanted me to go to university one day... they encouraged me." The open coding for this example is "motivation from mother," and the axial coding is "encouragement and achievement as a basic human value." Based on these coding and reading and rereading the transcriptions and writing memos to find the patterns that fit to the data, the concepts and categories were identified that were represented in the data. Selective coding as a final step was used to integrate and organize the key categories. Beside the continuously coding process the four steps of the constant comparative method developed by Glaser & Straus (1967) help that the theory will emerge and the data will be saturated, these are: "1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, 2) integrating categories and their properties, 3) delimiting the theory, and 4) writing the theory" (p. 105). To identify a coherent story, the three main categories were integrated to understand the educational journey of being successful and accessing higher education. For analyzing the data, both manual and technical analyses were conducted using Atlas.ti. Using Atlas.ti to link codes and categories and reading and rereading each interview convinced the researcher of the accuracy of the main categories.

## Findings of the Study

Three categories were found that were related to what FGMFSs perceived and experienced on their way to university: family values, institutional values, and friendships (interpersonal relationships).

### Category One: Family Values

The results of the interviews indicated that family values was one of the selective categories. Through the open coding and, subsequently, the axial coding, the following key categories emerged: encouragement, achievement, motivation, role of the mother, value of education, language broker, children responsibility, role model, and siblings. According to Schwartz (2014), achievement is an important value for personal success. Through achievement, one demonstrates competence in relation to social standards. Achievement is defined in this context as a value that I not only want to achieve for myself, but also as a value that I want to pass on to my children and as an investment. There were many statements about and examples of this. Encouragement (12 times) (Table 1, quotes A2, A6, A10, and A11), often from parents and especially from mothers (6 times) was mentioned by the participants. Some of the parents (mostly mothers) pointed out to their children that they themselves could not be able to learn because of their own circumstances (social and cultural conditions), but they knew from their life experience how important it is to learn. Encouragement was offered to use the opportunities available. Moreover, parental support through emotional motivation and encouragement was repeatedly pointed out. The parents could not help their children with the demands made by the school. However, they supported the children mentally and emotionally. The parents pointed out how important it was to learn and to get a better life and a good job. This supported the concept that the family is generally seen as the most important socialization place in which social learning takes place (Padilla-Walker, 2008).

In the family, the developing child continuously learns new practices and routines. This is part of the family culture. In the long run, these habits develop, as Bourdieu (1984, 1986) puts it, into certain behaviors, dispositions, attitudes, and lifestyles of a person. Family cultures, on the other hand, are embedded in a wider cultural and social context. Each family culture can fit more or less well into the surrounding socio-cultural context. Parents invest in their children as the next generation of the family (Coleman, 1988). The next generation will then (hopefully) support the parents later in life. This also includes communication about different life issues, such as discussions about education and professions (Table 1, quote A1), encouragement (Table 1, quote A10), and what they can achieve, such as becoming a doctor (Table 1, quote A6), in their personal life. Fathi (2018) pointed out that research has shown that parental involvement in raising children has an impact on their educational achievement, career path, and educational aspirations. In this process with the parents, however, the children and adolescents are often also actors in the migration process. The children are not only passive recipients of parental culture (Devine, 2009), but they also play an active role when it comes to language and supporting their parents in daily life. Through classroom learning, children are often engaged as language mediators and translators for their

parents. The role of children as interpreters often leads to misunderstandings between parents and the school. Bauer (2016, p. 1) calls these children “language brokers” and defines this concept as follows: “Language brokering is an activity whereby children interpret and translate for their migrant parents who have not yet learned the language of the new country.” This situation was also mentioned several times in the interviews ( $n = 4$ ) (Table 1, quotes A5 and A13). The children helped with tasks such as translating forms or visiting administration offices. In the interviews, they mentioned that it made them become more mature earlier than other classmates at school, and they had to help their parents very often (Table 1, quote A13). According to the life stories of the FGMFSs in this study, it was concluded that most of their parents did not have adequate linguistic knowledge, which made them dependent on translators and their children when dealing with official matters, such as doctor’s appointments, banking, etc. One of the interviewees criticized her parents for not being more assertive in learning the language during the first years after their arrival. The reasons for the parents’ passivity was explained by the uncertainty and inexperience in learning a new language, despite had been in Finland for long time, as well as dependency on their children to take care of language issues in the host country.

**Table 1.**  
*Family Values*

Interview	Quotes	Open coding	Axial coding
A2	“... always my parents told me you should go to university, and they wanted me to go to university one day... they encouraged me. My mother always told me that I should not make the same mistake that she did as she did not have the chance to study.”	- Motivation from mother  - Education is important	- Achievement as a basic human value - Value of education - Role of mother - Encouragement
A5	“My parents asked for help a lot, but they would never put their needs before mine, so I got lucky family wise. If my mom says she needs a translator, if she takes me, then I am away from school ... If parents do not understand the importance of school or how much can be missed or what can happen if you miss school all the time, ...	- Helping parents - Being an interpreter - Understanding school - Expectation in the family	- Value of education - Language broker - Support of parents
A6	“... my mother wanted me to be a doctor ... She always motivated me for everything, she is amazing ...”	- Motivation from mother - Value of education	- Role of mother - Encouragement
A10	“To be honest, someone that always encouraged me to study and gave me the feeling that studying is good, and that I should study after my vocational school, was just my mother. It is true that she is not literate enough, but always she liked that I studied.”	- Motivation and encouragement from mother - Importance of education	- Achievement - Encouragement - Mother’s role - Value of education
A11	“... my mom has a big influence on me, she was always encouraging me. She told me that your education as a woman is a freedom passport, those were always her words. She was telling me to continue, ‘I am proud of you,’ this made me proud to continue. There is no boundary for your dreams for your education ...”	- Motivation, encouragement from mother - Getting a vision for the future from mother	- Motivation - Encouragement - Mother’s role - Achievement - Value of education
A13	“Language still is a barrier for my parents because Finnish language is a difficult language. ... the kids learn it much easier and faster and actually you become an interpreter for your family and do all the stuff, ... you become adult when you are a child and your parents became kids because you are trying to take care of them. ... you become responsible. I think it affected me to be mature very early when I could have stayed a little child little bit longer.”	- Language barrier for parents - Become interpreter - Expectation in family - Changing one’s role - Responsibility - To become mature early	- Language broker - Family culture - Family migrant education(language) - Collectivistic culture

## Category Two: Institutional Values

Through the axial coding, some of the key categories emerged: equality policy, equity, culture of trust and respect, teachers and support, teacher encouragement, teacher and identity agent, teacher-student interaction, school and home interactions, and flexibility in educational institutions. Consequently, institutional values was identified as another selective category.

The results of the interviews reflect, apart from a few statements, that the students perceived and experienced values, such as equity and respect, in the Finnish institutions through teachers and staff in most cases. Respect was shown by the teacher for the students when referring to their abilities and their personalities (Table 2, quotes A11 and A15). Overall, the teachers were mainly judged to be helpful and fair. The students mentioned that the teacher motivated and supported them. The most important support was provided by teachers who had a strong and continuous influence on students' identities and attitudes (Table 2, quotes A6, A9, A11, A12, and A13-1). The teacher's understanding and the way these students acted and behaved made these students motivated and optimistic to believe in their abilities and their future in Finland. This support also took place in respect to the teaching methods used. They ensured that the students were often in a group with other Finns and that no groups were formed with only foreign students (Table 2, quote A12). Equity was perceived and experienced in the classroom in two ways. One was the positive aspect of equity which showed no difference in the way someone was treated by the teachers; they treated every student the same (Table 1, quote A7). The second was the negative aspect of equity which was caused by stress because the expectations were the same for everyone. Moreover, language problems caused stress regarding the participants' study and assessment (Table 2, quote A10). From the participants two have studied at the same time in secondary and vocational school. The other participants studied in high school and three attended vocational school because of the age of their arrival in Finland and the language difficulties they had. In two interviews (Table 2, quotes A2 and A13-2), the interviewees also mentioned discussions with the institutions and the teachers about their future school careers if they continued their studies in vocational or high school. However, although these pupils were interested in continuing their studies in high school, teachers and consultants tried to guide them to the vocational school. The participants explained it from two perspectives. First, students assumed that teachers wanted to prevent their failure because of their own perception of the skills and Finnish language competence of students, as high school with focus on theoretical subjects is more difficult than vocational school, which focuses more on the occupation and practice. Secondly, they assumed that teachers might consciously guide them to vocational school. Ultimately, the students in these cases asserted themselves, and agreements were made with the teachers for them to be able to go to high school.

The Finnish school system is open and flexible. Flexibility means that students can continue their education in any age, even after taking breaks from it. This organizational structure can also be seen as a sign of equality. In one interview (Table 2, quote A10), there was a critical comment of the teacher's assessment considering the equality of treatment in the case of language challenges such as those experienced by non-native speakers. In addition, students, especially in higher education, perceived that the reason for this behavior of teachers in relation to language was due to an assumption. Teachers assumed, they felt, that someone who has been accepted to university has the same level of language proficiency as the local students. Obviously, the teachers' perception was not in line with the students' perception of their abilities, interests, and especially their language skills. On the other hand, it was noticeable that language skills depended on the age of arrival of the FGMFSs in Finland. If a child of migrant parents was born in Finland or moved to Finland at an early age, he or she would probably not have a language problem. Also, such students would have greater social capital in the form of social relationships as opposed to FGMFSs who migrated later in their lives (from 11 to 18 years of age). The school and the university as institutions were judged to be equal in their organization. This equity was recognized as a high value in the host country and very often seen as a clear contrast to the country of origin. However, this meant based on the interviews that some students worked harder and were more stressed than others as well.

**Table 2.**  
*Institutional Values*

Interview	Quotes	Open coding	Axial coding
A2	"... when I was at secondary school. ... My grades were not good because I did not have any motivation to study. ... my teacher always said to me do not go to high school, go to the vocational school, because it's better for you. I do not know why she told me that, ... maybe she did not believe that I could go to high school ... she wanted to make it shorter for me like after that I can get a job and be like a nurse. I do not know maybe she knew better than me."	-Grades have not been good -No motivation to study -Teacher told her not to go to high school -Not sure why this option should be the best -Vocational school advised	-Different perceptions on the abilities -Equity/discrimination - Uncertainty -No encouragement
A5	"... I have really nice teachers. Of course, you cannot always get along with all of your teachers, I always had like a good relationship with my	-Relationship between teachers and students - Good teachers -Modeling for the future	-Student teacher relationship - Role model

	teachers, and I think that made me to become a teacher too.”		-Teachers as an identity agent
A6	“... From 7 to 9 I had a teacher who motivated me as much as my mother ... She had meetings with my mother at least ten times that I did not know about, telling my mother that he has potential abilities ... and actually because of her I went to high school and she made me to go to high school.”	- Meetings between teachers and parents - Teacher gives positive feedback - Being responsible - Positive influence	- Family and school relation -Encouragement - Equity - Role of mother
A7	“My teachers did not treat me in any especial way ... treated me as an equal, and they did not treat me bad nor try to especially help me. Teachers treated me good not because I was a foreigner, but because I was a good student ... For those of us who had not been good in everything or something, then teachers helped them more in case of Finnish language if they did not understand some of the concepts.”	- Similar treatment according to performance - Support from teachers	- Equity - Support from teachers
A9	“My teachers were so good and helped me ... I remember ... teachers divided the book for me and told me that you can read these pages not all of them as these subjects have a lot of contexts in Finnish, and also their behavior was so good to me.”	- Help from teachers - Good behavior of the teacher	- Support - Equity
A10	“In my vocational school, teachers do not pay attention that you do not know the language as Finnish students. ... They should consider that our language is not as good as other Finns, and it is difficult for us and pay attention to this when they are grading. They do not give you a feeling that you are a little bit different from other Finns, ... you could not see yourself different, but it has also a negative aspect. The negative aspect is that you always in stress. It could be equity from their view point, but equity could be considered when my mother tongue also is Finnish, but I am not such a person in a same level with other Finns.”	-Different perception on equity for teachers and FGMFSs - Evaluation -Positive aspect of equity: no differences - Negative aspects of equity: stress	- Perception of value by teachers and FGMFSs - Equity from two lenses
A11	“... School made me love the subjects, and there was respect for the students, respect, the teacher was respecting us ... you felt like you are important... my teacher ... she was an angel ... when I entered the high she made me what I am, I mean she made me totally love chemistry with everything”.	-Creating interest in subject - teacher influence - Respect - Teacher and identity of FGMFSs	- Value: respect - Role model - Teacher as an identity agent
A12	“... teachers especially who are in vocational school motivated me a lot ... I remember they were always, you know, supporting me... they were talking, walking, and telling me what to do ... They know that there are these language issues ... and they always made sure that, if it is about group work, there is someone who is with me so I was not staying alone, ...”	- Encouragement -Vocational school teachers were supportive -Teacher responsibility and taking care -Relationship between teachers and students	- Support -Encouragement - Equity
A13-1	“I think some teachers encouraged me, not all the teachers, because I spoke very good Finnish and I was like Finnish students, but I knew Arabic. It was a very good combination, and they tried to push me and other students told me like you are going to be a very much needed person in the future.”	- Motivation -Teacher's encouragement - Encouraged by other students	-Encouragement - Attitudes and identity
A13-2	“... when I was in the middle school, I was ... a good student ... I wanted to go to high school. ... when I was in 9th grade, one teacher who said to me, ‘Are you sure you want to go to high school ... Finnish is not your first language?’ at that moment, I was like you do not say that to me because it is like my first language she said, ‘Yes, but it’s going to be hard,’ and I was like, no I am good and will apply for high school, and I did not have any idea to go to vocational school. They think because you have an	- Good student - Teacher perception different on language -Vocational school advised -Different perception on FGMFSs’ ability and their strength	Different assessment of the performance - Perception on ability of FGMFSs - Support and equity or discrimination

	extra language it's a barrier for you and gets hard for you ...”		
A15	“When I got good grade and I could handle my courses at university, it made my classmates (Finnish) wonder, and they thought like how she can make it as a foreigner. But it is not like that in view point of my teacher. Each time when this teacher saw me, he mentioned this sentence ... “I put away my hat for you”, it means I respect you, you are a foreigner, but you have a lot of motivation and put much effort to do your studies.	- FGMFSs' ability - Motivation - Positive feedback from teacher - Respect from teacher	- Respect - Encouragement - Teacher's role

### Category Three: Friendship (Interpersonal Relationships)

Through the open and then axial coding, some of the following key words emerged: challenges in friendship, cultural barriers and friendship, friendship meaning, role model, friend and integration, academic performance and friendship, language, collectivism, and individualism. Therefore, friendship (interpersonal relationship) emerged as a third selective category. The interviews conducted in the course of this study pointed out the importance of having friends as a significant factor, not only for academic support but also for cultural and social integration. Moreover, the participants saw friends as a way to enhance their language skills, as well as the way they think, study, and work, too. The results in terms of friendship were very different. In general, friendship was considered very important and desirable, but the fulfillment and implementation of this wish was expressed as being very difficult for some. Bourdieu (1984) described this as access to social capital. Some had friends from school, and they got motivation and support from them; for them, it was always easy to find friends whenever necessary, no matter where they lived (Table 3, quotes A2, A10, and A14). Some explained that it was very difficult to find friends, particularly in high school, because of the course-based system, and others already had friends from hobbies or outside of school (Table 3, quote A12). On the one hand, some attributed this to the values and behaviors of the Finns, and they felt that Finns are introvert (Table3, quote A9). On the other hand, they saw their migration background as the reason. For some, it was also a stress not to make any friends (Table 3, quote A1). Some could not keep up contact with colleagues or classmates outside of university or work, and the friendship was limited to those places (Table 3, quotes A9 and A15). Another had friends (Table 3, quote A10), but did not share the same values with them, and pointed out that there were differences concerning behavior and humor based on cultural differences.

