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“I Became a Different Person”: Personal Change of Lithuanian Foster Parents through Informal Learning

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“I Became a Different Person”: Personal Change of Lithuanian Foster Parents through Informal Learning

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Abstract

Informal learning is understood as a complex emotional, cognitive and experiential process of learning during which the personal change of learner takes place. The article presents the findings of the qualitative study on the personal change of foster parents carried out in Lithuania, which reveals the subjective experience of informal learning of the foster parents fostering a non-relative child. By means of a narrative interview, 19 foster parents (12 women and 7 men) were interviewed in the study. The data were analyzed on the basis of the constructivist grounded theory strategy. The findings revealed that the personal change of foster parents takes place through conscious, intentional and purposeful informal learning in order to self-actualize and to become good foster parents. They themselves construct their way of learning during which they acquire new knowledge, rethink and reconstruct the knowledge they already have – all that leads to personal improvement. The personal change of foster parents also takes place through accidental, spontaneous, experiential informal learning, which is not always conscious or purposeful. While reflecting on their experience, foster parents see themselves in a new light; rethink their values and attitudes, thus getting to know themselves better. The findings of the study are important in order to highlight the role and significance of informal learning in the context of life-long learning. The findings may be a valuable contribution to the development of formalized training programs for foster parents and successful non-relative foster care.

Keywords: constructivist grounded theory, foster care, informal learning, personal change

"Me Convertí en una Persona Diferente": Cambio Personal de los Padres Adoptivos Lituanos a través del Aprendizaje Informal

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Resumen

El aprendizaje informal se entiende como un complejo proceso de aprendizaje emocional, cognitivo y experiencial durante el cual se produce el cambio personal del alumno. En el artículo se presentan las conclusiones del estudio cualitativo sobre el cambio personal de los padres adoptivos llevado a cabo en Lituania, que revela la experiencia subjetiva de aprendizaje informal de los padres de acogida de un niño sin parentesco. Mediante una entrevista narrativa, se entrevistó a 19 padres adoptivos (12 mujeres y 7 hombres) en el estudio. Los datos se analizaron sobre la base de la estrategia de la teoría constructivista fundamentada. Los resultados revelaron que el cambio personal de los padres de acogida se produce a través de un aprendizaje informal consciente, intencional y con un propósito determinado, a fin de autoactualizarse y convertirse en buenos padres de acogida. Ellos mismos construyen su forma de aprendizaje durante la cual adquieren nuevos conocimientos, repensan y reconstruyen el conocimiento que ya tienen. El cambio personal de los padres adoptivos también tiene lugar a través de un aprendizaje informal accidental, espontáneo y experimental, que no siempre es consciente o tiene un propósito. Al reflexionar sobre su experiencia, los padres adoptivos se ven a sí mismos bajo una nueva luz; repensan sus valores y actitudes, y así llegan a conocerse mejor a sí mismos. Las conclusiones del estudio son importantes para poner de relieve el papel y la importancia del aprendizaje informal en el contexto del aprendizaje a lo largo de toda la vida. Los resultados pueden ser una valiosa contribución al desarrollo de programas de formación para padres adoptivos y los hogares de acogida sin parentesco.

Palabras clave: teoría constructivista fundamentada, cuidado de acogida, aprendizaje informal, cambio personal

The issues of foster care have gained increasing attention in Lithuania over the past decade after the reform of foster care (de-institutionalization) was launched in the country. A child deprived of parental care is one of the most vulnerable members of society. Therefore, family-based foster care intends to provide complex assistance, satisfy a child's needs, provide conditions to live and learn in the family setting. A foster family environment rather than institutional care is considered most favourable for a child. According to the data of the Lithuanian Child Rights Protection and Adoption Service (2019), the number of children deprived of parental care remains high every year: 2,098 new cases of foster care (guardianship) were registered in 2018 (2,252 cases in 2016 and 2,524 cases in 2017). There was a total of 8,177 children (4,011 girls and 4,166 boys) deprived of parental care at the end of 2018. It is obvious that family foster care related issues are a particularly urgent problem in Lithuania both in the practical domain and in the research of political and social sciences. However, the research on this topic in education sciences is rather scarce. Foster family related questions are addressed rather narrowly with an emphasis on a foster child's needs, the challenges faced by foster parents, and the need for social assistance. Educational insights into the topic of family foster care are lacking. Meanwhile, foreign authors (Wehler, 2014; Diaz, 2017) point out that it is not only important to analyze how foster parents educate a foster child but also how foster parents learn from daily fostering experiences and how their personal change takes place. Foster parents fostering non-relative children in their family learn informally on a daily basis through everyday situations and various social interactions (Broady et al., 2010). In the process of informal learning an individual may create and generate new knowledge, establish personal values and views. It contributes to an individual's personal growth and continuous development.

