

LEARNING THROUGH THE EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF BIOLOGICAL / FOSTER PARENTING

Ramunė Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė

Vilma Žydžiūnaitė

Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania

Abstract. Learning through everyday experiences is understood as a complex process during which the learner undergoes various social interactions; it is an emotional, cognitive and behavioural process of learning. The aim of the study was to describe the process of learning of parents and foster parents through the everyday experiences of biological/foster parenting by revealing the similarities and differences of their experiences. The article presents the findings of the qualitative research. Applying the narrative interview, 4 parents and 8 foster parents were interviewed in the study. The data were analysed by using an inductive qualitative content analysis method. The findings revealed that the personal change of parents and foster parents and their growth in parenthood takes place in the process of learning from everyday experiences. The birth of a child into a family as well as the acceptance of a non-relative child into a foster family pose a number of challenges and cause confusion, but it is the experience of giving, joy and community too. The most striking difference between biological and foster parenting is revealed through the experience of 'emotional triangle' which is the only characteristic of foster parents. Communication with the foster child's biological family is one of the most complex aspects of foster parenting.

Keywords: fostering, learning through experience, parenting, qualitative content analysis.

Introduction

Learning from everyday life is a complex process during which the person experiences various social situations, and the perceived content of experience is transformed cognitively, emotively and practically. The experience is integrated into the person's biography resulting in a continually changing person (Jarvis, 2012).

Everyday life is a surprisingly unresearched topic from the perspective of learning, but once we delve deeper and start analysing, we recognise the significance of everyday life in the person's learning (Jarvis, 2012). It is acknowledged that learning contexts are everywhere (Edwards, 2009). However, the phenomenon of learning from everyday experiences is sufficiently difficult

to research, as it may be unrecognizable and unnoticed by the learners themselves (Eraut, 2010).

The learning of parents and foster parents through the everyday experiences of biological/foster parenting is perceived as the phenomenon socially constructed in the reality of everyday life (Burr, 2000), which takes place through diverse everyday interactions, encounters and experiences by reflecting on the new situation in the family. The everyday family life is an intersubjective world where we share and act in each other's being (Berger & Luckmann, 1999). Persons interact, share their experiences and learn from them. Parents raising their children and foster parents raising their biological children and fostering non-relative children learn from the everyday experiences of biological/foster parenting. According to Di Silvio (2012), parenting in an emotional, cognitive and behavioral process of learning; it is "natural" learning in the everyday environment. Various studies (Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė & Snieškienė, 2011; Sutton & Stack, 2013; Noble-Carr et al., 2014; Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė, 2015) revealed that the experiences of non-relative foster care¹ also provides an opportunity to learn from various everyday situations. Hence, learning from everyday experiences also takes place in case of non-relative foster care. Foster parents "find fostering to be a life-enhancing experience" (Diaz, 2017: p. 4). Wehler (2014) argues that foster parents learn to be foster parents on a everyday basis. However, it is not clear how learning through everyday experiences takes place. How are experiences of learning of parents raising their children and foster parents caring for their biological children and fostering non-relative children similar and in what aspects does it differ?

This article construes the learning of parents and non-relative foster parents through everyday experiences as a unique social-educational phenomenon which may be approached through the subjective concepts of experiences of parents and foster parents. Consequently, the *research questions* are raised: How does the learning of parents and foster parents through the everyday experiences of biological/foster parenting take place? How are these experiences similar and how they differ?

The aim of the study was to describe the process of learning of parents and foster parents through the everyday experiences of biological/foster parenting by revealing the similarities and differences.

¹ The term applies to families to which a non-related child (children) is placed for permanent (longer than 6 months) care which by the decision of the court of Lithuania "shall be established for children deprived of parental care who, under the existing conditions, are unable to return into their natural family, and their care, upbringing, representation and protection of their rights and legitimate interests are entrusted to another family" (Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania, 2000, Book III, Article 3. 256).

Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection

The study used purposive sampling by involving those participants who share similar characteristics and may provide rich and relevant data pertaining to the research question (Tong, Sainsbury, & Craig, 2007).