**Table 3.**  
*Friendship (Interpersonal Relationship)*

Interview	Quotes	Open coding	Axial coding
A1	“First of all, I felt a lot of shame like ashamed of myself because I had moved from ... and I thought people like judge me because of (migration) this and ... well, in general, even though I made an effort to forget about this, I still felt like very inadequate. ... and always I felt like stressful, and it was unpleasant.”	- Feeling shame and stress in contacting people - Perception of himself as a foreigner	- Friendship means stress - Perception of himself as a foreigner
A2	“I think my friends motivated me, because I had my friends all in Finnish, they were from good families ..., and they all wanted to go to the university, so I think it was the biggest motivation for me as I wanted to be like them.”	- Friends motivate him - Friends wanted to go to university	- Role model - Motivation
A9	“I do not have a lot of Finnish friends; I just have my old colleagues that sometimes I meet rarely. I think Finnish are people that are so introverted, and they are in among themselves. Getting friends among Finnish is so hard for me ... we are so close when we are at work and ... but our relation and connection is just at work environment not outside our workplace.”	- Hard to get friends - Friends from work - No close friends - Perception of Finns as introverted	- Perception of friendship is different - Friendship and culture
A10	“... at school I have some Finnish friends. All my classmates are my friends ... we are going outside for lunch. I get help from ... we are friends but ... still we have cultural	- Having Finnish friends	- Friendship and culture - Humor

	differences. ... They laugh at something that is not funny to me, and I could not laugh. I have tried to be integrated, but as I told you, I could not lie and laugh at something that it is not funny to me and I cannot just laugh as they laugh.”	- Cultural differences in friendship - Different kinds of humor	
A12	“I had friends, but they were not from high school and mostly in vocational school, and the friends that I had liked were from outside school ... like from somewhere else, like from playing football and something like that. I think it was really hard to get to know Finns ...	-Friends from outside of high school  - Hard to get friends from high school	-Friendship and institution
A14	“For me it is easy to get Finnish friends ... I still have friends that I knew from the age of five that are my best friends ... I got to know them when I was five. They are my best friends. ... it affected my integration. ... They give me another view of life. I always thought I am going to be at the same level with boys, girls, and everyone.	- Friendship and age of arrival - Integration and learning from friends - Adjusting with friends, hope	- Friendship and integration - Friendship and modeling
A15	“...To be honest, to be friends with Finnish is not easy. When I studied in university, generally, I had a good relationship with Finnish students, and I asked them (for) help and they really helped me. But our friendship was just about our study inside the university, and it did not go further like to be with them outside the university. I have to say that the system here is based on the courses, and you just go to the course and come back, so it is not like a place that helps you to make friendship deeper.”	-Getting help from friends - Friendship limited to inside university -No close friendship	- Support -Friendship and institution

## Discussion

In this study, fifteen FGMFSs aged 20–30 shared their experiences and perceptions on their way to university, their transition to it, and being at the university. Using and following the steps of GT, three main categories for this study emerged: family values, institutional values, and friendship. These categories have been perceived and experienced by the participants, they have played a significant role in their breaking through certain social patterns and moving on successfully, entering higher education institutions, and finding their way in the Finnish host society. These categories help to understand what is happening during this journey and where further activities of the host country are necessary to support more students to pursue an academic career. The linkage among these three categories is explained by openness and being open-minded. Openness emerged as a core category which describes the latent pattern of this data-driven study.

Family values describe the attitudes, ideas, and beliefs which a person inherits from his or her parents. The cultural imprint of the family affects the family structure, family culture, and the hierarchy within the family; thus, it affects the self-image of how one positions oneself within a society. An essential imprint in all cultures within a family or within a society is to be successful. Success can be divided into material success (earning a lot of money, building a house), ethical success (i.e., I’m always honest, I do not get offended), religious success (i.e., I will not reject my religion, I follow the instructions inherent in my religion) or cognitive success (I want to study).

One factor in the family, the encouragement and support of parents, especially mothers, is what appears to play an important role in adolescence. In this study, although some mothers had not even attended school, they always encouraged their children to continue learning and succeed at school. The encouragement and emotional support from mothers was mentioned by 8 of the 15 participants, which strongly identified the importance of their mother’s encouragement and emotional support during their children’s study at schools, even in higher education. They compared the situation in their origin countries with the new opportunities in the host society, and they acted consciously to help their children to be successful and take the opportunities offered in the host society. The

perception of inequality in education, especially for women, in their countries of origin compared with the host society also played an important role. The role of father and even grandfather also emerged from the data, which showed how they took care of their children's schooling and academic career. However, one negative aspect of parental involvement was that some parents used their children as translators or language brokers (see Table 1). Here, we see deeply-rooted expectations also coming from their culture, that children fulfill certain duties. These situations are seen both positively and negatively. On the positive side, the children felt more responsible and liked being helpful; but, they experienced it negatively as they could not have the same type of childhood as other classmates had. Being aware of this stressful situation for migrant children could lead to the development of activities that help and support them.

Overall, learning and education had a consistently high value in the families of the interviews. Education was validated by the family, and it was transferred to the children to appreciate education and set a goal for their life. Setting goals worked as a valuable dynamic for them to continue and not give up reaching them. This shows that the value of education based on family values is considered an instrument for upward mobility and enhancing one's social status. It is rooted in the families as a value to achieve success and emphasizes the belief in the power of education. The results presented here also agree with the findings of Schwartz (1992, 2014). For him, success represents an important value in the family. Here, we see families who believe in educational success for their children. They, themselves, can later benefit from this success, or focus on this success only for their children. These family values are thus transferred to the children.

Schools and universities are important institutions and are of great value in Western democracies. Yet, the school systems are inherently shaped by the behavior and reputation of teachers. This study found that all respondents considered school an important place where equality and justice exist. According to Mäkinen (2013, p. 1), "the Finnish education system combines high performance with widespread equality, justice and individual classroom support." This was very strongly perceived and mentioned by the interviewees. Educational institutions were seen as resources that support and help them develop their own skills and their hope for a better future. They recognized the expanded opportunities they would gain with education. What was appreciated by the FGMFSs at school and university, and the focus of all the interviews, was the role of the teachers and the quality of interaction with them and, in some cases, with their parents. The value of equality was also evident in all the interviews. However, equity without the teachers' consideration and efforts did not appear to be very influential. They appreciated the role of the teachers, who had a strong influence on them, more than the emphasis on equality. It turned out that they felt that educational institutions view and respect all students in the same way without regard to their personal and cultural backgrounds. However, FGMFSs often do not have the same cultural and pedagogical background that other Finnish students bring from home. Most participants also identified language and cultural barriers as very significant. For example, the difficulty of asking questions was mentioned. At the same time, they emphasized the interaction with teachers who ask questions, encourage them to ask, and not to be shy but confident. They also indicated that language difficulties often lead FGMFSs to vocational school or to subjects such as mathematics and physics. In these subjects, according to the interviewees, fluency in the Finnish language is not as essential for understanding as in other subjects.

Self-responsibility and independence were, they noted, some of the values that most of them acquired from their school and, especially, their university education. When asked about what they learned during their time as students, they mentioned that learning had to be more independent, and that they had to be more responsible for their own academic affairs. These were seen as particularly important. They mentioned that this is a key element in the Finnish education system, each person is responsible for himself or herself. They explained it on the basis of the culture of study and work in Finnish society. They recognized this and compared it to cultures of their home country.

According to the interviews, teachers were perceived mainly as helpful and fair. The teachers taught everyone the same way to, they noted. The teachers showed the values of the society which are based on equality and are exhibited in schools every day. It is necessary to show these values continuously. These results also correspond with what Sahlberg (2011) described as the important features of the Finnish system. These include a high level of trust in teachers and principals as professionals, encouragement to try new approaches, a culture of respect, diversity and trust, and free access to educational institutions for all students (Bakalar, 2017; Sahlberg, 2012; Yigit & Tatch, 2017) as features of an equitable society and school system. Nevertheless, two different perceptions seem to exist in the Finnish educational system. Teachers, based on the equality policy, try to help and support FGMFSs in their own way; however, it seems that this perception is not experienced in the same way by FGMFSs. As previously mentioned, FGMFSs experienced stress and pressure to work harder regarding their education. This is an important issue that should be considered by the education system to help understand how the functioning of the system is experienced and perceived by FGMFSs.

Furthermore, the results indicate that there are still too many misunderstandings about the institutions based on the background of the parents. Their experiences in their countries of origin have been very different. It is important that there is continuous communication between parents and teachers. It could be helpful if the values could be considered in a wider context and expand these values to their families, since students are not separate from their family values and culture.

This study showed that the relationship with Finnish friends has helped FGMFSs to integrate culturally and academically, affecting their academic performance and sense of belonging. The way in which friendship with Finnish students and classmates within the educational system has made them more self-confident helps them to expand their knowledge of the best ways of thinking, studying, and working. They also stressed the importance of personal responsibility and independence during their university studies. They learned this on the one hand from friends and colleagues, but also from the teaching methods used in schools and colleges.

However, the study results indicated that finding friends and making friends abroad as a child or as a teenager can be associated with many difficulties. Often, there is a lack of access to certain networks, social capital as Bourdieu (1986) described it, and sometimes the knowledge is missing about the appropriate behaviors needed to make friends. A lack of language skills is often another obstacle to making friends quickly and easily. Explanations for the difficulties of making friends were often linked to the behavior of the Finnish society. Finns, according to some participants, are cautious and self-centered. Furthermore, different values regarding behavior, use of alcohol, or relationships were noted as not consistent with the culture of the host country for many migrants. According to these findings, there are clear differences in these values between cultures from the Middle East and Northern Europe. The study also showed that there are different meanings of friendship among immigrants (collectivist societies versus individualistic societies). But, the difficulties with friendship can also be explained by one's self-perception as a foreigner. This was described as an obstacle to greater interaction with Finnish students. On the other hand, those who had made friends described this as particularly valuable. Others, who had made few or no friends, found this burdensome and would very much have liked to make friends and participate more in the life of society. All of the participants pointed to the importance of friendship and social relations. For those who had close relationships with Finns, they improved their social capital, which helped them to improve their cultural and social integration at university and in everyday life. The data also showed that this increased their self-efficacy and motivation to continue their studies and to overcome barriers, challenges, and social patterns that emerge, especially in relation to language and the culture of study and work.

It is noticeable that this study found no remarkable differences in the perceptions and experiences of FGMFS with different cultural backgrounds and different nationalities in relation to the three main issues raised. The main categories of family value, institutional value and friendship (interpersonal relationship) emerged from all fifteen interviews. There are similarities and differences in their perceptions and experiences, but they cannot be traced back to their different nationalities and ethnicities. Participants from the Middle East as well as from Africa, Vietnam and Russia, all drew attention to the importance of friendship and networking, of learning the Finnish language with more focus on academic writing, emotional encouragement by their parents, of belief in their abilities and of hard work in achieving higher education and its goals. The importance of the role of teachers and values in educational institutions in achieving and successfully continuing higher education as equally emphasized. The main differences emerging between the participants were related to gender, which will be discussed in the next study of the doctoral thesis.

## Conclusion

All three categories described here, family values, institutional values, and friendship, provided insightful answers to the research question of what a FGMFS perceives and experiences on the way to, in transition, and at university and helps to better understanding of what makes these students successful. The connecting element between all these categories is openness. These connections can therefore be created through openness and open-mindedness. This makes it possible to learn and experience new things.

Families who migrate need to be open to the new circumstances, open to contact with schools, and open to questioning and talking with teachers. Basic values in families, such as success and achievement, are used to take education seriously and to engage in these ways. Encouragement and motivation are essential characteristics for success. The family can open the doors for their children to make friends in the host society and vice versa, and thus improve interpersonal relationships.

The institution must be open to the migrants who come from different cultures and backgrounds. Institutions can support families and friendships and their values by organizing more interaction with families and activities that promote interaction and interpersonal relationships among students. It is also important for institutions that parents learn more about the education system. They should also learn more about the values underlying the institutions, such as justice, equality, trust, responsibility and respect. This, in turn, can later foster friendships between Finns and students with migrant backgrounds and, thus, increase integration. Promoting friendship in institutions will improve academic performance and success, while insuring the social integration of migrant students.