Informal learning is described as a natural accompaniment to everyday life, which is not necessarily intentional learning, and so may well not be recognized even by individuals themselves as contributing to their knowledge and skills. Though informal learning was first defined around 1970, it draws increasing attention affected by the trend of lifelong learning only (Lin & Lee, 2014). It is observed that attempts are being made to develop a theoretical conceptualization of the phenomenon of informal learning by addressing the similarities and differences of formal, non-formal and informal learning (Golding, Brown & Foley, 2009), describing the types

of informal learning (Marsick, 2009; Marsick & Watkins, 2014), analyzing how the concept of informal learning developed and evolved (Carliner, 2013; Lin & Lee, 2014; Van Noy, James & Bedley, 2016, Werquin, 2016). Informal learning was addressed from different perspectives by Schugurensky (2000), Livingstone (2002), Eraut (2004), Livingstone & Sawchuk (2005), Golding, Brown and Foley (2009), Choi & Jacobs (2011), Carliner (2013), Duguid, Mundel and Schugurensky (2013), Denson et al. (2015). A discussion is being held in Lithuania about the mechanism of identification, evaluation and recognition of the competences acquired through non-formal and informal adult learning in higher education in Lithuania and Europe. Studies in Lithuania highlight the role of informal learning in the culture of lifelong learning (Zydziunaite et al., 2012). It should be noted that the studies on informal learning have been on the rise (Field & Tuckett, 2016; Nygren et al., 2019; Morrison & McCutcheon, 2019); however, Lithuanian studies mainly focus on the aspects of adult informal learning in the work setting (Zydziunaite et al., 2012; Pauriene, 2017). It should be noted that the informal learning of adults also occurs in the family setting (Van Noy, James & Bedley, 2016). Hence, we can see that empirical data on adult informal learning in the home environment are lacking. Everyday informal learning is defined as daily learning taking place at home, work or community, which is not always conscious and intentional. Informal learning in the family / home setting encompasses a full range of new information, the transfer and acceptance of knowledge, the acquisition of new skills, personal development, support for each other, access to community resources (Rogoff, Gutierrez & Callanan, 2016). There are still many unknowns about the phenomenon of informal learning taking place in the daily home environment, namely in the daily environment of the families living through a unique experience of non-relative foster care, is especially poorly studied.

According to Wehler (2014), foster parents learn more from their foster children than from professional training or counselling. Most European countries offer formalized, linear and strictly structured adult training for becoming a foster parent. However, there are no such formalized training programs that would prepare foster parents for all potential situations in the fostering process, as they are all very unique. In specific situations foster parents have to rely on what they have learnt informally through the reflection on their daily experience or communication with other foster parents. Informal learning in a foster family is a continuous and nonlinear

process; foster parents learn, largely informally, “what it looks like to be a foster parent” for each unique foster child (Wehler, 2014); they learn what they need in specific situations (MacGregor et al., 2006). Still, it is observed that research-based evidence demonstrating that the informal learning of foster parents is important (Brown, Moraes & Mayhew, 2005) and that the formalized training for foster parents should be expanded by combining experience-based learning of foster parents and by realizing that informal learning is extensive, multi-leveled, multi-layered, ever-present and everywhere-present is lacking (Wehler, 2014). The motivation, process and context of informal learning may manifest themselves to a varying degree but it may be considered a construct which combines complementary forms of learning, activities and learning outcomes, thus revealing the role of informal learning in the context of lifelong learning.

The experience of non-relative foster care may be beneficial to all members in a family; the experience provides an opportunity to learn from various daily situations (Sutton & Stack, 2013; Noble-Carr, Farnham & Dean, 2014). After a non-relative child is accepted into a family, foster parents expect that they will raise, care for and educate the foster child in their family, but an opposite process also takes place – foster parents themselves learn from the daily experience of non-relative foster care, different social interactions and themselves change in this way. It is an internal, sometimes emotionally difficult, personal change of foster parents: their beliefs, views and values are changing. A new experience of interpersonal relations is formed in the fostering process (Tryc, 2013). Foster parents undergo various emotional experiences, rethink their values and views; their personal qualities change and they get to know themselves better.

Personal change includes the reorientation of personal attitudes, worldviews, values, beliefs and ways how individuals perceive their roles in different contexts (Young, 2013). An individual’s awareness, self-reflection and contemplation about the values and purposes of one’s life, perception of relationships between oneself and the environment are required for this personal change to commence. Hence, personal change occurs by reflecting on the experience acquired when individuals transfer and adapt their new learning experience to their personal or professional life (Young, 2013). By reflecting on their experiences, foster parents rethink their values, views and goals; they learn and enhance their awareness of what they have experienced

by recognizing their personal development. All that leads to more successful non-relative child foster care.