The research included 4 parents (2 women and 2 men) raising their biological children and 8 foster parents (4 women and 4 men) who raise their biological children and foster non-relative children for a period longer than 6 months.

To collect data, a narrative interview, with the participant's narrative in the focus of attention, was applied. The narrative enables participants to create and express their meanings and knowledge. It focuses on the stories told by participants, their plots and structures of stories (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The research participants were asked to tell about their everyday experiences of biological/foster parenting and learning from it.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed on the basis of an inductive qualitative content analysis method (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Elo et al., 2014). The transcribed interviews were first carefully read for several times. Then a unit for analysis was selected, which by the decision of the researchers was at least one sentence. The whole text was coded by dividing it into subcategories, which were later compared and linked into categories. Subcategories and categories were made of empirical qualitative data only.

Ethics

The research complied with the following principles of research ethics (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001): *autonomy* – the research participants could freely decide on their participation in the research; conditions were created for them to freely share their experiences during the interview; *beneficence* – the research participants were presented the research aim and purpose; they were explained that the data provided would inflict no harm on them; *confidentiality* – to protect the identity of the research participants, their names and the names of the people mentioned during the interviews were changed; no other personal information on the research participants disclosing their identity is made public; *justice* – the research participants could receive comprehensive information on the research; the research sought no personal benefit for the researchers; it relied on the principle of justice; the information provided by the research participants was analysed in full. Personal situation of the research participants was monitored (stress, changes in self-perception)

(Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Not to intrude on the family’s privacy and not to violate the rhythm of its everyday life (Humphries, 2008), the place and time of the interview was agreed upon with the research participants individually.

Findings

The process of learning of parents and foster parents through the everyday experiences of biological/foster parenting is revealed through the main categories: confusion, personal change, growth in parenthood, addressing challenges, sharing experiences, support from others, ‘emotional triangle,’ pain of separation. When comparing the everyday experiences of learning of parents and foster parents, we can see the overlapping experience of the two groups of participants as well as certain differences within the subcategories (see Table 1).

Table 1 **Learning of parents and foster parents through the everyday experiences of biological/ foster parenting**

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY (foster parents)	SUBCATEGORY (parents)	
CONFUSION	Internal fight	Shock determined by life changes	
	Doubts driven by the choice made	“Everything is about the child”	
	Overcoming oneself	Change of priorities	
		Reconciliation of family and work	
		Creation of a new family model	
			Losing oneself (woman)
PERSONAL CHANGE	Expanding the limits of tolerance	Becoming aware of personally important values	
	Learning to accept life challenges	Becoming aware of personal limits	
	Re-discovering oneself		
	“Reducing oneself” for the sake of another person		
	Learning to enjoy life		
GROWTH IN PARENTHOOD	Learning tolerance	Learning forgiveness to others (woman)	Dissociation from one’s biological family (man)
	Learning to accept responsibility for others	Becoming aware of one’s self-esteem (woman)	Change of the image associated with the father’s role (man)
	Becoming aware of the differences of biological and foster parenting		

	Learning self-control	
	Increasing one's patience	
	Becoming aware of the meaning of biological/foster parenting	
ADDRESSING CHALLENGES	Reading scientific literature	
	Search for information on the Internet	
	Analysis of personal mistakes and those of others	
	Cooperation	
SHARING EXPERIENCE	Helpfulness	
	Better knowledge of one another	
	Solidarity	
	Support	
	Confidence in another person	
SUPPORT FROM OTHERS	Help from family members	
	Support from friends	
	Assistance from the community	
'EMOTIONAL TRIANGLE'	Loss of stability	
	Loss of patience	
	Fear for one's security	
	Becoming 'hostages of the situation'	
PAIN OF SEPARATION	Balancing between 'to possess' and 'to let go'	
	Mourning	
	Withdrawal	

Confusion

Both the birth of a biological child or the acceptance of a non-relative child into the family causes confusion and makes the family go through various feelings. As stated by the participants in the study, these experiences differ.