Furthermore, making close friendships does not seem easy for FGMFSs, who do not immigrate to the host country as a child, but this could also be improved through more intercultural awareness among families on both sides. Society must be open to new fellow citizens, and of course, future fellow citizens must also be open to the new society. This was confirmed by the interviewees as an important issue. In order to also support other students with migrant backgrounds on this journey, so that social patterns (opinions, habits, attitudes) can be

adapted and they successfully complete their studies at the university, the aspect of openness must be taken into account. Openness connects the categories with each other. To achieve this, the following points should be considered: 1. Strengthening parents (education and awareness) to support their children and see education as an attainable key to success for participation and access to society. The support could include their efforts on own education as well and particularly in learning the Finnish language; 2. Continuing efforts to promote and train the intercultural competence of teachers to learn more about the cultural differences of pupils; 3. Continuous persistence of institutional values such as equality and equity; 4. Recognition and further strengthening of the important value of schools and universities as educational institutions; and 5. Promoting various strategies and activities within and outside institutions where children and young people can make friends and connect with society. However, the central focus must always be on emphasizing the equality of all and ensuring that these principles and values are openly implemented, lived, and respected.

### Disclosure Statement

The author declares that she has no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this paper”.

### Biographical Note

The author is studying at PhD level and this study is a part of her PhD thesis. She has interest in migration and education studies. The multicultural and teaching background of the author has raised the interest in cultural and social perspective of education and educational institutions.

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**PUBLICATION**  
**II**

**From challenge to empowerment: Cross-cultural experiences and perceptions of first-generation migrant family students**

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## From Challenge to Empowerment: Cross-Cultural Experiences and Perceptions of First-Generation Migrant Family Students

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**Abstract:** Although research on migrant students and their education exists, there is a lack of knowledge in Finland about the experiences and perceptions of successful First-Generation Migrant Family Students (FGMFS) in their educational path and transition from school to higher education. Therefore, this study aims to identify the main factors by which these students can successfully shape their educational pathway. Fifteen FGMFS pursuing higher education in Finland were interviewed, and, with the help of Grounded Theory (GT), three main categories — Individualism and Collectivism, Gender Role, and Critical Thinking — were identified as significant in coping with cross-cultural challenges and continuing their study in higher education successfully. The results of this study can help educational institutions create empowering environments to enhance the learning of FGMFS.

**Keywords:** critical thinking, first-generation migrant family students, gender role, grounded theory, higher education, individualism/collectivism.

Education plays a major role in preparing students with a migrant background for the possibility of employability and a better life. Second-generation immigrants are already significantly better educated than their parents (OECD, 2010). However, the educational outcomes of many children in this second-generation population group are not equal to that of the local population. Airas et al.'s (2019) report on Finnish students with immigrant backgrounds confirms this. Thus, strategies must be developed to promote the economic, social, cultural, and political integration of migrants and their children. From the societal point of view, the children and young people of the migrant families must be integrated into the educational system and are also welcomed in educational institutions.

However, few researchers have focused on the skills, challenges, and experiences of First-Generation Migrant Family Students (FGMFS) on their educational path to and within higher education. For example, according to Makrooni (2019), FGMFS agree that they are taught with equality in Finland; however, there is an indication that FGMFS and their teachers perceive equality differently when it comes to understanding the actual ability of these students to continue their studies in high school or vocational school. Nevertheless, little knowledge about these pupils, their capacities, skills, and challenges is available to educators and staff in the Finnish educational system, especially what makes them successful in the cross-cultural context that they experience. In studying students with migrant backgrounds, it is also essential to know and take into account their family and community culture to understand and help these students or FGMFS to develop the social and cross-cultural skills and capacities that can make them successful in their education and also find their position in the host country as well-educated people.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how FGMFS experience and perceive their educational pathways at school and university in the cross-cultural context in Finland and

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discover the interdependent factors that made them successful in their education. In this case, sub-questions were used to investigate how they perceived their cross-cultural experiences on their educational journey, how these perceptions and experiences influenced the development of their success as an FGMFS in higher education, and how their cross-cultural experiences and perceptions on their educational pathway have shaped their new position and their identity. In such, this study provides data to formulate these strategies better and to set objectives for the target group of FGMFS.

### **First-Generation Students in Higher Education**

Many researchers have studied first-generation college students (FGCS) with and without immigrant backgrounds in the United States, but the results of their studies might be different in Finland. The research on FGCS focuses on different topics, like parents who have had limited access to university education (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003), the grade of ambitions (Abdul Rahim & Azman, 2010), the lack of self-confidence before arriving at college compared to their peers (Saenz et al., 2007), staying less connected to campus and university life, and actively maintaining family and community roles and responsibilities (Ecklund, 2013). Forrest Cataldi et al. (2018) point out that, in the United States, their graduation rates are lower compared to students from college-educated parents. Furthermore, a larger percentage of first-generation university students in the United States come from lower-income households than students of the continuing generation, and they correlate negatively with academic performance and the completion of degrees (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Delima (2019) pointed out that better understanding of their lives and their learning experiences is important, and the knowledge that this group of students brings to the classroom needs to be developed and combined with the subjects taught. Castillo-Montoya (2017) found in her study that using previous sociopolitical knowledge of their life experiences can be useful for student learning. Migrant students often have learning difficulties and problems with academic writing, and the challenges for these students in terms of their emotional and social development are characterized by language difficulties and acculturation processes (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2001). However, it is also possible to use the diversity of the campus for successfully developing new teaching strategies (Castillo-Montoya, 2019). Despite these problems, some FGCS with migrant backgrounds are successful. They tend to obtain more university degrees than the locals (Baum & Flores, 2011), and the enrollment of students from migrant backgrounds brings linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity to schools and universities, although these are often ignored or overlooked (Rassool, 1999). Horowitz (2017) mentioned that it is important for the teacher to make this group of students more visible in the classroom and so become their ally in the classroom as a teacher. However, overall, “Most of the literature is focusing on the struggles and the negative outcomes of FGCS, but not many studies have focused on the experiences of the students who have been successful” (Demetriou et al., 2017, p. 35). Further, the results of the Airas et al.’s report (2019) indicate that Finnish students of immigrant and foreign backgrounds have problems attaining, continuing, and finishing higher education, even though they aspire to be successful in higher education.

Indeed, access to higher education is an integral part of improving the lives, opportunities, and possibilities of FGMFS, which will subsequently affect their well-being and improve their social mobility and success in work and life. However, there is a lack of knowledge about how FGMFS experience and perceive their educational journey (school and university), and how they are developing their cross-cultural capacity, and how they find their new position and become successful. Makrooni (2019) found three main categories—family values, institutional values, and friendship—which provided insightful answers of what FGMFS perceived, experienced, and made them successful during their educational journey to higher education in Finland.

Still, many aspects of FGMFS' life stories are not fully understood, including how they perceive and experience their educational pathway in the cross-cultural context and how these intercultural educational experiences influence their educational success, position, and identity in the context of Finland. Such an understanding will help educational institutions to develop culturally relevant pedagogy for migrant family students to further improve their educational success. These experiences can be used as a basis for promoting the quality of educational institutions; and as a basis for policymakers in creating inclusive environments and policies, from school to higher education, to support FGMFS' learning.

## **Research Process**

### ***Research Method***

This study uses Grounded Theory (GT) that Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed as a research method. With the help of GT, a theory or construct can be generated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For this purpose, data were systematically collected and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Existing conceptualizations should not be used in GT. This method allows researchers to find possible data without pre-assumptions. To ensure a high degree of openness, GT was used to discover and describe hidden patterns and constructions of FGMFS' experiences and perceptions during their successful educational path. In this study, which is part of a doctoral thesis, the emerging theory is limited in the domain of understanding the investigated phenomena in this particular part.

### ***Data Collection***

The registration office, the intranet pages, various faculty members, and the university's Facebook page were used to send an announcement to all students in April 2017. Five students responded; three of them were identified as members of a target group, and most interviewees were identified through a snowball effect. The precisely described announcement created trust in the research and made the aims of the interview clear (Buchanan et al. 1988). Fifteen students (eight female and seven male) were selected because they met the criteria as FGMFS (students in higher education who belong to migrant families and their parents did not have higher education degrees) and were available for the interviews. All participants, except four, came from the second largest university in Finland. Participants' ages ranged between 25 and 38 years old. Eleven participants were from the Middle East [Iran and Iraq], two from Africa, one from Asia, and one from Russia. There was no presupposition in the selection of participants from a specific group or country, and the majority of Iranians and Iraqis among participants was due to the use of snowball method. Four interviewees had graduated, and the rest were studying various subjects at the master and bachelor levels. One was born in Finland, four arrived between 1 and 5 years old, three between 10 and 13 years old and seven between 16 and 18 years old.

A 90 to 110-minute interview was conducted with each participant from May 2017 to September 2018. For most of the interviews English was used and only three were in their mother tongue. The interviews were recorded using an audio file and then transcribed. According to the grounded theory approach, no attempt was made to verify an existing hypothesis, but rather to follow the principles of grounded theory. An attempt was made to develop a theory based on the data (Rupsiene & Pranskuniene, 2010). As further data did not lead to any new concepts or dimensions, theoretical saturation was reached after 15 interviews were conducted (Houlton & Walsh, 2017).

Data were gathered in an open-ended question format and referred to the experiences and perceptions throughout their educational careers (school and university), always concerning their immigrant background. The questions covered such topics as cross-cultural conflicts and challenges, the influence of school and university on their attitudes, their behavior during their studies, differences they perceived or experienced compared to other Finnish students, their perception of themselves as FGMFS on their educational path, their perception of the way others have positioned them, and strategies in dealing with these two different cultures and values.

The stories of the interviewees were collected and evaluated, and a guideline was developed to get a framework. During this process, further questions emerged related to their lives and the people that have been around them: teachers, friends, relatives, peers, and parents. They were also asked about their emotions, values, challenges, and conflicts caused by the different cultures with which they were faced. This process was done 15 times until no additional relevant data were found, and theoretical saturation was achieved (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018). The writing of memos was carried out to establish Grounded Theory in the long term and to establish relationships for the next interview. The focus was on the most essential codes that appeared in the previous interviews. Based on the memos, sub-questions were used to investigate how they perceive their cross-cultural experiences about their educational path, how these perceptions and experiences influence their educational pathway development and success as FGMFS in higher education, and how they perceive and experience schools and universities in shaping their new position and developing their identity in an intercultural context.

### ***Data Analysis***

For the data analysis, open, axial, and selective coding was carried out (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Through open coding, concepts and key phrases were identified, and data were broken down into conceptual components to help the researcher's reflection on them. The data from each participant was "constantly compared" for similarities. Through coding and constant comparison, ideas are generated, and the conceptual connections between the individual categories are found (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Selective coding was used to integrate the main categories. This continuous process with the different forms of coding helped to bring the data to a conceptual level and to develop and find the properties of the respective categories and relations among them (Holton & Walsh, 2017).

Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were carried out following Strauss and Corbin (1994). The first step of data analysis was to do the open coding; for example, one interviewee pointed out (see A2b, Table 2), "My parents were happy and proud of me, respected me ... but maybe also they got a little bit scared because now I had the power to do something and had more freedom to myself." The open coding was "value of education" and "feeling scared of having power and freedom for children," and the axial code was "changing role and positions through education." These coding steps, rereading the transcriptions, and writing memos were used to find the patterns that were reflected in the data. The final step, selective coding, was applied to integrate the main categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) pointed out that in a continuously and comparative process of the four steps they developed, the theory will emerge and show saturation. The steps are: "1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, 2) integrating categories and their properties, 3) delimiting the theory, and 4) writing the theory" (p. 105). Realizing a consistent story to understand the cross-cultural context of their educational journey and being successful in the three categories that emerged were related to each other.

## Research Findings

In selective coding, the main categories are identified by authenticated relationships between the subcategories. In this study, individualism and collectivism (I-C), gender role, and critical thinking were identified as three main categories relating to what FGMFS perceived and experienced in a cross-cultural context from the time that they started their education in Finland until their higher education. These three categories explain not only the cross-cultural challenges they experienced but also their abilities and skills to deal with cultural and social contradictions.

### *Category One: Individualism and Collectivism*

Being an FGMFS also often means being the first to be confronted with certain specific requirements of the culture in the host country, both in the private sphere and in the school and university environment. There are no concrete instructions from parents for these situations. The FGMFS fall back on what they experience in their own culture to master life. These experiences can be very different, particularly if the cultural gap is significant. The interviewees of this study all came from predominantly collectivist societies (Middle East and Asia). Through the life story of interviewees, the difference between the host culture and the original culture was mentioned repeatedly. Through coding processes, the following key axial codes emerged: individual rights versus group demands, parents' expectation and demands, community expectations and judgments, following one's own cultures and roles, dependent vs. independent, uncertainty in relationships and friendships, and the role of culture in changing attitudes and perceptions.

The interview results show that fulfilling the expectations of parents, relatives, and one's own community in the host society were prioritized. The harmony and relationship with the collective were in the foreground, and even though the mother tongue plays a vital role at home, there were not many conversations between adults and children (quote A2, Table 1).

It is important not to make parents disappointed (quote A5a, Table 1). The demands and expectations of the parents were prioritized so as not to disappoint them; in return, what they want for themselves or what they believe in was put aside (quote A10, Table 1). Parents' expectations that children should help, e.g., with the translator (quote A11, Table 1), were also defined by the parents' demands on the children and the responsibility of children for their parents. In these moments, the individual rights of children who might not be available and attend school were ignored.

The pressure on the students was also evident in other situations, such as friendship, with whom they were going out (quote A9, Table 1), or being friends with the opposite sex (quote A10, Table 1). According to interviewees, for some parents in their communities, friendship was perceived as a threat because these friendships could cause a change in attitudes, leadership, and individual expressions of the lives of their children (quote A13a, Table 1).

Parents' expectations of their children and young adults in terms of marriage, friendship, and the way they lead their own lives were opposite to those of Finnish society, and the parents appear to expect that their children keep up with the dominant traditions and values of their own culture (quote A13b, Table 1). Thus, marriage and having children were expected and that avoiding that was called being selfish (quotes A13c, A14, Table 1).

Interviewees also pointed out that learning about Finnish culture and Finnish attitudes has helped them to organize their daily lives and to set the goal of being different from their prior selves. Success factors were mentioned as the responsibility to change their lives and to build strong relationships with themselves to look towards a better future through hard work;

they also focused on the organization of their lives rather than victimization and holding on past difficult circumstances (quote A14a, Table 1).