The transformation of worldviews, beliefs, knowledge and skills is contextual, because it is through the socio-cultural context that individuals continuously experience various social interactions with the people around them (Young, 2013). Different interpersonal relations are developed in a foster family; the community and a more remote environment radiate either support or disapproval – all that influences the personal change of foster parents. Personal change takes place as an inexhaustible source of change in all other fields. A foster family is like instruments in the fostering process; it is therefore important for them to know themselves well in order to construct adequate and effective relationships with a foster child. Personal values, attitudes and beliefs directly or indirectly affect how helpful they can be to their foster child. The awareness and knowledge of one's feelings, motives and skills are essential for effective self-application in the fostering process. Good self-awareness enables the creation of effective interpersonal relationships between foster parents and a foster child. Foreign studies revealed that in non-relative foster care the personal change of foster parents takes place in interpersonal relationships both within the foster family and with the environment (Thompson et al., 2016); change occurs through the solution of the challenges arising in foster care (Diaz, 2017); the dynamics of a foster family tends to change (Tryc, 2013). Wehler (2014) revealed that the fostering experience shapes foster parents and their views in the way they associate themselves with the world and perceive it. Foster parents become the “professionals” of a certain field, because new foster care related situations determine the acquisition of new knowledge. Through their daily experience foster parents develop their problem-solving and communication skills, start understanding the needs of others better and respond to them (Tryc, 2013). However, it is not clear how the personal change of foster parents takes place in the course of non-relative foster care. Therefore, the aim of the present article is to describe the personal change of Lithuanian foster parents by revealing their subjective experience of informal learning in a family fostering a non-relative child.

Methodology

Study Design

To reveal how the personal change of Lithuanian foster parents takes place in the course of informal learning through the daily experience of child foster care, the constructivist grounded theory research strategy proposed by Charmaz (2006, 2008) was selected. Based on this research strategy, the research was conducted as a cyclical process where data collection and analysis took place together. Research memos were also continuously written and integrated into the research; the ensuing process of conceptualization was again followed by data collection until theoretical saturation was achieved. The qualitative study was conducted in Lithuania.

Sampling and Research Participants

In order to reveal how the personal change of Lithuanian foster parents through everyday experiences of foster care takes place, *initial sampling* was first applied (Charmaz, 2006). As stated by Charmaz (2006, p. 100), “initial sampling in grounded theory is where you start whereas theoretical sampling directs you where to go. For initial sampling, you establish sampling criteria for people, cases, situations, and or settings before you enter the field”. Therefore, with the aim of the research in mind, the initial main sampling criteria considered before the research were applied:

- family composition – husband, wife, and foster child (children);
- gender – representatives of both genders were included in the research in order to reveal the role of men and women in the context of informal learning and their personal change;
- age – adult foster parents participated in the study;
- form of foster care – non-relative family foster care. There is a difference between relative and non-relative foster care in a family. When a non-relative child is placed in a family, the family does not know him / her; they are not connected by blood ties; thus, it gives rise to a new experience in interpersonal relations from which the family learns;
- duration of non-family foster care – at least six months, because, according to Lithuanian laws, foster care is considered permanent

when the placement lasts six months and longer. During this period a foster child and the members of a foster family establish a mutual relationship; social interactions give rise to various experiences – the informal learning of foster parents leading to their personal change takes place throughout this experience.

Foster parents were selected by using snowball sampling. The researchers selected the first foster parents from the former one researchers' workplace, in which social workers work with foster families. They subjectively reflected the original interests of the study. Later research participants themselves proposed the new ones. The research data and the constructed categories "showed the way" where the follow-up data should be sought. Thus, the *theoretical sampling* was applied as part of the constructivist grounded theory research strategy (Charmaz, 2006), which means "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges" (Glaser, Strauss, 1967, p. 45). As the study proceeded, it became clear that it is also important to interview divorced foster parents. Four foster parents (3 women and 1 man) who divorced in the course of foster care were interviewed. The analysis of the data enabled researchers to see the complexity of learning from the daily experiences of non-relative foster care and its diverse consequences in personal change.

In total, the research included 19 foster parents (12 women, 3 of whom were divorced, and 7 men, one of whom was divorced). The age of foster parents ranges from 33 to 65 years. All foster parents have post-secondary education; they are all employed, except for one woman who is retired. The age of foster parents' biological children ranges from 13 to 19 years old. The duration of non-relative foster care varies from 3 to 23 years.

Data Collection

To collect data, *the narrative interview method* (Riessman, 2003; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), which centres on the research participant's narrative, was applied. This method of data collection focuses on the narratives told by participants, which emerge spontaneously after the researcher initiates the topic for the conversation. The main topics / questions covered during the interviews were:

- What determines the personal change of the foster parents fostering a non-relative child?
- How personal change of foster parents took place through informal learning by fostering a non-relative child?
- What factors stimulate personal change of foster parents in the contexts of everyday experiences of fostering a non-relative child?
- What factors hinder personal change of foster parents in the contexts of everyday experiences of fostering a non-relative child?

The narrative helps participants to create and express their meanings and knowledge. It focuses on the stories told by participants, the plot and narrative structures (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The study complied with the interview qualitative criteria (Tong, Sainsbury & Craig, 2007; Edwards & Holland, 2013): the researchers used to ask short questions attempting to get in-depth and detailed answers; additional questions and the clarification of specific concepts used to assist for that matter. The researchers verified interview questions and controlled their course with due regard to the participants' ability to express their thoughts, age, emotional condition. The interview focused on details rather than the participant's interpretations. The interview avoided academic language and professional jargon. The average duration of a narrative interview with a foster parent was 1 hour 20 minutes.