The birth of children changes the family's life beyond recognition. Parents undergo the shock determined by the changes in life: *"it was such a shock for me that everything changed completely and for good. Life will never be as it used to be before"* (Mother M). The life of the family starts revolving around the child: *"you no longer live for yourself"* (Father G). When caring for their children, parents have to limit their personal needs and refuse certain interests and goals: *"I used to do what I like, and it is no longer like that now"* (Mother M). Priorities of parents change as well. They used to have more time for their hobbies. When the child was born, the new experience made them rethink their priorities: *"our priorities changed completely; there is suddenly a new life, and naturally you have to choose what you really need in life"* (Father V). Parents learn to reconcile family and work: *"trying to fit in your work is a difficult challenge"* (Father G). They learn to create new rules and to combine their and the child's needs. Spouses accept all that as learning, which is

emotionally challenging: *“this learning is not easy, we create everything again”* (Mother R).

The analysis revealed the unique experience of women/mothers. Female participants told that after the child was born, they felt as if they were losing themselves: *“I had a feeling of disappearing – where am I? And suddenly I realised that I was not taking care of myself at all”* (Mother M). Mothers feel that they as if disappear; they get immersed in the child’s world, caring and upbringing, thus forgetting and gradually losing themselves. Nevertheless, gradually, by reflecting on their experiences and receiving the support from their spouse and family, women rediscover themselves and recognise themselves as a different person: not only as a woman and wife but also as a mother. They discover how meaningful their new role actually is.

Meanwhile, the foster parents who care for their biological children and accept a non-relative child into their family already lived through the experience of birth and parenting of their biological child; after a non-relative child comes to their family, they as well undergo confusion in the family, but it manifests itself through different experiences compared to biological children. Before accepting a non-relative child into their family, foster parents experience an internal fight: *“my greatest fear was – what will I do with that unfamiliar child in my family?”* (Foster Father A). Even when the family decides to accept the child and the child is placed to the foster family, foster parents may experience doubts about their choice: *“I was sitting all pale for the first few months thinking: ‘What have I done? Should I try to return those children or should I try to live somehow?’”* (Foster Mother B). Foster parents feel no natural connection to the foster child which they share with their biological children: *“I still feel that this is not my child”* (Foster Mother A). They learn to overcome themselves to accept a ‘different child.’ At first, foster parents try to apply the experience of parenting their biological children to foster care; they try to change the foster child. However, they gradually realise that there is no need to change the foster child; they have to accept the child as he/she is: *“I had to overcome myself again and again to accept her differences”* (Foster Father T).

Personal change

Personal change of parents and foster parents driven by variety of everyday experiences and different social interactions takes place in both biological and foster parenting.

After a child is born, parents become aware of the values which they find personally important:

“the family leads to true values. The environment tends to knock you out of the way, and you start thinking that power, honour, good earnings and twice-a-year travels are your values; they are the good that you wish for

yourself. But in reality being with children and playing with them in the yard are much more than all that honour taken together” (Father G).

When parenting their biological children, parents start seeing and accepting their limitations: *“I accept that I will still make a lot of mistakes, because no one is perfect. You have to do as much as you can” (Father V).*

Meanwhile, foster parents expand the limits of their tolerance by learning from the experience of non-relative foster care: *“patience is what she taught me most of all. The patience learnt now helps me with my son as well” (Foster Father T).* Non-relative foster care is a new experience for foster parents in which they face various challenges. Thus, this experience creates conditions for them to learn to accept other life challenges: *“perhaps it prepares me for other challenges” (Foster Mother A).*

Both parents and foster parents rediscover themselves: *“first of all, I saw such qualities within me which I have never thought I could have. Both positive and negative. Some of them would not have even come up with my own children.” (Foster Mother A).* *“Children are like a mirror. They teach us, and this gives rise to plenty of good things. I am rediscovering myself” (Father G).* The personal change of parents and foster parents takes place through their learning to overcome their egoism and their “reduction” for the sake of another: *“fatherhood gradually forces you to put your pride and egoism aside” (Father V).* *“She allowed me ‘to die’. I mean my egoism” (Foster Mother A).* Parents and foster parents view this decrease in egoism as their personal maturity and development. They learn from their biological children and foster children to enjoy life and to appreciate what they have got: *“all children teach you to be happy about elementary things, they teach you simplicity” (Father G).* *“I saw that all kinds of small things can bring you so much happiness” (Foster Mother B).*