When FGMFS are confronted with the host culture, they carry with them the knowledge and values of their own culture. Because they live in the field of tension between two cultures, their positions, their identities, and understanding of both cultures develop, which also encourages integration and belonging. FGMFS learn to discuss and describe their cross-cultural situation and their origins anew through the many and varied influences of educational institutions. The process of change regarding their cultural identity, and their new role and position in society, has been described here in the context of the experiences of dimension I-C.

**Table 1**

*Individualism-Collectivism*

Interview	Quotation
A2	"...We spoke only and watch TV in our language and also with my family, and I did not talk to adults in the discussion at home..."
A5a	"...I am really relaxed and do not care about the grades. But I would not want to make my parents disappointed ... because my parents were monitoring my grades..."
A9	"...They [the family] thought if I go outside with my friends [and] I do something wrong. They thought that I cannot have a right of choice..."
A10	"...I know that my family does not like that, for example, if I have a girlfriend, my family did not know about it, because I do not like to make them sad..."
A11	"...I should take care of my family and be with [my mother] as a translator in every meeting for my mom to social, to bank .... I could not enjoy my own age. I was taking care of her things [and have] to feel responsibility more than [they do] ..."
A13a	"...My parents encouraged me to have Finnish friends .... Some other parents still do not accept to make Finnish friends because they are afraid that they will change you and make you part of the society when you always have to remember your background and your real culture and what is your real culture..."
A13b	"...Finnish society is an individual culture, and we have like a collective culture, so you are expected to be part of the group and part of the little community, and then you are expected to get married and have kids and very traditional stuffs .... There are values and traditions we have to keep up with even though you are in Finland ...."
A13c	"...If you are doing for yourself, it's like you are selfish because you have a role in the group, and the role is to get married and have kids..."
A14	"...I want to say that if we put ourselves first, it does not mean that you are selfish.... It does not matter if you have this healthy selfishness .... Actually, people just focus too much on others, and what others think about them and why they think like that, so they just think about fulfilling their expectations, and they don't focus on themselves, and that's why our people were miserable.... We have this pain in ourselves."
A14a	"...I am one person, but why I am different from tomorrow. I got it from Finnish culture. ... I have very Finnish attitudes on life like Europeans. I try to tell immigrants... to get in school and do this and that. ... [and] don't have a victim mentality.... Instead of blaming them whatever happened, you take the responsibility of changing and building a good relationship with self as the longest relationship is a relationship with ourselves...."

### ***Category Two: Gender Role***

The results of the interviews indicated that gender role and gender inequity was one of the selective categories. Through the open coding and, subsequently, the axial coding, the following key axial codes emerged: Gender and following traditional roles, gender inequity, changing patterns of life and thinking, gender and independence, higher education and changing role.

This traditional understanding of roles for young girls or women was evident in many different situations. Women and girls need to be protected and cannot be far or abroad when they are studying (quote A14d, Table 2); they have to be at home at a certain time, they can only go to a party or event up to a certain time. Going out with friends is limited, and freedom is applied differently (quotes A5c, A9, Table 2), but being home early hinders social life in the host society with different cultural expectations (quote A5c, Table 2). The families reinforce the traditional roles for women. That includes marriage, childcare, and household affairs (quotes A2a, A13b, Table 2). There is a very traditional understanding of the role of men. Men have to protect women and have a specific role (quotes A5a, A14a, Table 2). For the interviewees, independence caused conflicts and dissatisfaction amongst their families. Female interviewees have experienced tangible differences in treatment, expectations, and roles between home and society. This often leads to inner-family conflicts (quotes A2c, A5b, A13b, A14d, Table 2) that vary depending on the cultural and individual background, openness, or personal convictions of the parents. Although interviews demonstrated the value of education and encouragement to study from parents, some parents seem to fear that their daughters will have access to higher education because of the resulting increased independence and freedom for their daughters (quote A2b, Table 2).

Additionally, males are confronted with these traditional attitudes. On the one hand, the parents were proud that their sons were studying, but had difficulties with them leaving the family (as this was not so common in their own culture), as well as having friends of the opposite sex (quote A10, Table 1). Moreover, due to different cultural norms, men are not accustomed to talking about education at home or showing their feelings and emotions; this somehow creates distance between the parents and their sons (quote A1, Table 2). In the interviews, it was also pointed out that sons had difficulties at school and with learning the Finnish language, or often dropped out (quote A13a, Table 2).

However, the FGMFS not only break the traditional educational paths, but they also change and overcome traditional beliefs. They want to progress and do not want to experience similar roles as their mothers or other uneducated relatives (quotes A3a, A3b, Table 2). The female students at school experience gender equality. Teachers with intercultural awareness and encouragement played a significant role in this process (quote A14b, Table 2). In such an environment, female FGMFS want to study, be successful, and gain the same position and opportunities as men (quotes A3b, A13c, A14c, Table 2). Therefore, they must work hard to be successful, and they see education as a tool to gain power in life and to change educational and role patterns. For female FGMFS, the examination of their own roles that they experienced in contrast between family and society has an essential function in their identity development. Overall, despite facing cultural challenges and barriers, the chances of first-generation female students in Finland are considered good for improving gender equality and gender roles.

**Table 2**  
*Gender Role*

Interview	Quotation
A1	"...My parents did not talk about my education, because I did not want to talk about my problems .... My mom talked with my sister more than me...."

- A2a “...At weddings ..., I just look at girls at my age, they have children, ... do not work in any place ... do not have even high school diploma... and [that] makes me sad....”
- A2b “...My parents ... [are] happy and proud of me and respect me .... [It] is hard in Finland to get into a university. Also, they got a little bit scared because now I have the power to do something and had more freedom to myself...”
- A2c “...I want to move alone and get my own apartment... but my parents told me if you want to move it is ok, but it is not normal in our culture to live alone .... They resisted for a while, but then they accepted it....”
- A3a “...I did not like to be like my mom illiterate or like my other relatives that are not well educated ... just stayed at home, girls also ... are not so highly educated.... I wanted to progress and study....”
- A3b “...I wanted to show that as a woman I can also be successful .... Women can improve and progress and have higher education and work and be independent....”
- A5a “...My parents were afraid.... Girls in our culture and family have to be supposed and to be protected.... A Finnish lady helped me to move and live on my own....”
- A5b “...Gradually, after fighting in half a year, I got to move on my own when I started my university....”
- A5c “...My parents wanted me home before 10 pm... actually no social life with your friends ... When your friends say, ... let's go to drink... go to the student party ... I cannot .... My mom ... was waiting for me, so socially, it was so hard. At home, we had another cultural expectation....”
- A9 “...Freedom in my family [is viewed] as something else. ... If I go out with my friends, I do something wrong. ... I cannot have a right to choose .... They should decide....”
- A13a “...My brother had problems with school, so I was the good one who wanted to study. ... My parents were proud of me and lectured my brother. He did not like to go to school, did not study, ... no secondary degree. He now works at the restaurant....”
- A13b “...Women in [our] own society are not equal to men, so I did a lot of work to gain that.... I am very ambitious, ... want to study, ... be successful have my degree, ... be equal to a man because you are equal to a man and through your education. My family and my own community have been taught and strongly believe that the women are not equal .... It becomes a conflict if you say that it is not true....”
- A13c “...Our society treats boys and girls in different ways; they give boys more freedom. In a masculine society, you need to prove yourself [as a woman] somehow, and you need to work extra hard to earn to be equal....”
- A14a “...I saw the treatment of how in I had an equal raise up in Finland and living with Finns. However, when I grew up, I was faced with comments like I am a flower or you know a girl that should be protected ... from my family, so I knew culture is a power....”
- A14b “...In secondary school ... an amazing and smart teacher ... cared about the immigrant's children and mostly about the girls, ... and told me that girls like you with an education do not need anyone .... You have the power when you have an education, and that stuck in my mind ....”
- A14c “...People told me ... going to high school that is so hard .... You are not going to make it. I have good grades... and I am going to try. ... My friends are going there.... People told me you cannot do it ... because you are a girl, ... that gave me more power to show them or show myself....”
- A14d “...I won in one competition .... My family said congratulations, but you don't go anywhere without us. My older brother told me you are not going because you are a girl, and I am a boy. That was a breaking point. So, I decided to leave home....”

### ***Category Three: Critical Thinking***

Critical thinking (CT) was identified in this study as another important dimension. However, few researchers have focused on FGMFS or FGCS and critical thinking. Cognitive skills like comparing were used for their work and academic performance, as well as how hard one studied and worked and how many hours one had to invest to keep up with one's Finnish schoolmates. The comparison also leads to a high degree of self-regulation (quotes A4, A6, Table 3). How parents communicate at home and with their friends is very different from what FGMFS have learned from their education at school and university, and these differences are compared, explained, and analyzed.

Interviewees noted that the argumentation patterns and opinions would not contain different points of view at home, in contrast to the university environment (quote A2, Table 3). For some, discussion of cultural issues with their families was not a significant concern, and they felt that the presence of two cultures was a benefit that enabled them to see from different angles and think differently (quotes A12, A14, A13d, Table 3). Asking questions (included asking oneself) was also frequently mentioned, referring to their grades and studying (quote A4, Table 3), as well as asking questions and evaluating oneself for personal growth (quote A8, Table 3). It was also pointed out that in Finnish education, asking questions from kindergarten onwards helps to stimulate curiosity and in-depth thinking (quote A13a, Table3). Moreover, the critical role of higher education in questioning and openness in the discussion was pointed out and highlighted (quotes A13b, A2 Table 3). Furthermore, education and study have increased their self-confidence and self-efficacy (quotes A11, A13d, Table 3).

The use of cognitive skills for interviewees shows incredible development. Facione (2013) assumes that critical thinking is more than a list of cognitive abilities. Critical thinking is also referred to as a "disposition," which leads to the reverse conclusion that critical thinking is a ubiquitous and purposeful human phenomenon. Basically, the interviews were full of references to these cognitive skills and how valuable they were considered for one's life.

Critical thinking can be seen as an essential category in the development of one's own cross-cultural identity and finding one's position in society and their culture. The skills in argumentation and discussion helped FGMFS to indicate their own new position in the field of tension between one's own origins and the new culture, and in questioning and searching for logical reasons instead of accepting their position based solely on cultural norms (quote A13c, Table 3). They analyzed and explained their understanding of culture as sand in water, which can be shaped and not fixed forever like carved on the rock (quote A14, Table 3). This way of thinking and analyzing shows the ability to question critical aspects of the existing culture and the position that may be forced upon it.

**Table 3**  
*Critical Thinking*

Interview	Quotation
A2	"...Here at university, you have to think ...from different sides about the subject.... My family talked at home and with their friends with big and strong opinions without considering different views...."
A4	"... I have problems with [learning] stuff .... I did not get a good score ... and asking myself, is it because of the language? .... I came to the solution just by myself that to do something better ... get a good score and continuing schooling, encourage myself, ... worked harder, and I do not give up myself...."
A6	"...I had some challenges during my education. ... I always knew that anything like that, the only solution is myself and my behaviors, the solution is myself and my efforts...."

- A8 “...I like to analyze many things, specifically analyzing myself. Most of the time, I like to think about my actions, why I do, and how I react to something.”
- A11 “...Here education made me think you know thinking about information that I got, but in my home country, we just repeat the materials without understanding... I learned to like being independent, being strong, and trusting myself more.”
- A12 “... Discussion about cultural differences at home with family ..., parents ... you should do this, do not reject this.... To be honest, we do not see it as a problem of being in between two cultures. On the contrary, it has an advantage. We can see things in different ways, can always compare things... can choose ... compare to people who have only like one culture....”
- A13a “...Here they are teaching you from kindergarten to question everything, do not take anything like given to you. I argument much better than they [parents] do ... because I have the tools to have argumentation....”
- A13b “... University in Finland tries to concentrate on questioning everything, ... I question everything at the beginning .... I look at things from many different perspectives and not having the absolute answer. ... When I got to the university, I think I learned to discuss... accept the fact that something disagrees with me ... accept the fact that we think differently ....”
- A13c “...There are some structural atmospheres in the culture where have been created throughout the years .... they do not have any explanation for [many things]. ... they [community] are not willing to change their opinion, ... I want to prove my position just because they say that, ... but I am learning my position as an equal human being....”
- A13d “...When I went to high school, I realized that being different is my superpower....”
- A14 “...When I was young, I do not like my own culture and willing to be Finnish, but now...I see that there are both sides and I can mix the good sides. I realize that culture is changing all the time, and we determine the culture.... I realize that culture has not been carved in a rock, and you can break. It is like sand in water, and you can change it....”
- 

## Discussion

Makrooni (2019) described three important categories—institutional values, family values, and friendship—that help FGMFS to benefit from their educational journey to continue and complete their education. The important emerging conceptual element that links these categories is openness. Besides these categories, this study identifies three other vital categories that contribute to the academic success of FGMFS and help them to change and successfully develop preconceived patterns of their culture, roles, and thinking in the cross-cultural context. These include the culture-specific categories of individualism and collectivism, gender roles, and critical thinking.

The results for the first category tend to be similar to one main finding of Hofstede (2011), which is individualism versus collectivism. Individualism refers to personal goals and rights, while collectivism is more focused on group goals and demands, as well as how personal relationships are organized within the group. In their study, Schwartz et al. (2013) found that individualistic values are positively related to psychological and eudaimonic well-being. Yaman et al. (2010) and pointed out that Dutch mothers, in comparison to Turkish immigrant mothers, who belong to collectivist-oriented families exercise more authoritative control and do not show high respect for the autonomy of the children. These results were in line with the

findings of this study when the expectations of the family and one's community in the host country were mentioned in the interviews as expectations to be fulfilled with priority.

In collectivist cultures, groups and families are usually very large, and group ties are correspondingly strong. In individualistic cultures, on the other hand, individual self-realization and the nuclear family are prioritized; children learn to think in the I-form versus the We-form (Hofstede, 1983). Individual identity must be considered in close connection with a collective identity. Most researchers agree that Finland is an individualistic culture with strong institutional collectivism (Hofstede, 2011).