Data Analysis

Based on the constructivist grounded theory method, the data analysis included several stages (Charmaz, 2006; 2008): initial coding, focused coding, axial coding. Referring to the constructivist grounded theory; data collection and analysis were a continuous process (Charmaz, 2006). Hence, data coding commenced with the very first interview. In the course of *initial coding*, two major coding strategies were utilised: *line-by-line coding* where each line of the text was coded. This coding type allowed identifying both implicit concerns and precise statements and attitudes of the research participant. In this way, the researchers could identify the gaps in the collected data and to anticipate what additional data would be required. The second coding strategy – *incident by incident* – was applied where the transcribed text was divided into incidents explaining one theme, event or process. Incident with incident could be compared; the data could be compared with other data and incidents. The result of initial data coding is

the codes constructed for the collected data, which clearly show the generalized content of the data group (Charmaz, 2006). They explain the stories told by the research participants, their meanings and actions. In the course of *focused coding* analytically essential, most significant and/or recurrent codes identified at the time of initial coding were selected (Charmaz, 2006). All the available data were scrutinized and additional empirical information, which could better reflect the selected codes, was collected. Following the constructivist grounded theory procedures, selective, specific and conceptual subcategories were constructed by combining the codes obtained during initial coding and comparing data with data. During the stage of *axial coding*, the categories were constructed into a certain system with the major category (-ies) as its axis. This system helps to find answers to the questions such as ‘when, how, why, with what consequences’. Categories are related with subcategories which specify the properties and dimensions of categories.

Trustworthiness

The qualitative study complied with the major research trustworthiness criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2006; Cope, 2014).

To ensure the *credibility* of the findings, the researchers represent what the participants tell, think, feel and do as accurately as possible. Prolonged involvement in the phenomenon in question in its daily context as well as the development of a sense of trust and confidence of the research participants with the researchers contributed to the assurance of this criterion. The study lasted four years. The data analysis is presented by illustrating it with authentic passages from the empirical material. It controlled the biases of the researchers.

To ensure the criterion of *dependability*, attention was continuously paid to ensure the consistent application of the chosen constructivist grounded theory strategy and the collection and analysis of the research data in accordance with methodological requirements.

Though the criterion of *transferability* in qualitative studies is always problematic as they do not aim for a representative sample but rather for a thorough and in-depth understanding and clarification of research participants (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtler, 2006), the researchers believe

that the findings are also useful in interpreting other similar cases. The findings are also meaningful for other foster families, not only for the participants of this research. The phenomenon may also be studied in different settings by involving other research participants, e.g. when raising/fostering a child with a disability or nursing a patient.

The criterion of *confirmability* shows whether the study could be repeated and similar findings and conclusions could be obtained and whether another researcher who conducts a similar study would confirm the findings of this study. Considerable attention was paid to the neutrality of the findings in this study. The writing of research memos on the personal position concerning the issue in question served this purpose; it is also thoroughly described how categories were formulated and coding solutions and findings were made; the findings include rich illustrations with interview passages.

Ethics

The study was conducted in line with the following major ethical principles in qualitative research: respect for participants, protection of dignity and reduction of anxiety, informed consent, confidentiality (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001; Konza, 2005; Draucker, Martsof & Poole, 2009; Vanclay, Baines & Taylor, 2013; Sanjari et al., 2014; Dempsey et al., 2016; Raheim et al., 2016; Roth & von Unger, 2018). All the above principles of research ethics are interconnected and supplement one another.

Respect for participants. During the study the researchers tried to demonstrate respect for the participants and their living world by viewing them as autonomous individuals capable of independent decision-making, not judging their choices, not discriminating them on the grounds of their views, gender, religion, nationality or race and by ensuring that their views are faithfully recorded and given due consideration in the research report (Vanclay, Baines & Taylor, 2013). The creation of the confidence-based relationship with the participants and the demonstration of the researchers' empathy helped to guarantee the principle of respect for the participants and their private life. The researchers did not view the participants as a means for achieving the research goal but as the co-authors of the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Part of respect for participants is implied by the terminology of 'participant', rather than 'respondent' or 'subject' (Vanclay, Baines & Taylor, 2013).

Protection of dignity and reduction of anxiety of participants. It is yet another important ethical principle in qualitative research which was adhered to in the present study. Conducting social qualitative research on sensitive topics raises a number of ethical challenges, as sensitive topics may cause a psychological tension and anxiety for participants (Draucker, Marsolf & Poole, 2009). Researchers may evoke various emotional responses such as sadness, anger, anxiety or fear (Dempsey et al., 2016). Therefore, while interviewing, the researchers paid much attention to the emotional condition of the participants and the reduction of the arising anxiety in order to avoid any disturbance of their mental (emotional) health (Sanjari et al., 2014). In order to preserve the dignity and to reduce anxiety of the participants during the interview, the researchers created the relationship based on openness and goodwill. They did not resort to any psychological pressure and made every effort for the participants to feel safe; they took into account their emotional preparedness to speak on sensitive topics. In case any negative memories and experiences of the participants arose, the conditions for a therapeutic environment to create were ensured. If time for concentration or emotional self-control was required during the interview, emotional support was provided and conditions for a free and open conversation were created. After the participant calmed down, the researchers used to come back to interview questions the answers to which would usually become even more open and deeper; in other cases, the researchers used to agree on a different time for an interview.