Growth in parenthood

When children are born, parents learn the roles of a mother and a father. Even though experienced in parenting their biological children, foster parents who accept a non-relative child into their family also claim that they experience their further growth in parenthood.

Female participants stated that they learn forgiveness to others: *“I used to be a perfectionist, I am now more forgiving” (Mother M).* Motherhood also made them aware of their worth: *“I am now aware of my worth. This experience gave me the understanding that I am important” (Mother M).* Meanwhile, men/fathers see their growth in fatherhood as the dissociation from their biological family and the change in their understanding of the father’s role. Fathers realised *“what it means to be a father” (Father V).*

Meanwhile, foster parents learn to be tolerant towards another person and to take responsibility for others: “*you have to learn to take responsibility for another child*” (Foster Mother S). They see and realise the differences in biological and foster parenting: “*what works on your children may not necessarily work on foster children*” (Foster Mother S). According to foster parents, they would not have learned all those things (tolerance, taking of responsibility for another person, awareness of the differences in biological and foster parenting) if they were only parenting their biological children.

Both parents and foster parents learn to control their emotions continuously: “*I mean emotional self-control in trying to convey something to children, to educate them*” (Father V). “*It helped me cope with my emotions; I really see that I now have a more detached view of the situation*” (Foster Mother S). They learn to be patient: “*at least the limits of my patience definitely expanded*” (Mother A). Gradually, both parents and foster parents discover the meaning of parenthood/foster care. They find perfect moments in their everyday routine and enjoy them:

“*without children, everything in the world stops. You realise that there is much work to do, and it is hard, but those efforts pay off when you see those children. When you see those moments of joy, when the child comes and says, ‘mom, dad,’ when the child smiles*” (Father V).

“*We see how those children are unfolding everyday, how they become more free and calm, how it becomes possible and simple for them to accept those everyday things. It makes me happy*” (Foster Father A).

Therefore, the growth in parenthood, which begins when biological children are born and raised, continues when non-relative children are taken into the family.

Addressing challenges

Parents and foster parents face the everyday challenges of biological/foster parenting. They search for solutions by reading scientific literature: “*I was looking through various scholarly articles; I used to read about how to create a bond between myself and a non-biological child*” (Foster Mother S). They search for information on the Internet or in various forums: “*I used to spend time in forums to see what those situations are, I used to look for answers*” (Foster Mother B). The learning of parents and foster parents in addressing the everyday challenges of biological/foster parenting also takes place through the analysis of personal mistakes or those of others: “*these are the lessons of life – you go through your own experience and make conclusions. You make a mistake, analyse it and try not to repeat it in a different situation*” (Father T). Parents and foster parents search for solutions collectively, through cooperation

and occasional involvement of their biological or foster children: *“children themselves help; you sit with the child and you talk”* (Mother R).

Sharing experience

It is important for spouses to share their experience both in parenting their biological children and in non-relative foster care.

Helpfulness of spouses is very important in biological and foster parenting: *“it is necessary to support each other to make things easier”* (Father V). *“We used to share the time that we had to endure equally”* (Foster Father T). Spouses see each other’s differences, try to accept them and thus get to know each other better: *“you simply feel the openness of the other person and you get to know that person better”* (Father V). *“We saw each other’s reactions that we have never seen before”* (Foster Father T). Spouses get the feeling of solidarity: *“what the situation gave us was our solidarity”* (Father T). *“It really strengthens us, because you see that there are two of us, we will handle everything, we can do it”* (Foster Mother S). Spouses support each other, stand behind each other’s back and learn to accept challenges together through continuous sharing and discussion of their experiences: *“we try to row together, we learn to take decisions together”* (Father V). *“Everyday I and my husband used to sit next to each other and discuss how we felt; we shared how we were doing, what was difficult”* (Foster Mother A). This is how confidence in each other grows: *“I realised that I had to leave some space for my husband where he could build a connection with the foster child”* (Foster Mother B). *“I trusted him, I knew he was going to be a good father”* (Mother R).