According to Gudykunst and Nishida (1999), the interaction of an individual's strength of cultural identity with cultural background influences his/her individualistic and collectivistic values. Gonzales et al. (2014) pointed out that identity is constructed because of the dual influences of home and host culture. At the same time, however, by perceiving and questioning the values of one's own family and culture due to the cultural dimension I-S, other values, norms, and social roles are newly learned and adopted. This, in turn, has an impact on the shaping of social relationships, on one's own behavior, on the way one communicates, and what one expects from one's family. Additionally, the family also influences them. When two different cultures form you, you should be empowered to make independent decisions and follow the path you believe in that is right. Berry et al. (2006) defined this process of cultural and psychological change, which arises from intercultural contacts, as acculturation.

The second category, gender roles, has the strongest and most lasting significance for the female respondents in this study and leads to significant changes in their lives, their self-identity, their role, and their position. They perceive different treatment and expectations only because of gender. They experience differences in social life and their roles in comparison with what they learned and experienced with their Finnish classmates and friends. Freedom has a different meaning in their own culture than in Finnish culture, because freedom in the Finnish context is positively loaded; in their own culture, the role and rights of women are usually negatively loaded. The results of the interviews show that they recognize the positive meaning of freedom and equality and want to live and be treated as such.

However, they want these changes not only for themselves but also for the whole community and society in which they live. To do this, they must be empowered to have the necessary skills, be independent, and have control over their own lives. They want to achieve these skills and new positions through higher education. Meanwhile, they appreciate their own culture and norms and see advantages of their own culture, but they are willing to change the factors that are contrary to what they have achieved in their educational journey in the host society. Very important and very effective, of course, is for women to achieve equality, independence, and freedom.

The male interviewees also want a different position and a different role. While they may be forced into specific roles, they are often not confronted with gender inequity. This confrontation was not particularly highlighted in the interviews by the men as opposed to the women, even though they still involve collectivistic cultures and norms, for example, in case of their relationship with the opposite sex and fulfilling their parents' expectations. However, also, they want to change their position from a migrant or refugee to a functioning and active citizen. They want to change their economic situation, as well as the social and cultural structures of the community from which they come. Two of the male interviewees studied at both high school and vocational schools at the same time to ensure their professional and academic success. Their hard work indicates their diligence to achieve a better situation in their lives. For both female and male interviewees, it is a desire to be active citizens in the host society, but also a desire to change the tradition of their own community where it makes sense; for example, in the case of a good role model or their future profession, helping other immigrant family students and even development cooperation with their own country of origin.

The findings are in line with other researchers. Ravecca (2010) pointed out that school experiences of immigrant boys and girls or those with a migrant background generally reflect the models of gender differentiation of precisely the country of arrival. The greater control that families have over daughters can be traced back to traditional gender roles. However, young migrant women often manage to compensate in just one generation for the stressful pattern of educational and professional integration that has shaped their parents' lives in their country of origin (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005; Zhou & Bankston, 2001). What we also find is what Cervantes (2010) describes as *machismo* for boys, which is characterized by superiority and the roles of being a provider and protector.

According to previous studies, daughters of immigrant parents tend to achieve better school results than boys (Dale et al., 2002). Girls also have lower drop-out rates (Brinbaum & Cebolla-Boado, 2007) and higher educational aspirations, with a broader gap between girls and boys than what is seen in the indigenous population (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Fuligni & Witkow, 2004). Even though educational expectations are important predictors of success, the determinants of outcomes are significantly gendered based, showing that educational pathways are not segmented just by ethnicity and class (Feliciano & Rumbaut, 2005). This can be seen in the interviews as well. The brothers of the female interviewees (while they talked about their siblings' education) had difficulties at school and with learning the Finnish language or dropped out. The girls wanted to learn, wanted to change, and wanted to take part in society and live as they experienced it at school and in Finland.

For the third category, critical thinking, a few studies in the context of FGMFS; e.g., Terenzini et al. (1996) demonstrate that FGCS choose less demanding courses in secondary education and, therefore, they suspected that this could be an explanation for the weaker cognitive abilities of students in reading comprehension, mathematics, and critical thinking. Critical thinking was evident in the interviewees of this study at the level of axial coding in both cognitive abilities such as questioning, explaining, arguing, analyzing, comparing, self-evaluation and adapting, solving problems, searching for a solution, self-regulation, self-correction, and abilities like open-mindedness and judgment. These skills are in line with the important critical thinking skills posited by Facione (1990) and Facione et al. (2000). This is also in line with Demetriou et al. (2017, p. 32) argument that successful FGCS have developed the dispositions of “(a) being flexible and willing to change, (b) feeling independent, (c) perceiving challenges as opportunities for growth, and (d) risk-taking,” possibly during their studies.

Critical thinking is thinking that focuses on deciding what to believe and to do, which is also a “practical activity” (Ennis, 1985). In general, critical thinking means being fair and open when considering different views, trying to understand issues deeply, being curious, questioning assumptions, considering evidence and limitations, being persistent on seeking logic, being cautious, being humble, recognizing one's own limitations, and admitting when one is wrong or not knowing. Critical thinking plays an essential and unique role in the development of thinking and identity for FGMFS, which became very clear in the interviews. In the interviews, almost all skills that Facione (1990) mentioned in the cognitive, dispositional, and academic areas were described for different experiences in the family. The questioning of one's own culture becomes particularly apparent with the female interviewees when they are confronted with differences in values and roles. They begin to think, question, analyze, and synthesize, and then reflect. They then make decisions based on their experiences at school and university. Therefore, the critical thinking skills that they have learned and practiced in the institutions, gave them this ability, along with the confidence to go through this process of contradiction and cross-cultural challenges successfully. Critical thinking for both men and women also arose from self-assessment and self-correction in coping with academic challenges, such as getting enough ECTS points and good scores during their study in Finnish. Overall, CT empowers the FGMFS to use their educational pathways successfully.

These three categories—I-C, gender role, and critical thinking—emerged in this study, influencing the educational pathway of FGMFS successfully toward higher education and empowering them. All these cross-cultural experiences on their educational pathway in learning institutions were always confronted with an additional and different cultural context that what they experience at home with their families and communities. For these students, living in the cross-cultural context means looking at many situations from a different, broader perspective, and simultaneously living in two learning environments. The results of this study show how FGMFS' cross-cultural experiences and perceptions develop their cross-cultural identity and help them to shape their new position in the host society; broaden their viewpoint and horizon of thinking; and see, analyze, and discuss values, rules, and norms from two perspectives.

All this leads to what we could call an “innovative adaptive strategy”—not just to cope with different barriers, but also to be able to use one's strengths to overcome obstacles and to break the cultural and social pattern, thus paving the way for other migrant family students. Using the adaptive strategy is explaining a movement from being weak to successful; from being different and feeling weakness to being a person with a superpower with an active role in society; and being proud to be the first one in the family at university, and thus, a good role model. The instrument to realize these positive changes is education.

As a result, the cross-cultural experiences and perceptions of the FGMFS on their educational journey have a role in the empowerment process, which shapes their cross-cultural identity and makes them able to gain new positions by acquiring the ability to internalize two cultures through continuing their education. The forms of expression the participants used are quite different, show an interesting range, and are described in an expressive language. For example, they discuss seeing themselves as “belonging to a third culture,” “being different is my superpower,” or “I do not believe in nationality and what matters is humanity.” Overall, all of the interviewees see education in the cross-cultural context as an instrument to gain power, to change their destiny, to find a better position to be able to be influential in overcoming the cultural and social obstacles and in fighting for justice by working and studying hard.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, three main categories emerged, among which are collectivism and individualism, gender role, and critical thinking. The linkage among these three main categories is best explained by empowerment in the context of their cross-cultural experiences. Empowerment emerged as the conceptual element linking these categories, showing how the development of one's own cultural identity has been influenced and shaped by the recognition of differences and the use of skills taught by educational institutions and supported by higher education. This plays an important role in understanding how social and cultural patterns can be changed, how cross-cultural identity is developed, and what leads to success in attending higher education and finding one's own way into Finnish society.

All the categories that emerged provide insightful answers to the research question of what an FGMFS perceives and experiences on their educational pathway from school to higher education in the cross-cultural context in Finland. Through their experiences and perceptions of life in a cross-cultural environment, they developed innovative adaptation strategies to be successful through a new position in this development process. The participants also realized that they could not change social and cultural thought patterns without hard work and further education, which is why they use their higher education as a tool for self-empowerment. Through the empowerment of students and openness, institutional education can help this target group to complete their educational journey successfully. All three categories are components that certainly contribute to the development and shaping of cross-cultural identity; however, to

what extent, this study cannot achieve and precisely determine, and more research should be conducted.

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**III**

**Academic learners in Finland: The experiences and perceptions of first-generation migrant family students in higher education**

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## Academic Learners in Finland: The Experiences and Perceptions of First-Generation Migrant Family Students in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** The increasing migration and internationalization of societies require a new dynamic architecture in higher education. Understanding the educational journey of specific groups of students is, therefore, of great importance. This study describes the educational pathways of first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs) who have been successful in their university education. For this grounded theory study, fifteen FGMFSs at universities in Finland were interviewed. Three main categories—the academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being—were identified as critical factors influencing their educational success in higher education. The results of this study can help educators and policymakers better understand the factors that are important for FGMFSs' sense of belonging and educational success in higher education.

**Keywords:** academic environment, academic performance, academic well-being, first-generation migrant family students, grounded theory, higher education, Finland.

The importance of higher education in preparing students to work better and more efficiently in a society and its benefit to their private lives—socially, financially, and otherwise—are obvious (Hill et al., 2005). In this way, education should help to achieve socioeconomic advancement and reduce poverty. The United Nations (2017) validated these concepts by making high-quality education one of the 17 global goals for sustainable development. At the same time, the world is faced with corruption, wars, and poor governance. These conditions and the desire for a better life have led to migration worldwide. European Union (EU) countries are experiencing the effects of this migration. For example, thousands of children and young people with a migration background attend schools and universities in their host countries. However, the educational level that many have acquired when they enter their host country's educational system does not correspond to that of the local population. Great efforts are being made to understand better the challenges related to educating migrated young people and children, including scientific research activities in the social and educational fields. According to the academic achievements of migrant background populations across EU member states, "it is obvious that a 'one size fits all' approach to immigrant education in Europe would be far from efficient" (Bonin, 2017, p. 2). Airas et al.'s (2019) report on Finnish higher education students with an immigrant background supported this claim by demonstrating that these students are not provided with sufficient support during their post-secondary studies and Moitus et al.'s (2020) report on flexible pathway for students.

However, a segment of this population that has not received much attention is first-generation migrant family students (FGMFSs), higher education students who belong to migrant families, and whose parents do not have a university degree. In the context of higher education in Finland, few studies have focused on the experiences and perceptions of successful FGMFSs (Makrooni, 2019, 2020) compared to the US, where several studies have focused on

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the first-generation college students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Quinn et al., 2019). The topics have dealt with, for example, their persistence and completion of college studies (Holt & Winter, 2018), and impact factors increasing the retention (Pellew, 2016).

This article aims to fill this gap in the literature by describing how FGMFSs experience and perceive their lives as academic learners in higher education in Finland. Taking a grounded theory (GT) approach, open questions were used to collect and analyze data, with sub-questions developed to investigate how FGMFSs' perceptions and experiences affect them as learners in higher education. This study provides data that lead to a better understanding of the educational situation, challenges, and factors that promote the success of college and university FGMFSs. The findings can help university teachers and administrators to formulate strategies and measures to secure and build on the successes of first-generation students with a migration family background.

### **First-Generation Students in Higher Education**

A good body of literature about first-generation college students (FGCSs), with and without immigrant backgrounds, has been established, most of it emanating from the United States. The findings of these studies can be quite different from similar studies conducted in European countries like Finland, however, as the school and university systems of the different countries can often only be compared with great effort, for example, in the PISA studies.

Prior research on first-generation and non-first-generation students with a migrant or minority ethnic background has included examination and discussion on various topics, such as the difficulties and lack of support the students experience during their transition to college (Berggren et al., 2020) and their upper secondary education choices in Finland based on their attitudes about and experiences with the transition (Kalalahti et al., 2020). Other obstacles faced by these students identified in these studies include weak language and mathematics skills, inadequate study skills (Stebleton & Soria, 2012), difficulty understanding the campus culture, and using campus facilities, such as libraries (Ilett, 2019).

The grade point average (GPA) is a significant predictor of resilience (Mendez & Baumann, 2018), and the lack of peer support has been shown to be an indicator of lower GPAs (Dennis et al., 2005). According to Forrest Cataldi et al. (2018), first-generation students lag behind second-generation students in terms of persistence and success. Horowitz (2017) pointed out that this first generation "often work harder, are more motivated, engaged and determined than students of the second generation" (p. 9). Studies on self-efficacy also have shown interesting results. For example, Vuong et al. (2010) found that self-efficacy can impact GPA and persistence, while Chemers et al. (2001) reported academic self-efficacy and optimism could positively affect performance and adaptation; Ramos-Sanchez and Nichols (2007) revealed self-efficacy affects academic performance, college adaptation, and persistence of FGCSs. According to Meeuwisse et al. (2010), good formal relations with teachers positively impacted the sense of belonging of ethnic minority students, while Jeynes' (2003) meta-study showed the influence of parental involvement on all academic variables. Baum and Flores (2011) found that these students lacked information on access to funding, and Amos (2010) pointed out that it is not known which academic routes in university education had the greatest influence on the persistence of this population in the first two years. Emotional factors, such as well-being and loneliness (Neto & Wilks, 2017), well-being and acculturation (Schwartz et al., 2013), depression (Stebleton & Soria, 2012), and fear of failing (Bui, 2002) were also investigated, helping to gain a better understanding of the situation in which some of these students find themselves when attending college. Research on higher education students with an immigrant background in Finland has also identified problems like linguistic difficulties (Airas et al., 2019). These wide-ranging topics have been investigated, especially in the United States, to pursue data to inform strategies and program development to minimize dropout rates.