Informed consent. All participants were informed about the aim of the interview, the major features of the study design, process, potential risk and benefits for the participants. They were provided information about confidentiality and about who would have access to the data collected. The participants were informed that they were free to decide about their participation in the study, they had a right to express their thoughts freely and they could withdraw from the study at any time or refuse answering the questions. Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden (2001) refer to it as the *principle of autonomy*.

In accordance with the principle of *confidentiality*, it was ensured that the personal data enabling the identification of participants would not be disclosed. Therefore, the names of the participants and other persons mentioned during the interview were coded; no information enabling their identification was provided. Whereas a husband and a wife were included in

the study, they were interviewed separately and informed that what they told would not be disclosed to other family members. The participant could reveal what he/she spoke about during the interview to his/her family members as much as he/she liked. In this way, the participant could feel safe that he/she could share his/her experiences openly. In order not to intrude on the privacy of the foster family and not to disturb the rhythm of its everyday life, the place and time convenient for foster parents was agreed upon individually.

Findings

The findings of the qualitative study revealed that the personal change of foster parents takes place through both conscious, intentional and purposeful informal learning aiming to self-actualize and to become good foster parents; and through random, spontaneous, experiential, not always conscious and not always purposeful informal learning by discovering oneself anew. Two different directions of informal learning were revealed in the study. Some learning trajectories are oriented towards the goal and aspirations for the future – how to become a good foster parent; yet others focus on the past and former situations by learning from the past, thus revealing oneself in a new light. Both directions of informal learning take place simultaneously, repeatedly and supplement one another. Hence, informal learning in a foster family is seen as a swinging, upward, spiral movement in which the personal change of foster parents takes place (see Figure 1):

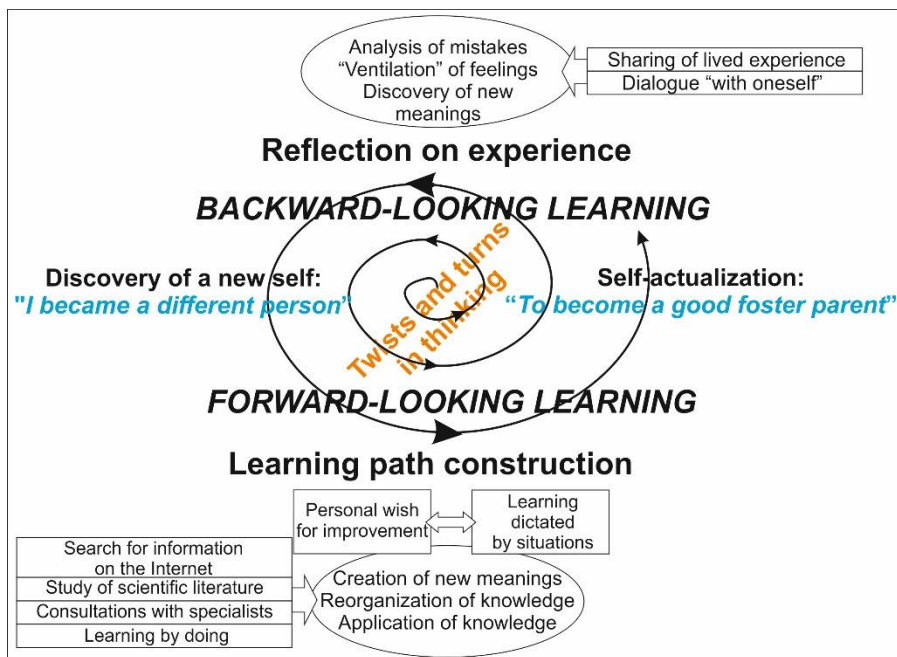


Figure 1. Personal change of foster parents through self-actualization and discovery of a new self (graphic memo)

Results

Personal Change of Foster Parents in order to Self-Actualize

The personal change of foster parents takes place in the attempt to self-actualize and to become a good foster parent to a non-relative child. Foster parents construct their way of learning in a conscious and purposeful manner; they take the planned steps of learning in order to achieve their goal, i.e. "to become a good foster parent" (GM10). Though the main goal is to self-actualize through non-relative foster care and to become a good foster parent, smaller goals dictated by the context and unique daily situations are set as well: "it depends on your needs today" (GT1).

Foster parents change by moving forwards intentionally through a predefined learning process, which starts with a formal training course for foster parents. This course helps future foster parents trust themselves more:

“that knowledge, that information calms you down” (GT3); *“the more you know, the safer you feel”* (GM1). The course helps foster parents realize what they can expect from their foster children and how to understand them:

It was that training that helped me realize how the child feels taken from his environment into one place, then another; he came to some unfamiliar people without anything of his own, so how can he feel safe, how can he be grateful? There is nothing like that; what he feels is fear and anxiety (GT7).