Support from others

The learning of foster parents and parents from the everyday experiences takes place through the relationship with other people as well. Spouses usually receive help from their immediate family: *“moms are excellent helpers; they can look after children, spend some time with them”* (Father V). Spouses take it as a gift, a great support and also a moment to have a rest in the everyday routine of biological/foster parenting. Thanks to the assistance provided by close relatives in taking care for biological and foster children, foster parents can appreciate those moments as the time to take a breath: *“children would go to my parents on holidays. They would spend time cycling in the yard. We used those moments to take a breath”* (Foster Mother B). Families also receive support, especially emotional, from their friends: *“if we had no friends to ventilate our feelings continuously, I don’t know how it all would have ended”* (Foster Mother S). Close contacts and communication with other families living through similar experiences is important for parents and foster parents. It allows them to learn from the examples of other families: *“it is indeed a great backup – those*

meetings with other young families or families with many years of experience” (Father V). Foster parents pointed out that they received plenty of emotional support from self-help groups where other foster families gathered and shared their experiences: *“the stories heard in the group were a good backup for us”* (Foster Mother B). Participation in a self-help group and talking to other foster parents strengthen foster parents; they acquire more self-confidence in everyday challenges.

‘Emotional triangle’

When comparing the learning experience of parents and foster-parents in biological/foster parenting, several differences determined by a unique experience of non-relative family foster care creating additional conditions for foster carers to learn emerged. By full accepting a non-relative child into their family, foster parents also have to accept the child’s biological family, history and origins. Foster parents face the so called ‘emotional triangle’ in this experience of acceptance, i.e. the experience of relationship between a foster family, a foster child and a child’s biological family. Foster parents are well aware that it is important for a foster child to keep in contact with his/her biological family, even though a problematic one. However, it is an emotionally painful and often dramatic point for all the actors in the fostering process. Both foster parents and a foster child lose their stability: *“our foster daughter would become severely unbalanced; she would suffer anxiety attacks over and over again for the following month”* (Foster Mother A). The rules applied in the foster child’s biological family would make the child’s successful adaption to the foster family more troublesome: *“she did not adapt to our family due to continuous communication with her sister, who is a complete failure, with no education, with TV and chips all day long and no limits”* (Foster Mother S). Foster parents would often lose their patience: *“all that communication with no rules gradually made us lose our patience”* (Foster Mother A). In some cases, foster parents were even threatened by the child’s biological family. They considered the child’s removal from the family to be the fault of the foster family. In such situations foster parents would fear for their security: *“I didn’t feel safe in the company of those people. They know my address and I don’t know what to expect from them”* (Foster Mother G). Foster parents become ‘hostages of the situation’ when they have to communicate with the foster child’s biological family. They have to give back the foster children to their biological family if such a decision is made; however, when they meet with the foster child, the child shows his/her attachment and wishes to come back to the foster carers:

“we had already brought her back to her mother, and when we met a week later, she spent the whole time sitting on our laps, and when we were about

to say goodbye, she grabbed my hair saying, 'Mom, please don't give me to that woman.' Can you imagine? What we have to do is to take the child, detach her from us and say, 'I'm sorry but perhaps we will meet some time again'." (Foster Mother A).