However, knowledge specifically on the experiences and perceptions of FGMFSs as learners in higher education is lacking (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020); the literature mainly focuses on the struggles and adverse outcomes of FGCSs, while few studies have focused on the experiences of successful students in this population (Demetriou et al., 2017) or examined the factors that promote their academic success in Finland. Makrooni (2019) described the perceptions and experiences of FGMFSs as they travel the educational path to higher education in Finland, using three main categories: family values, institutional values, and friendship. A better understanding of the life of the FGCS and their learning experiences is also important for the faculties in order to better shape their overall learning experience at the universities (Delima, 2019) and to develop teaching strategies by strengthening the link between academic content and students' lives (Castillo-Montoya, 2019).

The current article focuses on the perceptions and experiences of FGMFSs while enrolled at higher education in Finland. Therefore, the main research question in this article is how FGMFSs experienced and perceived their educational careers in higher education relevant to their migration background. The results can provide a basis for educators and policymakers to improve the quality of educational institutions further and to promote the creation of an inclusive environment from school to higher education for FGMFSs.

### **Positionality**

For additional context the first author shares her positionality in relation to this study. I myself studied and taught at school in a multicultural country with different languages and ethnics. My ethnic and cultural background and my experiences during my study and teaching awakened my interest in the cultural and social aspects of education and their role in shaping the educational journey. Gradually I became aware of the facts that these educational paths may differ due to family, ethnic, cultural and gender-specific backgrounds. I wanted to learn more about this topic and went on an educational journey myself. I had the opportunity to study this phenomenon in Finland. In Finland I was able to analyse the educational journeys of students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and to learn about what aspects that made their educational journey successful in an educational system that was foreign to their parents and to them. Moreover, the question of how this journey can be accompanied and supported even better by the educational system aims of great interest to me.

### **Method and Data Sources**

This study applied the GT research method that Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed. GT not only elicits descriptions of experiences but also generates a theory for a process or an action to make it applicable in practice. The basic idea is that theories are grounded in the data that are systematically collected, such as actions and social processes in the interaction processes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It was then further developed (Creswell & Poth, 2018) individually by Glaser (2002) and Corbin and Strauss (2007) in differentiation from each other and later differentiated by their "students" - especially Charmaz (2006) with the constructivist grounded theory approach and Clarke (2009) with the situational analysis approach. However, the characteristic basic considerations of the grounded theory methodology are consistent despite many further developments. This includes above all the continuous alternation of fieldwork (data collection) and reflection (data analysis and theory building). Its essential features include conceptualization, permanent comparison, theoretical sampling and memo writing.

The field of research is considered to be without bias and prejudice. "The researcher enters the field and explores a substantive area by allowing the chief concerns of those actively

engaged therein to guide the emergence of a core issue or problem” (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 30). The study presented in this article employed GT to uncover unknown latent patterns in the academic lives of the FGMFSs. For this purpose, the participants were asked about their experiences and perceptions of university. According to Ribeiro (2014), “A comprehensive and faithful description of human perceptual experience has to consider, simultaneously, general, structural, individual, and situational elements involved in perception” (p. 561). For this research, perception is defined as the result of interactions between aspects of the individual (FGMFS) experience and context (university).

To ensure the reliability as well as the validity of data within a study, Morse et al., (2002) recommend different verification strategies. These include "methodological coherence, sampling sufficiency, developing a dynamic relationship between sampling, data collection and analysis, thinking theoretically, and theory development" (p. 18). These basic strategies are well founded and comprehensible. Within the framework of the GT, validity is based on the "interchangeability of indicators in multiple incidents" (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 79). This is achieved by the "method" of comparative analysis of the initial data, the resulting concepts, which in turn lead to categories. One way to check validity, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), is to obtain feedback by reviewing by the participants themselves in order to allow the participants to check the data analysis. For this study, for example some transcriptions were randomly selected and sent back in order to allow participants to give feedback on the transcription. This was done to increase credibility and to avoid misunderstandings. They were also asked additional questions if there were discrepancies in the transcriptions.

### ***Data Collection***

Announcements about the study were posted in Spring 2017 on the university’s Intranet website, faculty web pages, and Facebook page and the registration office and/or sent directly to students to recruit participants. Five students responded, three of whom were FGMFSs. The remaining 12 students in the study sample were found using the snowball method lasting about one year. Of the 15 total participating students, 8 were female, and 7 were male; their ages ranged from 25 to 38. Eleven participants came from the Middle East (Iran, Iraq), two from Central Africa, one from Russia, and one from Southeast Asia. The age of the participants when they immigrated to Finland varied. One was born in Finland, four relocated at the age of 1–5 years, three at 10–13 years, and seven at 16–18 years. Participants for this study were mostly (73%) enrolled at the second largest university in Finland and studying social and human sciences, medicine, engineering, and natural sciences.

Collecting data proceeded from May 2017 to September 2018. The data were gathered through interviews, which lasted 90 to 110 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Three interviews were conducted in the student’s mother tongue, and the rest in English. The participants received the necessary information about the research objective, their rights, and the anonymous use of the data. Data were collected following the GT procedure in that no attempt was made to verify a pre-existing hypothesis. The data formed the basis for developing a grounded theory (Rupsiene & Pranskuniene, 2010).

The theoretical saturation was considered (Holton & Walsh, 2017), as no further insights into the research subject were gained after the 15 interviews were conducted. The number of data required for saturation is given as 10-15 in the relevant literature, depending also on the complexity of the study (Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018). The theoretical saturation was achieved in this study after 15 interviews. New concepts or other significant data did not reappear (Holton & Walsh, 2017). After the 10th interview it became apparent that no further new key issues were discovered, however, 5 more interviews were conducted to ensure that data saturation was achieved. Further data was not collected as the concepts and categories were

saturated and a theory had emerged. Continuous comparison and memo writing also helped to reach saturation.

Interviewees were asked open questions that focused on the students' experiences and perceptions throughout their educational careers in higher education relevant to their migration background. For example: "What feelings did you have when you entered the university?" "What experiences did you have with staff, lecturers, and friends?" "How did you experience your studies at the university?" "What challenges did you experience, and what strategy did you use to deal with these challenges?" "What did you learn during your studies at the university?" "What suggestions do you have for other FGMFSs to help them academically succeed?" "What would you suggest that universities do in the future to help other FGMFSs to be successful?"

The data collection process was accompanied by the preparation of memos for the consolidation of the GT to serve as a basis for the subsequent interviews. The memos constituted the starting point for further sub-questions designed to gather more detailed information about the participants' experiences and perceptions of learning and living at the university, the obstacles they had to overcome, and the factors that helped them complete their studies successfully.

In addition to the advantages of GT in discovering unknown patterns in the educational pathways of this specific group in Finland, the authors are also aware of the limitations and challenges of using this method. The application of GT requires sufficient experience in data collection and analysis, which could be a challenge for a naive researcher and the possibility of errors is high. The sample size and data collection, the analysis of the data could also depend on the influence of the researcher's experience and background.

### ***Data Analysis***

An open, axial, and selective coding process was performed for data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Open coding was used to find concepts and key phrases and to decompose the data into conceptual components. This coding enabled a better reflection on the data. In addition, all data were continually compared with each other in an attempt to identify similarities. This approach to coding generates ideas and establishes conceptual links between the main components and categories of what emerges (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Selective coding was used to integrate the main categories. The different types of coding in the form of a continuous process were integral to the conceptualization of the perceptions and experiences of the participating FGMFSs. This process included discovering the properties of the respective categories and developing the relationships between them (Holton & Walsh, 2017).

To exemplify the coding process, one interviewee pointed out that "to be successful depends on how much a human believes in himself and his abilities ... his interest in doing what he wants to do ... and how much they are ready to do that..." (see Table 2, A10a). Open coding produced "believing in self," "interest," and "having goals," and axial coding produced "self-belief," and "self-efficacy."

### **Research Findings**

The participants' experiences and perceptions of their higher education were classified into three main categories: academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being. These categories refer to what the FGMFSs perceived and experienced during their time at the university, explain the essential aspects of success at the university, and indicate improvements needed in Finnish higher education and what proved to be useful for this group of students. The categories overlap in some respects. For example, research shows that a high

degree of self-efficacy is associated with good performance, but a high degree of self-efficacy is also associated with feeling good. Therefore, individual sub-categories like self-efficacy appear in several main categories.

### ***1. Academic Environment***

To be an FGMFS often means being the first in the family to obtain a higher education degree. For these students, the organization and requirements are new, and the wishes and hopes are great. The gateway to a better life in the future through access to knowledge has been reached. As FGMFSs are the often first in their family to go to university, they receive no specific instructions from parents and siblings regarding what to expect or how to handle challenges and have no one in their close family environment to turn to for advice on such matters. Thus, they encounter the academic environment with a degree of uncertainty about what to expect. Through the coding process, the following axial key codes related to the participants' experiences and perceptions of the academic environment were created: the challenge of the academic language, Finnish as a second language, and getting to know academic writing (e.g., essay writing and reflective writing). The code of academic working included different academic skills, such as autonomy, which pertains to being in charge of one's action, reflecting on feedback to improve; critical thinking and questioning; and discussion and group work. Additional axial codes included the following: academic institutional norms and rules at the university; teaching behaviors and student-teacher relationships; integration into seminars; teaching methods; organizational structure; and university-based cultural offerings and support. All sub-categories characterize the university as an institution and comprise fundamental elements of university culture. The main findings in this category are discussed according to three subtopics: academic work (requirements from the university), academic relationship (teacher-student), and academic climate (university-based offerings and impact on students' thinking).

**1.1 Academic work.** The participants' perceptions and experiences regarding their studies and the challenges they faced while in university resulted in the academic work sub-category. The students noted that the lack of behavioral practices and skills needed for the academic work presented significant obstacles. For example, their language skills were challenged on very different levels, including the academic language used in the different disciplines and by different faculties (Table 1.1, A10). The Finnish language had always presented a challenge for many, as the majority (73%) of the students interviewed moved to Finland as teenagers; however, they realized that the demands on their language skills were even higher while studying at the university than they had been in high school (Table 1.1, A5). They pointed out that Finnish teachers and Finnish students never embarrassed or corrected them in front of the class for incorrect use of the language, which was a criticism of other places (Table 1.1, A15).

Most ( $n = 8$ ) also found academic writing highly challenging: they perceived it as very difficult and required more effort on their parts because Finnish was not their mother tongue (Table 1.1, A4, A8). However, three participants recounted having had no problems with academic writing, one even possessing advanced skills (Table 1.1, A14). Specific study skills, such as analytical skills, independent and autonomous learning abilities, argumentation, and critical thinking, are also necessary to succeed in higher education. The students noted that the need for these skills presented further obstacles to their success (Table 1.1, A15a), as they found the way of thinking and work habits of their peers at the university quite different from those of the friends they had before university (Table 1.1, A6). They reported feelings of "shock" early in their university studies at the amount of responsibility that was placed on them for their own learning compared to what they experienced in high school), where teachers provided more

support, and finding it difficult to adjust to this shift (Table 1.1, A7). Table 1.1 includes interviewee quotations related to academic work.

**Table 1.1**  
*Academic Work*

Interviewee	Quotation
A4	“Speaking is easy; writing is much more difficult because Finnish is not my mother tongue ... knowing some technical words is easy for [native-speaking] Finnish, but I had to work to understand better.”
A5	“It was very different, the materials that we had in university were instantly much harder and we did not ever have it at high school and ... texts with super scientific terms... because scientifically language is really difficult and that is something’s that you did not study at schools because not everyone will use it.”
A6	“[The] university was a really different environment, and people were different in their way of thinking. At [the] university, my friends and their parents were highly educated, and their way of thinking and their knowledge was not comparable with [that of] my friends before university.... They had a different world in comparison with those friends that I had before going to [the] university.”
A7	“There is a lot of responsibility for the student herself or himself to study and learn, whereas when you are in school, the teachers take a lot of responsibility for you.... But at [the] university ... you have to be aware of everything and take a lot of responsibility, so that was very shocking for me.”
A8	“Writing was too hard for me. I was never a good writer, and it was very difficult for me to write essays or to do some homework [assignments]. My grammar was not my problem. I learned it quickly at first, and I do not have difficulty writing correctly, but academic writing was a problem.”
A10	“In the first days and first semesters, the teachers, for example, talked about power, voltage, and some expressions related to electricity. I did not understand anything, and you know all lectures were in Finnish.”
A14	“I never had these kinds of linguistic problems with writing or stuff ... because I have written so much you know; I even wrote in magazines and books.”
A15	“Finnish people never break your face [embarrass you], ... they do not mention it that you are talking wrong.... I would like them to correct my Finnish language, but they do not.”
A15a	“There are many things at [the] university that you feel alien to,... [no] person that gives you guidelines or shows you what to do, and you are in the place where everyone is thinking differently.”

**1.2 Academic relationship: Teacher-student.** The relationship students have with their professors or teachers, in reference to the axial coding, can be described in terms of support, interest, and feedback. Some ( $n = 4$ ) had very positive experiences (Table 1.2, A2), but some ( $n = 4$ ) complained about a lack of support (Table 1.2, A7, A8), while a couple ( $n = 2$ ) reported objecting to negative feedback they received in terms of language (Table 1.2, A3). Overall, students indicated that they would like more support from and interactions with faculty. The participants’ views about feedback, support, and relationships with teachers seemed to depend on the faculty and the course being taught. For example, students noted that they had too little interaction with their technical subject teachers (Table 1.2, A7a).

The interviewees pointed out that the professors demonstrated a high degree of equality in dealing with students, explaining that they were not treated differently because of their origin (Table 1.2, A13). According to participants’ feedback, teachers had no interest in who students were: the subject was in the foreground, not the person or his or her country of origin (Table 1.2, A12). However, they opined that the teachers should give more consideration to students’ migration backgrounds and difficulties with the language (Table 1.2, A10). The interviewees mentioned that more opportunities should be available for students to ask for support. The expectation of students to take responsibility for their learning and organization of their studies was mentioned again (Table 1.2, A11).

Moreover, a contradiction became apparent in the analysis of the interview data. On the one hand, the students expressed a desire to receive more individual help and feedback. However, this would result in their being treated differently, which is contrary to the principle of equality, a highly valued doctrine in Finnish society. Thus, this situation reflects a contradiction in goals because if all are treated equally, injustice can occur, but if all are treated fairly, inequality can occur. Table 1.2 contains interviewee quotations about the teacher-student relationship.