After a foster child is placed into a family, the person's further road of learning is not only constructed by the person him/herself aiming for personal development and knowledge but also by certain situations arising in a family. Not only an individual wish to learn but also the process of learning dictated by the environment and different situations in the solution of daily challenges can be observed. Nevertheless, decisions as to how and what to learn are taken by the foster parent him/herself by taking into account *“what I need at that particular moment”* (GT20).

Foster parents tend to look for the solutions and answers to daily challenges in online portals and forums:

I did much reading online, I used to spend time in the forums of foster parents; of course, your experience is always unique, and you cannot find the same experience online. But that simply helps you raise questions and you look for answers. You find new meanings, see everything in a new light, reorganize your knowledge – what you know and what you don't know (GM2).

Foster parents gain new knowledge from scientific literature and scholarly articles:

I was looking through various scholarly articles, but there is not much literature in Lithuanian. I used to read and search how to help my foster child, how to overcome the arising hysteria, how to recreate the bond (GM1).

Foster parents learn and gain knowledge from other foster families. Through socialization foster parents solve various arising problems related

to non-relative foster care, relationships in a family and the new situation together. They search for solutions by sharing their experience:

Self-help groups really helped me. There is a psychologist working with foster parents once a week while children are spending time in another room; you are calm, you tell your problem, you select the biggest one, everybody is sitting in a circle, some eight people in total. We pick the biggest problem, the burning one, which hurts most of all, and everyone shares his or her experience and opinion. And it is really good. You take the bull by the horns and pull it out; you analyze the problem in detail and you realize where it comes from, why it happens as it does, in great detail, based on the experience of all the people who are present. That person becomes stronger, gets hope (GM11).

After facing challenges in non-relative foster care, foster parents search for solutions and new knowledge by consulting professionals:

We went to look for some help, because what was happening was already unbearable. We turned to psychologists, various professionals, various self-help groups for help. I attended various lectures. I went everywhere I could (GM10).

In this way, foster parent accumulate and reorganize the knowledge they already have by simultaneously constructing new meanings: “*your vision and views change*” (GM2). Foster parents try to apply the newly acquired or reconstructed knowledge in their daily life:

Those thoughts then again come into my mind: What were we told in that course? What were we told about such situations, what should we do? You remember, for instance, that in that situation you need to hug. Or you think, wait, what was it written? Ah, well, I need to give it a try (GT3).

Foster parents change by trying to self-actualize through non-relative foster care; they see this self-actualization through the feeling of necessity: “*you realize that this child has no one else but you*” (GM1); they see it through the pride in the tangible results:

It becomes a joy. We see how those children are unfolding every day, how they become more free, how they calm down, how it is becoming possible and easy for them to accept those daily things (GT7).

Self-actualization is sensed through the appreciation of other people when others notice the efforts made by foster parents:

I am so proud when teachers praise my foster girls for their dutifulness, respect, activeness, and kindness. They learned most of those things from me and my husband. It makes us happy and inspires us not to be sorry about becoming foster parents (GM15).

Religious foster parents find meaning in non-relative foster care through the prism of religion, i.e. they perceive it as “going towards sacredness”: *“it leads to perfection and sacredness; there are many roads to God, and foster care is one of them”* (GM11).

Through construction of their way of learning, future-orientation and self-actualization in non-relative foster care, foster parents develop and grow personally by acquiring, reconstructing and applying the required knowledge and constructing new meanings.

Personal Change of Foster Parents by Discovering a New Self

The personal change of foster parents also takes place by learning from experience. By reflecting on their experience, foster parents gradually realize that various daily situations enabled their growth and improvement: *“I believe that we got more from our foster daughter than we gave her”* (GM1). Foster parents refer to it as the lessons of life: *“You live and you learn, you go through your experience and make conclusions out of it”* (GT1).

The reflection on one’s experience takes place when foster parents analyze their mistakes and learn from them:

You make a mistake, analyze it and make your conclusions. You apply them and try not to make the same mistake in a different situation. You analyze what you did good, what you did bad in order to do it better next time. I agree that there were lessons in my life which I needed to learn for a number of times; I used to make the

same mistake repeatedly, but then if you analyze it, you become more alert (GT1).

Experience is reflected through the continuous identification of the arising feelings and their “ventilation”:

If we were alone and we had no friends to ventilate our feelings with, I don’t know how it all would have ended (GM2).

New meanings are gradually discovered:

I have always thought that everything is black and white. You need to do it this or that way. But when you fail, you lower your expectations. You put less pressure on yourself (GM15).

The reflection on experience is developed through the sharing of personal experience with others. Foster parents share their experience and feelings within their family. They search for solutions together:

We sit down every evening and we talk: the situation is like this, the situation is like that, and we talk, we think what to do, what to change, what methods to apply. Every evening we talk and we try again and again (GM10).

Foster parents share their feelings and exchange their knowledge among themselves, thus learning from each other:

Every day I and my husband used to sit and discuss how we were feeling. We used to share what we experienced that day, how we were doing, what was difficult. He used to ask for my advice. And I was asking for his opinion (GM1).