Pain of separation

After the process of non-relative foster care discontinues, foster parents undergo a deep pain of separation. After getting attached to the foster child, the foster family would feel that they started possessing the child; hence, when giving the foster child back to the biological family, foster parents used to balance between the wish 'to possess' and 'to let go': "*when we ourselves decided to let go our foster daughter, I then realised that we simply have to learn to live somehow*" (Foster Mother S). After separation with the foster child, the foster family often starts mourning if the relationship is not maintained afterwards: "*I would feel as if half alive and half dead, as if after the funeral but still without a grave. Because our foster daughter was all around the house, there were photographs, everything*" (Foster Mother A). After the relationship with the foster child is discontinued, the whole foster family as if withdraws into themselves: "*she left by also leaving such negative effects on our daughter, her withdrawal into herself*" (Foster Father T). All these experiences are emotionally painful, but they are only a part of the whole experience which does not reduce the meaning of non-relative foster care seen by foster parents.

Discussion

The birth of a child or the foster care of a non-relative child causes **confusion**. However, these experiences differ. After a child is born, parents experience confusion due to an absolutely new situation: the arrival of a new family member (Bornstein, 2002). It is a new shocking experience forcing to rethink priorities, learn to reconcile family and work, create a new family model. Meanwhile, in case of foster care, confusion is more a result of the encounter with an unknown, unfamiliar child (Di Silvio, 2012) without understanding the child's reactions and behaviour triggered by the early experience (Tryc, 2013); foster parents learn to accept a "different" child. After a child is born, the family's situation fundamentally changes, whereas the foster family faces changes in their everyday life, but there are no radical changes in the family. Foster parents already have their family model and try to accept an unfamiliar child into it by trying to maintain a balance in the family.

Learning of parents and foster parents through the everyday experiences of biological/ foster parenting takes place through **personal change**. By parenting their children, parents learn to accept their new roles (Deave & Johnson, 2008;

Rosenberg, 2009; Reid, 2010; Cameron et al., 2012). Foster parents also consider the experience of non-relative foster care to be the process of their personal growth and change (Diaz, 2017; Gvaldaitė, 2017). The research revealed that the personal change taking place in the two groups of participants has something in common. Through the experience of biological/foster parenting parents and foster parents get to know themselves better, learn to reduce their egoism and enjoy life. The research participants refer to this experience as that which enabled them “to discover a new self,” i.e. the learner rethinks his or her attitudes, worldviews, models of behaviour; they learn to accept situations as they are. However, foster parents pointed out that the experience of non-relative foster care taught them to accept the children which differ from their biological children, thus learning to expand their limits of tolerance.

When raising biological children or fostering non-relative child, ***growth in parenthood*** takes place. Parents and foster parents go through personal development, learn to control their emotions, develop their patience and gradually become aware of the meaning of biological/foster parenting. However, the two groups of participants undergo a different growth. When a child is born, parents live through a new experience; they learn to be parents. Meanwhile, foster parents already perceive themselves as parents, and the foster care of a non-relative child as if expands their perception of parenthood. They see the differences in biological and foster parenting and also learn to take responsibility for other, disadvantaged, children; they learn to be foster parents (Diaz, 2017). Non-relative foster care 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 (Gvaldaitė, 2017).

Biological and foster parenting poses a number of ***challenges***. These challenges differ, e.g. foster parents often face a traumatising experience of foster care and the improper, aggressive and hysterical conduct of the child determined by it (Haugaard & Hazan, 2002; Fisher et al., 2011; Stacy et al., 2014; Diaz, 2017;), the lack of professionals and social services (Canali et al., 2016). Meanwhile, parents face the challenges determined by the lack of information on the child’s development and the skills of parenthood (Bornstein, 2002). The present research expands the aforementioned studies by revealing what strategies are used by parents and foster parents in addressing challenges. It was observed that both groups of participants share identical strategies of addressing challenges. To solve the emerging difficulties, parents and foster parents search for information in scientific literature, on the Internet, in forums; they discuss the arising difficulties and search for common solutions together with the spouse or other family members. Parents and foster parents reflect on

their personal mistakes and those of other people and learn from them. This is how experiential learning takes place (Kolb & Kolb, 2008).

When parenting biological and foster children, *spouses share their experience*. They support each other (Bornstein, 2002). Foster parents sense mutual solidarity (Gvaldaitė, 2017). The study revealed that parenthood and the experience of foster care allow parents and foster parents to know each other better. They see their spouses in a new light when the latter communicate with their biological or foster children.