**Table 1.2**  
*Academic Relationship: Teacher–Student*

Interview	Quotation
A2	“Positive feedback [from my teacher on an essay] ... gave me courage ... it makes you more confident that you are at the same level as everyone else.”
A3	“Just one bad experience, one ... teacher told me he was very surprised that ... [someone] allowed me to enter the university ... ‘your language is not good [enough] ... to study at [the] university.’ ... He [later] apologized to me.”
A7	“I do not know how to do [the work in] this course. The questions are difficult; the teachers are not helping me, [and] I do not have any friends at the university to help me. My friends ... do not know anything about this, and they are cooking pizza, so I cannot go there and ask them. So, you become hopeless.”
A7a	“They [teachers] come and teach, and then they go; they are not interested if you are listening or if you are learning.... In large-sized classrooms, they just show some slideshows.... If you are studying engineering, nobody wants to discuss—just give a lecture and go ... in big classes you cannot ask [questions].”
A8	“In my short absence [from attending] the university, teachers asked about my absence, but when they saw me somewhere ... nobody offered any help actually.”
A10	“Teachers [should give you the] ... feeling that if you have a problem in [understanding the] language, you can ask ... then it could be easier for these students to ask [for help].... Sometimes being in seminars creates the most stress for me, and it happens even if I know that I can speak ... and I think it is because teachers did not give the impression that it is not a problem for you to make mistakes.”
A11	“[The] university is a totally different world from high school ... at the university, you are on your own.... They only show you some stuff ... nobody is going to help you. Teachers drown new students in an ocean of knowledge.”
A12	“As I told you, I had the impression that teachers are not interested in who I am and where I am from. They do not know [that you are an immigrant] probably, and they do not ask.”
A13	“I have not realized differences from my classmates [in the way we are treated] by professors and teachers. They try not to treat you differently, not in a positive or negative way. They required the same thing from students ... they will never start ... discussions [or ask questions]...They do not show interest at first, ... you have to bring it [up] yourself so that they will ask you more ... but I never felt that my background made them do something differently.”

**1.3 Academic climate.** The academic climate in this context refers to the quality and character of university life, which encompasses students, staff, cultural offerings, values, and organizational structures. When asked about their experiences with the university’s cultural offerings or activities specifically, most recalled never having experienced any. Of those who had, some referred to a special seminar or course (Table 1.3, A3), and others mentioned activities outside the university (Table 1.3, A14). Two participants also spoke about their shyness and feelings of shame in standing up for and openly displaying their culture (Table 1.3, A5) but added that they liked to talk about their culture when someone asked about it. Overall, most pointed to the lack of courses and programs targeted at FGMFSs at their university. Some assumed only limited offerings were available because the population of students with migrant backgrounds was small and because no one requested such programming (Table 1.3, A10).

The interviewees noted they viewed their overall higher education experience positively, including the outcomes of increasing their knowledge and becoming more open-

minded (Table 1.3, A3a). They learned to observe the world through different lenses and gained an understanding of the values that residents of Finland and the rest of the world held (Table 1.3, A4), which they explained was helpful for integration (Table 1.3, A6). They described the atmosphere at their university as one in which everyone was treated equally, and no racism was witnessed (Table 1.3, A7); for some, it was the first time experiencing such a climate (Table 1.3, A6a). Students commented others were not concerned with who one's parents were other than to ensure the student received support from the family and the wish that more migrants went to the university to study. The interviewees pointed out that such an academic environment provides a setting for efficient and successful learning (Table 1.3, A13). They also expressed appreciation for the equal treatment and open-mindedness they experienced. Table 1.3 presents the quotations of interviewees related to the academic climate.

**Table 1.3**  
*Academic Climate*

Interview	Quotation
A3	"Yes, I had one experience in one seminar among our classmates in our major when I wore my traditional cloth ... and also talked about my culture, and they liked that."
A3a	"A university education helps you develop your character.... Studying at [a] university teaches you many things...I increased my knowledge, and it helped me to be open-minded."
A4	"You could see the world from different views, maybe understand much better the life values here in Finland and the world."
A5	"It is a shame, really, because my other friends do not (do) really anything like that.... If you are the only one [going to university], that makes you feel lonely, too."
A6	"The university [climate] is helpful in many aspects, for example, for integration, humanity, serious things, and broader issues."
A6a	"In university, others did not see you as a foreigner; they do not pay attention to that, and the atmosphere is that everyone is the same. In high school, they see that you are different and tell you that you are different."
A7	"When I came to the university, it was a totally different situation [from what I was used to]; there was no racism because people are well-educated, and the mindset had been changed."
A10	"I would like to introduce my culture and talk about these things ..., but I [only] talk if someone asks me.... I never had such cultural programs. None of my teachers or classmates ever asked me about where I am from."
A13	"I am in an environment where I can work hard and achieve these things. If I were in another environment, I might not have these things. So, environment, society, and everything from the culture that surrounds you are effective."
A14	"I do cultural, social activities all the time, but I didn't do it at the university level ... I am doing this on a society level."

## 2. Academic Performance

In the category pertaining to the strategies participants employed to manage their studies successfully, open coding and axial coding resulted in the following important axial key codes: self-reflection and self-discovery, different perspectives and thinking, perfectionism versus letting things go, persistent and hard-working, motivation, self-efficacy, and attitude toward work. In addition to the many experiences and challenges that arise from immersing oneself in a new environment, the FGMFS as a learner with his or her own experiences is at the center of these categories.

Naturally, this category overlaps with the academic environment category and with well-being, but it became clear when analyzing the interview data that students' self-concepts were essential to their ability to be successful in the learning process. An impressive aspect of their experiences and perceptions was the examination of self. The interviewees expressed that they had learned to think for themselves and to identify the appropriate methods for accomplishing tasks (Table 2, A4); they learned to understand their abilities better and discover

who they were, believe in themselves, and be themselves (Table 2, A2, A9), and to take responsibility for their thinking. They also recounted learning not to compare themselves with the Finns in terms of language skills. They noted that among the most important lessons their post-secondary education taught them was to question everything, to understand different perspectives (Table 2, A13), and to not only set but be persistent in achieving goals by not giving up when faced with obstacles but, instead, working to overcome them (Table 2, A15).

**Table 2***Academic Performance*

Interview	Quotation
A1	"I did not like to give up.... I believed [in] myself, there was, like, hope that I will be able to overcome it."
A2	"Maybe the biggest thing ... I have learned in university is believing in myself.... If I want to do something, I can do it, and it's not hard if I want to do it—I just have to work for it."
A4	"I learned ... what will be a solution or what can I do to be better.... I just encouraged myself, or I told myself that maybe I could do something in a different way and work harder, and I do not give up on myself ... and I did it, and I felt I got better."
A5	"In the group we got texts, and we were reading texts together and asking each other, 'did you get that part?' because sometimes what I got [from the message] was different than what they said, and it was really good to get kind of different pictures."
A6	"It was strange and ... hard at first, ... the style of studying was strange ... spending eight hours a day just doing homework ..., but I got used to it."
A8	"Reading and academic writing was not my [strength] ... I was never a good writer, and it was very difficult for me to write essays or to do some homework [assignments] ... so I stopped and for half a year I just thought about that—why, really, do I want to do that? And after a half year, I thought, I have to work harder ... I had to believe in me that I can make it."
A9	"I understood my abilities better.... university helped me to think again about myself ... to know myself ... to find myself again ... my self-confidence increased."
A9a	"I understood that I should indicate my plan for my life and achieve my goals step by step.... I think my efforts and my standing on my purpose is the secret of my success."
A10	"I tried to find a way for more understanding of the subjects ... I searched the Internet ... read the books in these languages that I knew [mother and native], and I just tried by myself."
A10a	"To be successful depends on how much a human believes in himself and his abilities ... his interest in doing what he wants to do ... and how much they are ready to do that."
A12	"In case of language their [Finnish students] study is much easier compare to me... although language is a challenge for me but I do not take it as an excuse , and I do not take it like ok I am lower than them"
A13	"I learned to question everything while in school ... look at things from many different perspectives ... not believing I had the absolute answer.... We discussed this in our courses a lot."
A13a	"I think every time you put effort into something, and you work hard for it, and you achieve it, you have been successful."
A14	"I have very Finnish attitudes on life, like European.... I was humbled by the opportunity ... to do this and that, and it is why I am different tomorrow [than today].... My attitude now is ... don't have the victim mentality ... no matter what happens, you take the responsibility of changing."
A15	"Many times, I became sad ... regretted [going to university] and told myself it was finished ... but I stood up and continued.... You should believe in what you want and put away many things."

It was interesting that their university experience taught them they did not need to be perfect and not be too hard on themselves when things did not go their way. Of course, the students also learned to perform the necessary tasks and to meet the requirements involved. They learned to ask questions until they got the help they needed if they were unsure how to proceed with a certain task or assignment and observed that through this process, their skills improved, and they became more knowledgeable. They also discovered ways to ensure their difficulties with the language did not prevent them from achieving their objectives after realizing that focusing on the challenges the language barriers presented did not help them reach

their goals (Table 2, A12). They explained that they just worked harder and motivated themselves when faced with obstacles (Table 2, A4), dedicating many hours, and much persistence (Table 2, A6). The interview data further revealed that, throughout their higher education experience, the students discovered that persistence was the secret to success (Table 2, A9a) and that hard work coupled with practice was the only way to achieve their academic goals (Table 2, A13a). That the students demonstrated a high degree of persistence and endurance while studying was evident from their comments; they refused to give up when presented with roadblocks to their success.

Another important sub-category that emerged for success was self-efficacy. This was expressed as believing in oneself and being able to succeed (Table 2, A1, A8, A10a). Being organized in groups or learning together was emphasized (Table 2, A5). Attitudes towards more responsibility, learning, and better work habits were also mentioned as important concepts for self-efficacy (Table 2, A14). This included also identifying the methods that best helped them to understand a topic better (Table 2, A10) and seeing difficulties such as those presented by the Finnish language as challenges but not problems. Participant comments regarding academic performance can be found in Table 2.

### **3. Academic Well-being**

The academic well-being category can be divided into three areas: psychological well-being (personal mastery, finding one's position, making decisions and setting goals, changing attitudes, feeling of how one is perceived, and the feeling of being different), emotional well-being (pride, happiness, fear, loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, motivation, and otherness), and social well-being (friendship and interaction with others at the university). The students described experiencing overwhelming conflicting feelings at the beginning of their studies when they were finally at the university, the place where knowledge is imparted. They felt good and proud to be the first in the family or the first among friends to achieve this (Table 3, A8). All were happy to be in university and to start a new life, to start over, to leave the old behind, to have made it (Table 3, A1). They were happy, too, with the subjects they were studying ( $n = 13$ ). They were aware that attending university was a significant achievement for them, for their families, and other migrants. They did not give up; they overcame all obstacles that stood in their way and, in doing so, increased their motivation to succeed and to be a good role model for other immigrant students (Table 3, A13). However, pride and happiness were not the only feelings recalled; participants also recounted feelings of fear and stress (Table 3, A15), helplessness (Table 3, A5), being alone, and, above all, loneliness ( $n = 7$ ; Table 3, A7), all caused by a lack of help and support. For two interviewees, the age difference was also mentioned as a reason for being alone.

The feeling of being different from the host society was also mentioned; they felt it brought attention to them, but this attention was not assessed negatively (Table 3, A2). Others pointed out they did not feel they were judged differently in terms of intelligence and performance or treated differently based on their ethnic origin (Table 3, A6). This also applied to their relationships with their teachers. Some had the feeling that teachers were proud of them. The teachers were considered friendly and did not treat them differently; however, for some, this created feelings of stress because they were expected to perform at the same level as other students (Table 3, A10).

Friendship with other committees also played an essential role in their well-being, according to the data. The importance of making new friends to be socially engaged and adjust to the new environment emerged through the interviews. For some, the new environment presented the opportunity to make new friends and maintain friendships with other students from their preparation courses, first joint courses, orientation courses, and continuing courses

( $n = 5$ ). Some ( $n = 6$ ) felt integrated, considered themselves social, had many friends from the beginning (Table 3, A12), and pointed to the mutual influence that took place between them, such as learning from each other (Table 3, A14). Others had difficulty making friends ( $n = 6$ ) and felt they had to give up to be completely themselves and play a role (Table 3, A10a), while others pointed out that although they had tried in many ways to make friends, it was challenging to establish close friendships with Finns. For some, friendships only existed at the university and in the courses but did not continue outside the university environment (Table 3, A15a). All in all, the participants considered friendship a critical factor in their well-being and academic adjustment. The data further showed that the age of arrival in their host country (Finland) was indicative of having close friendships.

**Table 3**  
*Academic Well-Being*

Interview	Quotation
A1	"It's kind of like starting a new life, and like there was hope that everything would help me find my place in society, and I would be ... happier in life."
A2	"You always know that you are different because you look different from everyone else... Every time when you came to class, you get attention ... teachers always remember your name first ..., but also I feel like everyone is nice."
A5	"Sometimes, I felt proud [but] also sometimes helpless because there was no one in my family to ask, so I would have to ask ... the teachers and staff."
A6	"Actually, they [teachers] did not see me as different and as [having] a lower IQ or anything like that. The only one that sees like that is us, and that is not reality."
A7	"I was totally alone in the university, and the Finns were among themselves.... At some points when I had some difficulties in some courses, there was nobody to help me or nobody to do the problems with me, so at some points, you feel despair."
A8	"I was very proud of myself... I don't know any immigrant men studying in my major here at the university."
A10	"I always had stress because they gave me this feeling that I do not have any differences with Finns in the case of language.... It is true that I do not want teachers to treat me separately from others, but I feel it [would be] positive in this line that teachers know that I am not like others, and it is not necessary to have as much stress to do [work at the same level] as Finnish do."
A10a	"Sometimes, you should play a role (it means you should change your character apparently) because if you want to be yourself, it will be difficult to integrate fully into the class."
A12	"I think I am social, like, I can describe myself socially based on my life experiences.... I am quite well integrated into the university that I can ask other students or teachers ... I have some hobbies and activities with not just classmates..."
A13	"I felt very proud because I wanted to achieve, and I achieved, and it was not very normal for immigrants.... I was the first to get to the university, and it was a big thing for my family... and it creates a responsibility to do things well because it's like you are paving the path for the next generation."
A14	"I know they [friends] have impacted me, and I have impacted them. I was like, 'hey, listen, listen' ... it is not very normal among Finns to say, 'hey listen, listen,' ... so everybody learns."
A15	"I could not enjoy myself really as I felt fear. I mean, I was afraid that maybe I could not do that and study at university."
A15a	"To be honest, to be friends with the Finnish is not easy.... Our friendship is just about our study inside the university ... it did not go further like to be with them outside the university."