The personal change of foster parents also takes place through the dialogue “with oneself”, when, reflecting on various experiences, they rethink what they learned, how this learning took place and how they were feeling about it. Diary-writing helps to develop this dialogue “with oneself”:

Sometimes I used to sit and do some therapeutic writing. It really helped me. It was as if diary-writing: what I lived through, what I experienced, what emotions I had (GM2).

The reflection on experience by sharing one's experiences with others and by having a dialogue "with oneself" enables foster parents to discover and see a new self:

I feel that if not for her, I wouldn't have known that some of my qualities even existed, that they were inside me, both good and bad. If not for our foster daughter, I would have probably lived my whole life without knowing that I could react this way or that I could have such feelings (GM1).

Foster parents get to know themselves better; they see such qualities which they have not seen before:

When I took those children, I realized how bad I was. Until then it seemed to me that I was good. Though I test my conscience, I make confessions, I work in a school. But it was only after I took those children that I saw all those things – impatience, lack of love, how I could not control myself, my anger. I saw everything bad that I had inside me (GM11).

Foster parents realize their limitations:

After all, I have been working in a school for 15 years; I certainly know something about pedagogy. But with these children you can put that pedagogy aside, it does not work, in fact, nothing works at first. I realized that I cannot do everything, that I'm not almighty, that not everything works (GM10).

They learn self-control by accepting the situation which is hard to change and develop their patience:

It helped me cope with my emotions. Because I really see that I now have a more detached view of the situation. It teaches some self-control (GM2).

As foster parents change through the purposeful construction of their road of learning aimed at self-actualization and through the reflection on the lived experience, we can see how they experience certain “twists and turns in their thinking”:

You need to change your thinking. I myself used to experience some twists and turns in my thinking, I had to change myself every month. You need to rethink everything; you need to change yourself (GM10).

The foster care of a non-relative child is seen as a continuous improvement and personal growth of foster parents:

Foster care is a permanent job, continuous improvement, development of your mind. I feel like a professor. After all, I’ve attended so many courses and read so many books on foster care (GM11).

It changed me. I’ve had so many experiences; I’ve visited so many psychologists and psychiatrists. I don’t know what I would be like without my foster child (GM15).

The personal change of foster parents takes place by reflecting on the lived experience and by applying the new way of thinking in everyday life. The reflection on experience enables them to realize what they acquired, what they learned, how they changed, to know themselves better and to take adequate decisions in order to provide successful foster care for a non-relative child.

Discussion

The informal learning of foster parents from the daily experience of non-relative foster care leads to their personal change. Foster parents consider the experience of non-relative foster care to be the process of their personal growth and change (Diaz, 2017). Our study detailed how this personal growth of foster parents takes place; it revealed that through informal learning foster parents get to know themselves better. This experience enables foster parents “to discover a new self”, i.e. to rethink their attitudes, worldviews, models of

behaviour; to learn to accept situations as they are. Non-relative foster care as if expands the foster parents' perception of parenthood. They see the difference in biological and foster parenting and also learn to take responsibility for other, disadvantaged, children; they learn to be foster parents (Wehler, 2014; Diaz, 2017). The foster care of a non-relative child in a family is viewed as a new and different experience of parenthood in such a way that it helps to nurture an unconditional love for the child and through that child to another person. Learning through empathy is a special way to understand new things (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Our research revealed that foster parents learn to be more empathetic and expand their limits of tolerance by accepting a non-relative child whose raising and care differ from the experience of biological parenting. Developing an emotional connection with foster children and being motivated to help them expands foster parents' understanding of foster children and their needs. Empathy is a strong impulse to help one another, and stereotypes, and prejudices are destroyed in relation to the foster child.

The personal change of foster parents takes place with a view to becoming good foster parents. Foster parents see non-relative foster care as a positive and meaningful activity of their whole life nurturing the feelings of pride when they see how, thanks to them, their foster children change to the positive side (Veltman, 2016; Diaz, 2017). Our study revealed that non-relative foster care is not only seen as a meaningful activity; through foster care foster parents also seek self-actualization. In this way, they seek to become good foster parents to a non-relative child in a conscious and purposeful manner. They try to pursue this goal through the intentional and predefined construction of their way of learning leading towards personal development and growth. Wehler (2014) argues that foster parents construct their understanding about certain things through learning from various situations, through informal learning. Our study revealed that in the course of informal learning foster parents do not only accumulate and reconstruct their knowledge but their attitudes, values and beliefs change as well. For the personal change of foster parents to take place through the purposeful construction of the way of learning, self-regulation or control, independence, initiative, ability of conscious selection of learning activities of foster parents as learners are important (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Loyens, Magda & Rikers, 2008; Cunningham, 2010; McConnell, 2013). Foster parents themselves plan and realize learning as the precondition for their life-long development.