Support from others is essential in the process of biological or foster parenting (Diaz, 2017). Support of the community and professionals, which is still lacking, is very important for foster parents; social services are especially lacking (Canali et al., 2016). It is important to be open to assistance and to use all available and possible resources from the environment in foster care (Gvaldaitė, 2017). The study showed that not only the assistance from their relatives but also the emotional support of their friends is of paramount importance in both biological and foster parenting.

'Emotional triangle' is an experience faced by foster parents. 'Emotional triangle' involves a foster family, a foster child and a child's biological family. Foster parents have to ensure that a foster child will have a chance to maintain contact with his or her biological family; however, it poses considerable challenges for them (Diaz, 2017; Gvaldaitė, 2017). Foster children have a double role to play: they have their biological parents and foster parents which they gradually start considering their parents as well (Maaskant et al., 2016). These meetings have an unbalancing effect on both foster children and a foster family. The study revealed that foster parents consider themselves to be hostages of the situation.

Foster parents experience the *pain of separation* when the relationship with their foster child discontinues. Both foster parents and foster children get attached to each other (Goodrich, 2010), leading to a heartbreaking separation. The feelings of loss, sadness and mourning are also experienced by the foster parents' biological children when their bond with the foster child discontinues (Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė & Snieškienė, 2011; Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė, 2015; Williams, 2017). As foster care begins, foster parents already sense the fear of attachment to the child; they fear that if they get attached to the child too much, it will be more difficult for everyone to get apart later. The longer the child lives in a foster family, the greater the attachment and the more difficult the separation is (Diaz, 2017). The study revealed that if the relationship with the foster child discontinues completely, the pain of separation increases. It was also observed that foster parents get too little attention from professionals when they live through separation.

Conclusions

The learning of parents and foster parents through the everyday experiences of biological/ foster parenting is understood as a complex process during which the learner faces various social interactions; it is an emotional, cognitive and behavioural process of learning. Different research participants view and characterise this learning in a similar way; certain aspects overlap and supplement one another, though differences are observed as well.

Personal change of parents and foster parents and their growth in parenthood take place in the process of learning. The birth of a child into a family and the acceptance of a non-relative child into a foster family pose a number of challenges; parents and foster parents experience confusion, but it is also the experience of joy and community. By learning through their everyday experiences, parents and foster parents live through the experience of unconditional acceptance and giving, which change and enrich them.

The most prominent difference between biological and foster parenting is viewed through the experience of 'emotional triangle,' which is only characteristic of foster parents. Communication with the foster child's parents is one of the most difficult aspects in foster care. To accept the child into the family fully, foster parents have to accept the child's family and previous history. Hence, a positive approach, empathy and understanding of foster parents enable the foster child to perceive his/her history as an inseparable part. However, it is observed that professional assistance required by foster carers in maintaining the relationship with the foster child's parents is particularly lacking.

References

- Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė, R. (2015). Globėjų biologinių vaikų vaidmuo globos procese: "Mes visi tapom jų globėjais, mokytojais, motinomis ir tėvais". *STEPP: Socialinė teorija, empirija, politika ir praktika*, 10, 21-34. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15388/STEPP.2015.10.4857>
- Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė, R., & Snieškienė, D. (2011). Biologinių vaikų patirtis šeimoje, globojančioje ne giminaičius vaikus. *Socialinis darbas. Patirtis ir metodai*, 7 (1), 31-50.
- Bornstein, M. H. (2002). Parenting Infants. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of Parenting: Children and Parenting, Volume 1*, (pp. 3-42). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cameron, G., Coady, N., & Hoy, S. (2012). Perspectives on being a father from men involved with child welfare services. *Child & Family Social Work*, 19, 14-23.
- Canali, C., Maurizio, R., & Vecchiato, T. (2016). Foster care: motivations and challenges for foster families. *Social Work and Society. International Online Journal*, 14 (2), 1-15.
- Deave, T., & Johnson, D. (2008). The transition to parenthood: what does it mean for fathers? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 63, 626-633.
- Di Silvio, R. (2012). Learning to 'Parenting': Peer-to-Peer Educational Actions in the Italian