## Discussion

In this study, three categories emerged based on the GT analysis: academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being. The academic environment includes all formal and informal aspects of an academic institution. Meeuwisse et al. (2010), in their model, assigned factors to formal and informal teacher interactions and formal and informal student interactions in the learning environment. In Tinto's (1993) model, a distinction

was made between academic integration and social integration. Academic integration refers to the intellectual life of the university, while social integration refers to relationships and connections outside of the classroom. The academic environment is also shaped by learning models, such as the Biggs (1989) learning model, which assumes that it is the teacher's job to create a learning environment that supports learning activities that lead to achieving certain learning outcomes. This support involves aligning the curriculum, outcomes, teaching methods, and assessments, which he called *constructive orientation*. These models and concepts are applied to explain and understand the tasks and processes in academic institutions, such as dropping out, success, perseverance, student support, norms, and values.

In this study, academic environment refers to the sub-categories that the FGMFSs interviewed mainly experienced, which include academic abilities and skills, the interaction between teacher and students as well as between students and students, activities, programs, teaching methods, assessments, and assignments, teaching behaviors, institutional values, and university culture.

The process of integrating and understanding the institutional norms and requirements and becoming familiar with the university culture was highly challenging, according to the participants. The interviewees repeatedly referred to language skills in general as making these processes more difficult. A distinction can be made between academic language, technical language, and Finnish as a foreign language. The use of academic and technical language is part of university education and must be learned as core skills. What makes things even more difficult for some students pertaining to language skills is that in Finland it is also necessary for civil servants in public professional positions, such as lawyers, teachers, or doctors, to have a good knowledge of Swedish which is the second official language of the republic of Finland. This is one reason for the importance to include multilingual education in curricula to promote social justice (Paulsrud et al., 2020). Academic writing, which is another core academic skill and ability essential for academic life, constituted another significant challenge. However, the data indicated that the participants gradually improved their academic writing skills while pursuing their degree.

Overall, FGMFSs recommended that future FGMFSs pursuing an advanced degree take more courses to learn and improve their academic language skills. Further competencies and skills, such as independent learning that professors expect students to have, which the interviewees had considered themselves lacking in, need to be learned as well. The participants explained that to cope with the new norms, rules, and requirements of studying at a university, they needed time and space for the possibility to think, to adapt to them, and to find coping strategies. The adaptation and coping were needed due to their educational backgrounds, academic Finnish language skills, and cultural influences. The participants recalled often needing more time to ask themselves questions about the tasks, and to consider the areas in which they were experiencing difficulties, and to identify the proper actions to take and the appropriate process to follow when taking them to address those issues. These possibilities included group work when interacting with others, asking questions, responding to questions asked by teachers, and talking about feelings and thoughts. According to participants, no specific multicultural programs were offered, but the diverse and heterogeneous atmosphere, as mentioned previously, differed from the atmosphere of high school in a positive way, all under the umbrella of equality, which they highly appreciated. In their study, Zilliacus et al. (2017) confirmed the students' impression that only superficial multicultural programs have so far been established in education in Finland. However, new curriculum reforms are expected to integrate the multicultural perspective more strongly into education. Equal opportunities at the university were seen as positive and were highly valued by all of them. However, the value of equality conflicted with equity. Because of students' migration background, being treated equally could

negatively impact equity because it may be unfair for students to be expected to complete tasks that require certain skills that they do not possess.

Interactions between teachers and students were reported as both appropriate and inappropriate, depending on the subject and the number of students in the class. Teachers were found to be helpful and supportive, especially in providing feedback. However, the students felt they would have benefited if the teachers had tried to learn more about the students and encouraged them to tell more about themselves. These interactions also reflect the students' level of involvement in the university. Involvement in the university, according to Tinto (1998), is an essential factor in students' perseverance.

The results pertaining to the second category, academic performance, show that FGMFSs applied their experiences and the challenges they encountered to develop into academic learners, successfully building their thinking, acting, and learning skills. They recognized these challenges, questioned themselves, and evaluated the situation. They saw the opportunities offered by studying at the university and understood that the only way to overcome the challenges was to work harder than others, to study more consistently and persistently, and not to give up. They changed their attitudes and thinking by believing in their goals and staying focused on what they wanted to achieve. These results are in line with the work of Dotson (2016), who argued that the correct formulation of objectives leads to improved student performance. They began to use what they learned from teachers, friends, and peers for their progress to become independent and stand on their own two feet. They realized that it was not easy for them to achieve their goals and that they had to change their attitude, their way of thinking, and the way tasks were done, so they worked to become more and more efficient. They all had a high degree of self-efficacy and perseverance. As found in other research (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013), there was a positive relation between academic self-concept and academic achievement for these students. Their self-confidence, hard work, motivation, and interest in the subject and discipline and the goal of remaining at the university led them to succeed.

These results are also in line with those related to the concepts of self-efficacy and persistence. Zimmermann (2000, p. 86) wrote, "Self-efficacy beliefs have also shown convergent validity in influencing such key indices of academic motivation as the choice of activities, level of effort, persistence, and emotional reactions." Martin and Marsh (2009, p. 353) defined academic resilience as "a student's ability to overcome acute or chronic adversities that are seen as major attacks on educational processes." The Conway (2009) model of immigrant and native student persistence includes high school preparation, resources for academic skills, and educational aspirations. In this model, she compared different groups, but the results were inconsistent. Individual student groups showed persistence in specific areas, while the vast majority of students at community colleges in the United States did not show persistence. It is obvious, however, that perseverance and hard work were a necessary condition for success.

With regard to perseverance, Mendez and Baumann (2018) investigated persistence in a College Assistant Migrant Program (CAMP) and were able to show that academic resilience in the Latinx student population was not associated with academic persistence. Instead, family responsibilities, work, and debt accumulation seemed to be the strongest predictors of leaving college in their circumstances. Edman and Brazil (2007) could only partially confirm their hypothesis that ethnic minority students have lower self-efficacy.

For the target group of the current research (FGMFSs), a high degree of self-efficacy and persistence of students was uncovered during the interviews, although the way this group of students studies seems to be a blind spot for universities. Universities seem to underestimate the challenges they face and how they manage and overcome these challenges. Lecturers and administrative staff should give more attention to the situation these students face and how they can receive more support. The experiences and perceptions of the FGMFSs in this study show

that more support for the learning process is needed. Although this study highlights the strengths of these successful students, it is possible that not all FGMFSs work hard enough or have the strong persistence necessary to succeed.

The third category, academic well-being, consisted of psychological, emotional, and social aspects for coping, adapting, and functioning in life. For Gräbel (2017), psychological well-being referred to the purpose of life, personal growth, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, and autonomy, and social well-being referred to positive attitudes toward people as well as belief in the growth and understanding of society and participation and identification with the society; emotional well-being refers to positive and negative emotions. Diener (2006) focused on positive effects (e.g., contentment, pleasure, euphoria, interest, engagement, and joy) and adverse effects (e.g., sadness, anxiety, worry, stress, frustration, guilt and shame, envy, loneliness, and helplessness). These positive and negative emotions and moods play a major role in our daily lives. Bui (2002) discovered that first-generation students had a greater fear of failing in college. Gräbel (2017) found a positive relationship between emotional and psychological well-being and academic achievement. Cobo-Rendon et al. (2020) reported that mental health impacts the well-being and academic performance of academic learners.

These results align with the findings from the interviews in this study. The interviewees conveyed positive emotions, like pride, happiness, and overall positive feelings, but negative emotions, like loneliness, helplessness, and stress, were also mentioned. The feeling of loneliness that was experienced had to do with the difficulty in making friends among Finns at the university. Having friends and studying with them as a group, not being alone, and getting support from peers was very important. Friends can help with academic adaptation, can share information, exchange academic experiences, and students encourage and learn from each other. Loneliness was also partly caused by significant differences in age (they felt too old, particularly if the age of arrival was 17 or 18, to make friends) or cultural differences (not going to pubs). Also present was a fear of being unable to complete the tasks, of making mistakes, and of not being able to speak Finnish in the seminar. According to the data, perfectionism and fear of making mistakes bothered the participants for a long time until they learned that they were allowed to make mistakes. Thus, they learned to study and to learn at the university in a relaxed atmosphere. The interviewees never reported feeling guilt towards their family for going to college when their family members were unable to achieve the same goal, as Covarrubias et al. (2015) reported in their study.

According to these categories, the links that emerged to combine the three main categories—academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being—can best be explained by functioning and a sense of belonging. The three categories are interrelated. This means that a supportive and encouraging climate in an academic environment can positively affect performance and well-being. Positive feelings of well-being, such as happiness, friendship, and encouraging thoughts, affect the quality of performance. High-quality performance can, again, influence good feelings, valued involvement, and positive perspectives of the students towards the academic environment.

In this study, the sense of belonging referred to the academic environment with the sub-categories of academic language, institutional norms, and academic skills among academic learners; it also referred to academic performance, in which a strong relationship between self-efficacy and persistence can be seen. Well-being is expressed in emotions such as pride, happiness, helplessness, fear, stress, friendship, interactions, making decisions and planning, and personal growth in a new environment. This sense of belonging and the status they have achieved is something that interviewees want to maintain. These are among the most essential feelings they expressed. Moreover, the feeling of not being seen differently accelerates the feeling of belonging. They were viewed just like other Finnish students, which gave them a feeling of belonging. This feeling of belonging motivated them to do more to secure their status

as students and their academic success and led to valued involvement in their study at the university.

As a graduate-to-be seeking to achieve academic goals, individuals work hard and persistently, as giving up is not an option. I call this concept “functioning.” This functioning includes all activities and actions related to strategies to overcome academic challenges, in the sense that it is vital to understand the ambition and goals and the field of study one has chosen and to achieve academic and social potentials. This functioning is motivated by the aspiration to have a better life and a good career, and the ability to participate in working and professional life. The desire to be successful personally, but not forgetting to be a good role model for other students with immigrant backgrounds and one’s community, makes them more responsible, functioning, and capable. Students must want to function. That is, they must take responsibility for themselves, show perseverance, and work harder and longer than others to belong and meet the requirements, which are the same for all. They are proud to be FGMFSSs, and they feel even more responsibility to be successful.

In conclusion, the results of this functioning lead to belonging, which create a circular process in the academic success of these students. That is why the two concepts—a sense of belonging (sb) and functioning (f)—are interdependent. Overall, if you feel that you belong, then you will be functional, and when you are functional, you feel that you belong [(sb⇒f) ∧ (f⇒sb) ≡ sb⇔f].

The results of this study agree with those of previous research in which the feeling of belonging has demonstrated positive effects on the intention to persist (Hausmann et al., 2007); on belonging and identification to reduce retention (Hoffmann et al., 2002); on academic self-efficacy; on intrinsic motivation and task value; on the promotion of student participation (Freeman et al., 2007); sense of belonging as a significant predictor of self-reported meta-cognitive and academic time management strategies (Won et al., 2018) and on belonging, familiarity, acceptance, and a sense of justice (Teng et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

In this article, based on the study of 15 FGMFSSs, the recollections participants on their experiences and perceptions in higher education in Finland were described and analyzed. The experiences and perceptions were classified into three main categories: academic environment, academic performance, and academic well-being. These factors were crucial for the participants’ successful studies, according to the information they provided. The three categories help to understand what these students experienced when they entered the university and began their studies, what their strengths were, what challenges they faced, the strategies they employed to address those challenges, and what led to their success.

Based on the GT approach, in which a link between the categories is sought, in this study, the links between the three identified categories are best described as “sense of belonging” and “functioning.” The sense of belonging is an important factor in the time spent at the university, as it was for the interviewees in this study. A sense of belonging is important for FGMFSSs’ status and their position in their families and society. The sense of belonging can be strengthened by a valued involvement, where they can see themselves as leaders of their self-growth as academic learners in the pursuit of achieving their goals. It gives them the strength of “functioning.” This functioning is reflected in their persistence and self-efficacy, which we can also be referred to as “very hard working.” The perception of the different situations results from the interactions between their individual experiences and the academic context in which they took place. At first, their experiences are perceived through their naive perspective, but, after a while, they perceive the values on which the academic environment is based. In other words, at first, they do not “see” how everything works. They learn more and more and find better ways to cope and to act efficiently in their studies and their learning. As a

result, their perceptions change and, therefore, both the sense of belonging and the functioning complement each other.

The results also indicate that additional university activities and support programs are needed to help more students become successful, especially those with this background, in their academic careers. The results of this study can help educators and administrators better understand the vital role these two concepts play in the education of FGMFSs and what individual steps can be taken to improve the education and services provided to them. This may consist of considering and possibly developing further academic, social, and cultural programs to strengthen the sense of belonging and functioning at the university for this group of students. The following points can be mentioned as practical implications of this study on a micro (teachers and professors) and a macro level (administration):

Micro level:

- Providing support by teachers and professors through active inquiry when needed
- Creating situations in the classroom in which students' previous knowledge and experiences can be presented concerning cultural backgrounds
- Promoting friendships and friendly peer relations among students to prevent loneliness
- Using, supporting and encouraging group work and cooperation actively
- Strengthening self-efficacy through motivation and recognition
- Supporting and promoting effective individual working habits
- Strengthening and enhancing personal and informal communication, discourse and meetings between teachers and students

Macro level:

- Offering enough support at the beginning of the study program for students to enhance understanding the nature of academic environments and to organize studies properly
- Organizing and offering courses for academic writing
- Organizing informal activities to create opportunities to make friends and strengthen peer relations in the study contexts
- Developing and offering intercultural programs, seminars, and courses also in cooperation with students
- Appreciating students' cultural and other knowledge and experiences in developing the curricula.

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## Notes on Contributors

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