The personal change of foster parents also takes place through the reflection on personal experience. Foster parents speak about the difference of their foster child (which does not fit their understanding of “normal”); however, when faced with a different child, they see themselves in a different light as well – they discover their new reactions, see the qualities which they have not seen before. That “difference” provokes them to take a look at themselves. By seeing themselves in a different light, foster parents also open to the differences of others with courage and without disapproval. Though at the beginning foster parents find the child’s differences frightening, the experience of non-relative foster care teaches them to accept those differences with an open mind. Wehler (2014) states that reflection helps to produce insight into the experience and brings meaning to it. Our study also revealed that through the reflection on their experience foster parents discover themselves anew and see their character qualities, views, beliefs which came to the fore during the process of non-relative foster care and which they have not seen before. Schugurensky (2000) highlights the importance of the learner’s reflection; the learner should become aware that though not intentionally, through other activities, some learning has still taken place. The learner should consciously reflect on the acquired learning experience, create new concepts of experience in order to test them again in new situations (Kolb & Kolb, 2008).

Wehler (2014) revealed that in the course of informal learning foster parents use two major types of learning, i.e. situated learning and constructivist learning. In order to make personal change through purposeful construction of the learning pathway, learner self-control, autonomy, initiative, ability to make conscious choices in learning activities are important (Cunningham, 2010; McConnell, 2013). Our study revealed that foster parents plan and implement learning as a condition of their lifelong development, but during informal learning foster parents not only accumulate and re-design their knowledge, but their attitudes, values and beliefs also change. So the unconscious, inaccurate and accidental transformation of the person is seen. Our study also confirmed that informal learning (informal knowledge) is actively created by people themselves, reflecting on their experiences and engaging in discourse with others (Cobb & Yackel, 2011). Additionally, our study also revealed that foster parents learn from daily experiences unintentionally and undergo their change through informal learning; however, more types of informal learning can be observed. Foster

parents learn through situated, purposeful, self-regulated, self-directed learning processes as well as through non-structured, often unconscious, random, spontaneous learning or experiential learning.

Wehler (2014) took interest and tried to understand the role of informal learning for foster parents and how they comprehend their informal learning experiences. His study confirmed that formalized training for foster parents is not enough; informal learning plays a very significant role when foster parents already have non-relative children in their family. After all, they face different and unique situations which provoke what foster parents need to learn at that very moment. Formalized courses teach future foster parents to become foster parents, but they only learn to be foster parents through their lived experiences. Our study also confirmed that formalized training for foster parents and their informal learning in the foster care process are both very significant forms of learning. A foster care of a non-relative child causes many tensions and challenges, but as they are solved, the foster parents experience unity and strength, and greater trust in one another (Tryc, 2013). Our study also showed that the personal change of foster parents takes place through different forms of learning. The realization of personal change leads to successful experience of non-relative foster care.

Conclusions, Study Limitations and Future Research

Through non-relative foster care foster parents learn from their daily life situations informally through different interactions and situations. Thanks to this learning, the personal change of foster parents takes place. The study revealed that different and supplementary types of informal learning emerge in a foster family. A part of this learning takes place through the person's intentional orientation towards the future with an attempt to self-actualize and to improve personally. Hence, this learning focuses on the construction of the personal path of learning. Yet another part of informal learning is seen as random and spontaneous learning when learners do not even realize that they have acquired certain competences. It is only by looking at their past and reflecting on their experience that foster parents discover a new self. The personal change of foster parents takes place through both the reflection on their lived experience with others and through a dialogue with oneself by applying that experience in one's personal, social and community life. The reflection on their experience enables foster parents to realize what they have

acquired, to get to know themselves better, to take adequate decisions and to care for a foster child successfully.

The informal learning taking place in non-relative family foster care is construed as a unique social-educational phenomenon, which was approached through the subjective concepts of experience of Lithuanian foster parents. It is a new topic in the domain of education as well as other social sciences in Lithuania. The research enabled to see the informal learning of a foster family as not always predictable, continuously ramifying in multiple directions and limitless, where the road of learning is constantly constructed and reconstructed intentionally and consciously as well as spontaneously and randomly. The research describes the main orientations of informal learning taking place in a non-relative foster family with respect to time by revealing how a personal road of learning is constructed and how personal change takes place by reflecting on the lived experience. A broader and more complex understanding of adult's everyday informal learning was revealed.

The results of this research can contribute to the improvement of foster parents training courses both in Lithuania and abroad. Professionals working in the child care system are encouraged to extend foster parents training courses and organize ongoing support seminars for foster families already fostering a non-relative child. Sharing experiences and learning from each other will allow the foster families to respond more successfully to daily challenges and seek successful foster child care. Continuing education of foster family's needs to be strengthened to include topics such as attachment bonding between foster parents and foster child, early childhood trauma intervention.

Research participants were Lithuanian foster parents. The selection of research participants from only one country was perceived as study limitation. On the other hand, it revealed the situation in Lithuania in the hope that this study would encourage similar research in foreign countries. Another limitation of the study is that adoptive parents and foster parents caring for relatives' children were not included. Thus, in the future, researchers are encouraged to expand the field of study by including parents caring for relatives and / or adoptive parents, and compare the findings with the results of this study.

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