- Associations of Adoptive Families. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Human and Social Sciences*, 8, 18-25.
- Diaz, R. (2017). *The experience of foster parents: what keeps foster parents motivated to foster long term? Doctoral dissertation*, USA: Antioch University Santa Barbara.
- Edwards, R. (2009). Introduction: Life as a learning context? In Edwards, R., Biesta, G., & Thorpe, M. (Eds.). *Rethinking Contexts for Learning and Teaching: Communities, Activities and Networks*, Abingdon, Oxon, U.K.: Routledge, p. 1-13.
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62, 107-115.
- Elo, S., Kääriäinen, M., Kanste, O., Pölkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngäs, H. (2014). Qualitative Content Analysis: A focus on trustworthiness. *SAGE Open*, 4 (1), 1-10. doi: 10.1177/2158244014522633
- Eraut, M. (2004). Informal learning in the workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26 (2), 247-273.
- Fisher, P. A., Stoolmiller, M., Mannering, A. M., Takahashi, A., & Chamberlain, P. (2011). Foster placement disruptions associated with problem behavior: Mitigating a threshold effect. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 79 (4), 481-487. doi: 10.1037/a0024313
- Goodrich, S. A. (2010). *Connecting Children and Families: Expectations and Experiences of Professional Foster Parents. Master Theses*. USA: University of Connecticut.
- Gvaldaitė, L. (2017). Priėmimas globojant vaiką: patirtis, kurianti naują kultūrą. *STEPP: Socialinė teorija, empirija, politika ir praktika*, 14, 48-63. doi: <https://doi.org/10.15388/STEPP.2017.14.10415>
- Haugaard, J., & Hazan, C. (2002). Foster parenting. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of Parenting: Children and Parenting, Volume 1*, (pp. 313-327). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Humphries, B. (2008). *Social Work Research for Social Justice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jarvis, P. (2012). Learning from Everyday Life. *HSSRP. Human & Social Studies. Research and Practice*, 1 (1), 1-20.
- Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2008). Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to Management Learning, Education and Development. In S. J. Armstrong & C. Fukami (Eds.) *Handbook of Management Learning, Education and Development*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews. Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Maaskant, A. M., Van Rooij, F. B., Bos, H. M. W., & Hermanns, J. M. A. (2016). The wellbeing of foster children and their relationship with foster parents and biological parents: a child's perspective. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 30 (4), 379-395. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2015.1092952>
- Orb, A., Eisenhauer, L., & Wynaden, D. (2001). Ethics in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33 (1), 93-96.
- Reid, C. D. (2010). *Becoming a mother without losing myself*. Alberta: Athabasca University.
- Rosenberg, C. (2009). Mothers negotiating their identity: a creative narrative inquiry. *Enquire*, 2 (1), 108-132.
- Stacy, L., Blythe, S. L., Wilkes, L., & Halcomb, E. J. (2014). The foster carer's experience: An integrative review. *Collegian*, 21, 21-32. doi:10.1016/j.colegn.2012.12.001

Bagdonaitė-Stelmokienė & Žydžiūnaitė, 2018. *Learning Through the Everyday Experiences of Biological / Foster Parenting*

- Tong, A., Sainsbury, P., & Craig, J. (2007). Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 19 (6), 349-357. doi:10.1093/intqhc/mzm042
- Tryc, L. M. (2013). *The Experience of Being a Foster Parent in Non-Kinship Placements: Emotional and Psychological Impacts*. Master Theses. USA: Grand Valley State University.
- Wehler, B. A. (2014). *Until all the pieces fit: a hermeneutic phenomenology of the informal learning of selected foster parents in North-eastern Pennsylvania*. Doctoral dissertation. USA: The Pennsylvania State University.
- Williams, D. (2017). Grief, loss, and separation: Experiences of birth children of foster carers. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22, 1448–1455. doi: 10.1111/cfs.12366